



Linking health and biodiversity in policy and practice

The conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity is critically important to the aspirations and policies of the health sector – helping to secure the basic human right to health and supporting universal primary health care. Biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation pose a growing threat to our health and well-being, but protecting biodiversity can help to strengthen public health programmes, reduce emerging health risks and sustain resources for medicine and medical research. Similarly, achieving sustainable health for all people is an important consideration for the long term success of biodiversity strategies and action plans.



Disease and the lack of access to health care services place significant pressures on community resources, promoting unsustainable exploitation of biodiversity. The health sector also has its own impacts on biodiversity, and health interventions, particularly in emergency situations, have the potential for ecological damage. From a development perspective, outbreaks of wildlife disease can threaten crops, livestock and human health, undermining conservation initiatives and sustainable development policies.

It is increasingly important for the public health sector to recognise that human health and well-being is influenced by the health and integrity of local ecosystems, and frequently by the status of local plant and animal communities. In many cases, the long term success and sustainability of public health management planning may be determined by the degree to which ecological factors are taken into account. This concept must also be explored at multiple geographic and temporal scales. Clearly, then, best practice in health protection must ensure that the relevance of biodiversity is assessed and accounted for within various plans or projects. Similarly, biodiversity conservation initiatives must also account for how such projects may affect public health, for better or worse.



Co-operation between the health and biodiversity sectors is essential if these linkages are to be addressed effectively for the long term benefit of all life on Earth. The Conference of Parties to the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity has recognised this, calling for greater communication and collaboration with the World Health Organisation, the COHAB Initiative and other organisations to facilitate the integration of biodiversity and human health in policy and practice, and to promote consideration of health concerns with biodiversity strategies and action plans. However, more needs to be done if the importance of biodiversity to human health and well-being is to be recognised within the plans and policies of the health sector. Four key challenges are:

1. Integrating biodiversity and ecosystem services into health and development policies.

Conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity must be recognised as an important element of public health management planning. Appropriate steps for safeguarding ecosystem services must be incorporated into national action plans for promoting health and delivering universal primary health care. This should include mainstreaming biodiversity into policies and plans relating to the health impacts of climate change. It is also important to ensure that the potential impacts of current health and development activities on biodiversity are understood and addressed, so that possible future risks can be avoided.

2. Integrating health and development considerations into plans and programmes on biodiversity conservation.

Sustainable development requires a holistic approach that acknowledges the links between biodiversity and human well-being. Strategies which prioritise biodiversity conservation without addressing community needs can potentially cause conflict and be counter-productive. In order to minimise opportunities for dispute and to promote better linkages with the health sector, conservation planning should aim to account for so called “distributive impacts” and the potential for negative effects on livelihoods and community traditions (e.g. restricted access to wildlife used in traditional medicines in protected areas).



3. Capacity Building - strengthening international, inter-governmental and interdisciplinary cooperation.

Conceptual and practical barriers between the health, development and biodiversity sectors must be identified and overcome. Beyond development of understanding and the willingness to work together, there is also a need to address capacity requirements, and facilitate cross-sector cooperation and harmonization within and between countries in developed and developing regions. This requires development of cross-sector platforms for dialogue, knowledge transfer and experience sharing, and appropriate financing and training mechanisms.



4. Raising public and corporate awareness of the importance of biodiversity to human health and increasing public involvement in conservation.

It is important that the importance of biodiversity to human health and well-being is promoted amongst the private sector and general public. Through public education programmes on the human benefits associated with conservation and the risks associated with biodiversity loss, a sense of stewardship for biodiversity and the ecosystem services which support health should be fostered within local communities and businesses.

In order to support the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the World Health Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals, the COHAB Initiative calls for increased efforts by the CBD COP and conservation organisations to reach out to the health sector and to better communicate the message of biodiversity conservation to decision makers in public health care. This should include strengthening partnerships with the World Health Organisation and with organisations working at the interface of the health and ecological sciences. The biodiversity crisis and its significance for human health, and related links with climate change, must be brought to the sphere of discussions at the World Health Assembly, so that future global health commitments and strategies might work to promote greater co-operation with biodiversity-related conventions and the support partnership in areas of mutual concern.

About COHAB

The COHAB Initiative (Co-operation on Health and Biodiversity) is an international programme of work established to address the gaps in awareness, policy and action on the links between human health and well-being and the conservation of biological diversity. The Secretariat of the COHAB Initiative is based in Galway, Ireland. Visit www.cohabnet.org or email info@cohabnet.org for more information.