

Refocusing Health Priorities for Sustainable Development: The Kenyan Situation

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Abstract

Sustainable development is understood to require the current generation to meet their needs without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs. On a large scale, health of human beings is the primary reason for sustainable development; refocusing health priorities is instantly unavoidable. The focus should be regarding investment in health as a great contributor to achieving sustainable development. With a new constitution and viable legislations on health and social security, health priorities ought to be reconsidered. This paper is aimed at elaborating and analyzing the health priorities in relation to sustainable development, discussing ineptly the effects of health on sustainability of development and recommending possible changes or improvements to ensure a balance between health and sustainable development. The analysis is based on reference to health policies in the statutory frameworks of the various national, international and other applicable Laws. Writings from leading scholars and relevant case study are also relied on. Health is a major contributor to development without regard to health effects of unsustainable development there would be destruction and threat of health of humans. Health and sustainable development have unbreakable linkages and development strategies should always be construed with the highest regards to health effects.

Keywords: *Sustainable development, Reproductive health, Social security in health*

Introduction

Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and reproductive life in harmony with nature.¹ It is a concept of current limitation for future benefit.

Goal 7 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) calls for ensuring environmental sustainability for the benefit of all. Target 9 has two components: to integrate principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes, and to reverse the loss of environmental resources.²

For over centuries, the importance of sustainable development has not been underscored. Various researches, legal forums, programmes, treaties and legislations have been developed and implemented to achieve sustainability of development.

Health and development are interdependent so that there has to be a balance between the two for both to survive. Development in most instances leads to pollution of the environment and pollution in turn has great negative effects on health. Ill health means that a people cannot work or get education which then translates to poverty and poor living standards. Such a people are a great burden and slow down the development rate of a country. Moreover, ill health reduces the ability to reproduce so the working force of the country that disregards sustainable development becomes inadequate.

Currently, health and sustainable development encompass several areas such as sexual reproductive health, social security and women empowerment. All these sectors are cardinal in refocusing health priorities to achieve sustainable development.

Effects of Unsustainable Development on Health

Air Pollution

This is a major environmental health issue affecting both developed and developing countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that some 80% of outdoor air pollution-related premature deaths were due to ischemic heart disease and strokes, while 14% of deaths were due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or acute lower respiratory infections; and 6% of deaths were due to lung cancer.

The major contributors to pollution of air are industries that emit smoke and release urban and agricultural waste; transport industry that has vehicles using fuel with sulfur content; use of unsustainable energies such as charcoal; inappropriate waste disposal mechanisms. The common air pollutants in all these are particulate matter ranging from dust to soot and wood smoke, ground level ozone for example smog, sulfur dioxide produced when coal and crude oil are burned.

With the daily springing up of industries in Kenya, it is expected that air pollution would escalate if not mitigated. Currently, most Kenyans especially in the rural areas use charcoal and firewood as their source of energy. The smoke produced from the burning of charcoal and firewood causes irritation to the eyes and respiratory complications. Why do people tolerate these effects? It is because the cleaner sources of energy are not affordable and available to them. It should also be noted that charcoal and wood are mostly from illegal felling of trees which upsets the ecological balance leading to climate change.

Water Pollution

Water is said to be life. We use water in our day to day life to drink, clean and cook. Water pollution is therefore catastrophic to humans and animals. Water is also a habitat for aquatic animals whose survival depends on purity of the water. The effect of water pollution is toxic depending on the chemical pollutant and the concentration of the pollutants.

In developing countries, the category in which Kenya and most of Africa lie, 70% of industrial wastes are dumped untreated into water where they pollute the usable water supply.³ Polluted drinking waters are a problem for about half of the world's population. Each year there are about 250 million cases of water-based diseases, resulting in roughly 5-10 million deaths.⁴ Lack of safe water and sanitation in cities leads to cholera, malaria and diarrhea.⁵

Water and sanitation go hand in hand. Nairobi for example has several slums including Kibera and Mathare. These slums are actuated by inadequate water supply with clean drinking water being unavailable. The sewerage systems in these areas are a nightmare since latrines are inadequate and are poorly maintained. The congestion of people in these slums is due to excessive rural-urban migration in search of better livelihoods. This migration happens because most viable industries are located at the city and as the number of unplanned settlements rise; services such as water and sanitation become scarce. People are then forced to use unsafe water resulting in water-borne diseases. These illnesses then further the vicious circle of poverty.

3 World water assessment Programme available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/water/wwap> as 21/7/2014

4 Top facts about pollution; <http://theexpeditionproject.com/info-top-environment-stuff1522-top-facts-about-pollution>. as at 27/07/1014

Noise Pollution

Noise is very common in the environment- from transport to industries and at home. Hearing is an essential sense crucial for daily human interactions, communication and safety. We constantly get exposed to sound that is beyond the healthy quantity for the ears. Continued exposure to extreme quantities of sound impairs hearing and the general health of a person.

Health effects of noise include anxiety and stress reaction and in extreme cases fright. The physiological manifestations are headaches, irritability and nervousness, feeling of fatigue decreased work efficiency.⁶

Exposure to continuous noise of 85-90dBA (decibel level), particularly over a lifetime in industrial settings, can lead to progressive loss of hearing, with an increase in the threshold of hearing sensitivity.⁷

Soil Pollution

The main sources of soil pollution are:⁸

1. Industrial activity. This is the biggest contributor especially with increased mining activities. During the process of mining, by products are disposed of as industrial waste which in the long run renders the soil surface unsuitable for use.
2. Agricultural activities. Chemicals in pesticides, fertilizers and fungicides have a general great use in agriculture. They offset the natural balance in the soil components reducing soil fertility. Some chemicals percolate water and flow into rivers and are consumed by humans.

Other sources of soil pollution include waste disposal in soil, accidental oil spillages in soil and acid rain.

Crops and plants grow on soil and absorb nutrients from soil. The crops are consumed by humans. If the soil in which the crops grew was polluted, the crops will contain the pollutants and upon consumption could lead to terminal illnesses. Prolonged exposure to the pollutants could upset the genetic makeup of the human body thereby having a harmful effect on the future generations.

6 Eschooltoday.com/pollution/noise-pollution/effects-of-noise-pollution.html

7 Kryter KD- the effects of Noise on Man, 2nd Edition Orlando, FL: Academic press,1985

8 Supra note 5

Soil pollution can also lead to widespread famine as plants are unable to grow on polluted soil.

Health And Development

The International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) states that ``the enjoyment of the highest standards of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic and social condition.'' It can then be said that good life relies wholly on good health. Good life is the ability to enjoy human rights and well-being. Health is therefore at the heart of enjoyment of all rights.

Sustainable development aims at improving the quality of life for the entire world's population without increasing the use of our natural resources beyond the earth's carrying capacity.⁹

Health is a beneficiary of and a contributor to development. It is also a key indicator of what people-centered, rights based, inclusive and equitable development seeks to achieve.¹⁰ Health contributes to economic, social and environmental development through multiple pathways.

Improved health feeds sustainable development, and sustainable development feeds improved health in a virtuous cycle, supported by effective health services.¹¹

How does sustainable development benefit from health?

Reduction of poverty

Poverty is a major contributor to ill health in all countries. Ill health reduces and limits productivity and school attendance thereby furthering the vicious cycle of poverty. The ability to enjoy right to work and education, which are in turn, essential to enjoyment of an adequate standard of living, is determined by health. At the same time, poverty related structural disadvantages such as lack of clean water; sanitation and decent work hinder prevention and fuel the spread of diseases.

9 http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/HSD_Plaq_02.7_def1.pdf as at 21/06/2014

10 World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the Government of Sweden and the Government of Botswana(2013) Health in the Post-2015 Agenda :Report of the global thematic consultation on Health, April,2013. available at <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/file/337378/download/366802> as at 2/07/2014

11 *ibid*

Channeling of resources to development sector

Poverty leads to ill-health, but possibly ultimately more debilitating is the negative impact of poor health on development. Malaria alone is estimated to have slowed economic growth in Africa by up to 1.3% each year and HIV/ AIDS by up to 2.6% in high prevalence countries. When the consequences of the high burden of other preventable diseases and lack of effective care are added, the result translates into hundreds of billions of dollars lost. Considering what an annual investment of hundreds of billions of dollars would have on life in poorer countries succinctly illustrates how investments in health and health care are productive, and not simply consumptive - as some are prone to think - with more than tangible returns.¹²

However, when there is a lower burden of preventable diseases, more funds can be channeled to creation of jobs in the industrial, tourism, financial, technical and other sectors. Good health fuels development.

Good health enhances development through other multiple pathways including;

- Survival of trained labor
- Higher productivity among healthier workers, and
- Higher rates of savings and investment.

The Kenyan government, like many others has come to realize that health and sustainable development is complex. It encompasses sexual reproductive health, social security and empowering the woman. Previously, a lot of emphasis was placed on provision of in- patient and out-patient services, improving access to health services for preventable diseases such as malaria and sometimes even provision of free health care services. This has however proven to be inadequate as population pressure continues to be on the rise and health services do not reach those who need it most. Moreover, quality of services one gets depends on one's financial ability with the rich getting the best services.

`Free health services' are a menace; most of the times they translate to poor quality drugs, and sometimes counterfeit drugs, inadequate doctors and medical officers and general poor services. Taking note that most people who

need these 'free health services' are those who cannot afford regular services due to poverty, it is very troubling if these services do not benefit them.

12 Supra note 10 It is for the above reasons that I consider sexual reproductive health, social security in health and women empowerment as key in improving health which in turn fosters sustainable development.

Sexual Reproductive Health and Sustainable Development.

Reproductive health rights have a direct and significant impact on sustainable development. Population and sustainable development have been recognized as having linkages by the 1992 Rio Declaration and Agenda 21. As such, it is necessary to reaffirm the role of sexual reproductive health and reproductive health rights in achieving sustainable development. Article 43(1) (a) of the 2010 Constitution declares a right to reproductive health care for every person.¹³ This is a new provision in the constitution of Kenya as the previous constitutions did not include reproductive health rights in the sections.

Reproductive health rights have been enshrined in the Maputo protocol and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in a much clearer manner.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which took place in Cairo, Egypt, asserted that individual and human rights were at the center of population and development concerns. It linked environmental protection to individual decision making and human rights, including gender equality and the right to reproductive health.¹⁴

But what is sexual reproductive health? It is reproduction in a manner that does not endanger the lives of the mother and the unborn with the mother having the rights to choose the timings of the births. It entails access to family planning services of their choice and the availability of maternal health care services to expectant mothers. Sexual reproductive health rights impute a positive obligation on the government so that resources have to be sourced in to achieve the objectives.

¹³ Article 43 (1) (a) - Every person has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which includes the right to health care services, including *reproductive health care*.

¹⁴ UNFPA. Summary of the ICPD Programme of Action. New York: UNFPA, 1994; available at <http://www.unfpa.org/icpd/summary.htm> accessed 3/07/2014.

How do reproductive health rights ameliorate sustainable development? *Control of population*

Overpopulation continues to be a major challenge in achieving sustainability of development as it leads to pressure on the natural resources. If a country is not able to meet the basic needs of its people then this would translate to diseases, food insecurity and increased poverty levels.

On one hand, good reproductive health means that maternity services are available for expectant mothers so that their pregnancies are monitored until birth. It ensures that utmost medical care is given to the mothers and their babies thereby reducing deaths and increasing infant mortality rates. When mothers give birth in hospital, it reduces spread of the HIV/AIDS to the infants and should there be any birth complications, medical services are availed.

Eventually, adequate maternity services mean a healthy population which is able to work efficiently and produce the much needed labor force to work in industries and other development sectors.

Good reproductive health services also mean access to family planning services. These services include the use of contraceptives and other birth control methods. They must be adequate and available to all people in the country and at affordable prices. Adequate access to comprehensive sexual reproductive health services and contraceptives impact greatly on the control of the population.

The birth control methods are very important in ensuring that births are planned and spacing between births is adequate. The spacing is important for ensuring health and recovery of a mother between pregnancies. The contraceptives also ensure that the rate of unplanned pregnancies is lower so that families get the number of children they can adequately provide for. The result is smaller and healthier families and a society that can sustain the population without strain on the resources. These result in reduced levels of poverty, improved food security, and access to education and eventually leading to development. The controlled population will also translate to less pressure on the environment so that clean water and adequate housing will be more available.

There are however many challenges on sexual reproductive health services. These include;

- Traditional norms and beliefs-African cultures believe that children are a sign of wealth and prosperity so that one has to sire many children to be considered successful. Some cultures hold on to their traditional medicines and do not take their sick ones (including expectant mothers) to hospital and refuse to accept contraceptives.

Lack of access to reproductive health services- many people still shy away from taking about their reproductive health since they do not have access to the services. The services are still not available in all rural areas and there is little awareness on how and why people should use the contraceptives.

Gender equality, women empowerment and Sustainable Development

Reproductive health, including realization of women's right to choose the number, timing and spacing of pregnancies, is critical for sustainable development; this cannot however be done without the empowerment of the woman.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, empowers women and girls and increases their opportunities for education and employment. Investment in reproductive health and education have multiple and complementary effects for women, their families and overall sustainable development.¹⁵

Gender equality is key to slowing down population growth rate which in turn has a bearing on sustainable development. Gender equality in this case means empowering young girls and women with information for acquiring sexual reproductive health services and making informed decisions on their sexual reproductive health rights. The result is improved quality of life for all but particularly women and children. It is important to mention that families with fewer children and children spaced further apart can afford to invest more in each child's education that in the end contributes to the development of the country.¹⁶ The result of this would be reduced population growth rate and eventually reduced pressure on the scarce natural resources.

15 Respecting rights, Meeting Needs, Building Resilience-Population dynamics , Reproductive Health and sustainable development: critical links and opportunities for post 2015 available at <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/getWSDoc.php%3Fid%3D2753> as at 20/07/2014

16 Supra note 15

Relationship between social security in Health and Sustainable Development

Social security is the ability of people to access basic needs as food, shelter clothing and health services irrespective of financial ability. It is arguable that social security is meant to protect those who are most vulnerable by providing them with services which they would otherwise not afford. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure that its people have social protection.

Agenda 21, the global plan of action agreed to at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) devotes an entire chapter to "Protecting and Promoting Human Health". Chapter 6 recognizes the interconnection between health and environmental, social and economic development supports an inter-sectoral approach and identifies five programme areas: meeting primary health care needs, particularly in rural areas; control of communicable diseases; protection of vulnerable groups; meeting the urban health challenge; and reducing health risks from environmental pollution and hazards.¹⁷

Availability of social security especially to the most vulnerable groups like the sick, the poor, women and marginalized groups means access of basic needs including food, sanitation, clean water and health services. With almost everyone being able to adequately gain the aforesaid resources, the development status of a country will gradually ameliorate. Good social protection also means that the poverty rates and levels are low and consequently the well being of a people is improved. With adequate well being, living standards are higher and people will not succumb to the realities of poverty: which are in most cases unsustainable.

Education and economic development are great beneficiaries of social protection. If one does not have to worry about the basic needs, they can put more time and resources in learning and improving their skills therefore getting themselves better equipped for opportunities that will eventually improve their livelihood. Being educated also means that people learn how to use the environment in a sustainable manner.

Women, children, youth, the elderly, orphans and people with disabilities are amongst those vulnerable to ill-health. This holds true at all levels of development, but is most pronounced under circumstances of poverty. These are the groups that desperately need social protection.

17 Supra note 14The right to social security is enshrined in Article 43 (1) (e) of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. This was a progressive step for Kenya since prior to that, social security was only derived from the National Social Security Fund Act and the National Hospital Insurance Fund. Kenya stands on principle of supremacy of the Constitution and as such social security has the backing it deserves. There is however much debate on whether listing social security in the bill of rights demands positive obligation from the government.¹⁸

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

In order to streamline health with sustainable development, it is important to revisit previous policies and targets made in relation to health and sustainable development to assess our failures and find a way of bridging them.

While the importance of health was discussed during the Rio Summit in 1992, its follow-up has been neglected. More than twenty years later, there is little evidence that health has benefited from the initiatives that resulted from that event. For example, while health has been mentioned as a priority in the Climate Change Agenda, an analysis of climate change initiatives indicated that less than 0.5% of expected health damage cost were covered by adaptation funds and that economic models informing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) mitigation assessments ignored health co-benefits (WHO Submission to the UNFCCC, 2012).¹⁹

The above implies that a lot has to be done both at national and international levels to achieve the targets set out in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. There should be a departure from the traditional health policies that have been used over and over and health should be viewed from a totally different dimension. Women empowerment should now be viewed as the way forward in ensuring health and development so that affirmative action now enshrined in the constitution should not be given a blind eye. Social security should not be seen as a burden on the government and the people but rather as the weapon to fight poverty and disease and to better the standards of living of Kenyans. In Sexual reproductive

18 Social and Economic Rights in Article 43 of the 2010 Constitution are to be implemented in accordance with Article 21(2) of the 2010 Constitution which provides that the state shall take legislative, policy and other measures, including the setting of standards, to achieve the progressive realization of the rights guaranteed under Article 43.

19 For more information: <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>. health, concentration should not only be on maternity health as seen in the governments' free maternity health care, Millennium Development Goals and Kenya's Vision 2030; but it should also include countering the challenges that hinder access to reproductive healthcare in Kenya.

Recommendations

Immediate and decisive action on the following recommendations would improve Kenya's capacity to address its health and environmental in an integrated manner and promote sustainable development:

1. Enhance investments in public health, education and empowerment of women, and adopt pro-growth, investment conducive, and job-creating economic reforms. These steps will help optimize Kenya's potential to benefit from the demographic dividend.²⁰
2. Prioritize meeting of women and their partners' needs for family planning. Family planning can help reduce unplanned births, improve health outcomes for women and children, and slow population growth.²¹ It would help ease pressure on the environment and natural resources, strengthen resilience to climate change, and enhance economic growth by empowering women.

3. Take gender issues into account in the design of health and sustainable development policies and adaptation strategies. Target women with the strategies, involve them in planning and implementation of interventions, enhance access to education, and create more livelihood opportunities for women.²² Strengthening the resilience of women will help communities and reduce poverty.
4. To ensure that there is access to basic health services, the NHIF should be made affordable to those who need it most: the poor, women and marginalized groups. The Kenyan government has made commendable efforts by providing free maternal health services but that is still not enough. Social security in health should be made an absolute right for every Kenyan citizen. That can be achieved through creating a tax system to include funds for health security.

20 ibid

21 Supra note 15

22 Supra note 15

The National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) should work closely with the devolved government system to ensure industrial and mining projects that are likely to affect the environment undergo Environmental Impact Assessment as required by the Environmental Management and Coordination Act (EMCA). The assessments should not only be done at the proposal of the project but also after completion of the project as deemed necessary.

5. The polluter pays principle enshrined in the Rio Earth Summit and the EMCA should be made stringent to deter industries from polluting the environment with the confidence of paying just a little fine. The consequence of disposing their waste in an unsustainable manner should be so high that they would not dare commit the offence.
6. The cleaner sources of energy such as electricity, LPG and biogas should be made more available and affordable at the rural areas. More should be done to educate the rural people on the effects of using unsustainable energies and on destruction of forests.

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