

# Commentary

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ECONOMIC INVESTMENT AND ACTUARIAL RESEARCH

## World Health Organization

The World Health Organization (WHO) is the coordinating authority on international health matters within the United Nations system. WHO experts help countries to address public health issues and, as a part of this process, the WHO promulgates health guidelines and standards. The WHO also supports and promotes health research. Working in conjunction with the WHO, national governments can address the challenges of global health problems and seek to improve the health and well-being of their populations. There are 193 countries that constitute the membership of the WHO. The WHO and its member countries work with many partners, including other United Nations Agencies, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. The WHO is staffed by more than 8000 public health experts, including doctors, epidemiologists, scientists and other professionals from around the world, working in 147 local country offices, six regional offices and at WHO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. The WHO Constitution was adopted on April 7, 1948 and, on each anniversary, it is celebrated around the world as World Health Day.

Disease outbreaks can cause a crisis for a country, for an entire region or even the whole planet. Conflicts and natural disasters can also have repercussions that affect millions of people. WHO works through relief efforts and restoration activities to save lives and to reduce the impact of health-related crises on people's lives. The International Health Regulations (IHR) are critical tools in the fight against the global spread of infectious disease; negotiated by WHO's members, the IHR establish rules that countries must follow to identify disease outbreaks and stop them from spreading. The IHR cover established diseases such as poliomyelitis; they have been expanded in recent years

to cover new diseases such as SARS and new strains of influenza. A recent development at the WHO is the establishment of a Strategic Health Operations Centre that functions during humanitarian emergencies and disease outbreaks to coordinate information and responses between countries through its Epidemic and Pandemic Alert and Response facility.

Problems associated with improper diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use and other activities have increased the risks of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes; more than half of all deaths worldwide each year (currently about 35 million in a total of 57 million) are caused by chronic disease. Deaths from chronic disease are expected to rise by 17% worldwide over the next ten years according to the WHO. The WHO's Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health is targeted to help fight heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer and obesity-related conditions; the strategy encourages people to be more physically active and eat healthier diets.

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, 191 countries pledged to address the ambitious tasks of tackling poverty and ill-health and improving people's lives by 2015. Derived from the Millennium Declaration, these tasks are known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Health-related issues are at the center of the MDG agenda. Three of the eight MDGs are directly health-related issues: reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. The conditions for achieving better health are also important factors in the objectives of other MDGs, such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and achieving environmental sustainability. Almost 90% of all child deaths are attributable to just six health conditions: diarrhea, HIV/AIDS, malaria, measles,

neonatal causes, and pneumonia. Malnutrition increases the risk of death; over 50% of all child deaths occur with children who are underweight. More than half a million women die each year in pregnancy and childbirth; most of them die because there is not sufficient skilled regular and emergency medical care. More and more women are now obtaining access to skilled care in South-East Asia and North Africa, but in sub-Saharan Africa, 1 in 16 women are at risk of dying during pregnancy or childbirth over a lifetime, compared to about 1 in 2000 elsewhere in the world. Ensuring environmental sustainability is essential for improving people's health; water and air quality are fundamental factors that influence health; food supply is also a critical issue in many parts of the world. Malaria, tuberculosis and HIV infections are of major concern to the WHO. Malaria kills more than one million people a year; most of them are children under age five in Africa. The global tuberculosis epidemic causes nearly nine million cases of disease and kills about two million people each year. It is estimated that five million people will be newly infected with HIV this year and more than three million people will die of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. The WHO is working to ensure that everyone has access to quality health care. Much remains to be done in many countries to provide adequate hospitals and clinics, essential medicines and equipment, and trained health workers.

*Source: World Health Organization*

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