

## “under construction...” building bridges between health and sustainable development at Geneva 2010

Presentation by Dr. Thomas Mattig, Geneva 2010 IUHPE World Conference

Dear Mr Chairman (Madame Chair)  
Dear Representatives, Dear Colleagues

The Swiss Agency for Health Promotion has the honour to host the 20<sup>th</sup> IUHPE World Conference on Health Promotion which is taking place in Geneva in July 2010. As its Director, I have the pleasure to talk to you, for a few minutes, on what this Conference is about and what we, as organiser and hosts, are striving to achieve.

The Conference is about **Health**, by which we mean both the state of not being ill as well as the broader concept of complete physical, mental and social well-being that blends in with the other great concepts of human existence such as Dignity, Freedom, Happiness, Justice and Peace.

It's a about **Equity**, by which we mean social justice and fairness, and the societies' need to counterbalance and correct inequalities inherent to nature's lottery.

And it's about **Sustainable Development**, by which we mean the need to a prosperity that preserves all the cradles of life that provide us with the means to cover our daily needs, for our own sake and that of future generations. We need an economy that takes into account the natural laws of regeneration, that doesn't depend on the blind exploitation of our diminishing resources and waste that endangers our very habitats.

The Conference is preoccupied with **two concerns** touching on all three of these facets of well-being:

**The first one is the magnitude and complexity of the issues impacting our health and well-being**

Humanity and the social order as we know it today are facing huge, unsettling changes within the next couple of decades – changes of a magnitude that were beyond the imagination two generations ago when WHO was founded to help to create a world of peace, justice and prosperity after the disaster of World War II in 1946, or only one generation ago when the Health Promotion Movement was initiated with the Ottawa Charta in 1986.

Let me name a few prominent ones that I picked off the news headlines just this month without going into detail:

- Population growth rate 75'000'000 people a year more needing nurturing, food, water, shelter, education, basic health care etc. Just to get an idea of the dimensions: The population of the UK is 60 Mio, of Kenia 30 Mio.
- Growing need for energy, to make economies work vs. stagnating energy resources
- Climate warming due to burning fossil energy and meat production
- Growing consumption and need for clean water, to drink, to wash, to irrigate land.

- Growing need for fertile land to produce food and phenomenon called “land grabbing” to grow bio fuel. This month the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) reports that a billion people suffer from lack of food.
- Polluting of our oceans and land with garbage and toxic industrial waste. I may draw your attention to “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch”, a growing plastic waste dump in the middle of the Pacific Ocean of the size of Germany.
- Destroying of forests, of soil, of fishing grounds
- Sprawling urbanisation

Within the last two decades the internet has taken up our lives with breath taking speed providing us with instantaneous global communication and means to interact as well as giving us access to a vast body of growing knowledge from all over the world. It is changing our understanding of human nature, our societies, of health, of life. It is becoming painstakingly clear, with all the research data available to support our perception, that all the big and small issues hitting the news headlines everyday are highly interconnected. (The crisis of the financial system for instance is not just passing phenomenon, it's touching on the very meaning of what money actually represents in our daily lives.)

Sir Michael Marmot, who chaired the WHO Commission's work on Social Determinants of Health, said upon presenting the report a year ago, that Health Promotion was all about improving the daily

conditions of life, about having the freedom to be and to do. It's more than a technical task of averting and treating disease, about giving people vaccines or showing them how to wash their hands, telling them to do more sport, not to smoke etc. Health in this optic is not a "sector" but a quality of being that's conditional to all thriving life. It's a property that emerges when conditions are right. And today we are doing everything to get them wrong.

This is our number one challenge at the Conference: Where do we Health Promoters start to act? How do we propose that societies organise themselves and interact to meet all these challenges? The answers cannot be one tracked. It cannot be a "one size fits all" approach. The world is too complex.

The ambition of the Conference is to get more clarity on these issues.

**The second concern is that the world is moving faster than our capacity to conceptualise it.** We get trapped by the taxonomy and institutions we created decades ago to understand and solve the problems as saw them then. With these institutions come professional identities and careers, governmental structures and credit lines. This contains the advantage of focus and specific insights, but it also carries the danger of blending out vital signs that force you to look at a bigger picture and reframe the issue.

This leads to the other ambition: We want to bring two concepts together that came into being at about the same time, emerged out of the same “Zeitgeist” and since then have evolved in parallel often ignoring the existence of the other in spite of the underlying concern being essentially identical:

**The concept of “Health Promotion”** which is about improving the conditions of daily life and empowering people to create healthy settings and cultivate sound attitudes,

**and**

**The concept of “Sustainable Development”** which is about securing a lasting planetary habitat that allows improvement in life conditions and prosperity for all of the growing number of people without destroying the very capital off which we are living.

Both started in the 1970ies and gained momentum in the 1980ies Health Promotion with “Health for all by the year 2000”, “Ottawa Charta”, “Alma Mata”. Sustainable Development on the other with the “Club of Rome”, “Brundtland Report”, “Rio Earth Summit 1992”

**These Concepts are twins that must go hand in hand.** Today’s knowledge of the challenges we are facing make this an imperative.

To this end the Conference aims to build bridges between the institutional fields and professional domains of Health Promotion and Sustainable Development.

The ambition is to find the mind sets to unlock institutional constraints and free mental and financial resources to tackle the real challenges at hand.

To make this ambition last we are planning to launch the “Healthy<sup>3</sup> Initiative” offering a unifying idea to all of us striving to create a better world, irrespective of where and in what field we work in – an idea that is, so it appears to me vital to closing any of the widening gaps. It is simple, but not easy:

### **Healthy People in Healthy Societies on a Healthy Planet**

We know little about the Source of Life, but we know a lot about the resources we need to live healthy lives: water, food, shelter, primary health care, education, fairness, justice and peace.

I invite you to meditate on the meaning and the connection between two: the Source of Life and the Resources of Health. May the motto serve as a signpost!

### **One last word to the World Conference on Health Promotion in Geneva:**

The Geneva Conference on Health Promotion in 2010 will not be a mass event comparable to the Olympics in Beijing or the World Expo in Shanghai. Nevertheless, it's an event that will draw several hundreds of people, all with their

needs, expectations and habits. It shall also serve as practical learning ground.

It's our goal to walk our talk and to design a healthy venue that satisfies the needs in a sustainable manner. We want to offer a playground to test our claims in 1:1 practical terms.

It's an opportunity to think through and prepare for all the aspects that impact our health and well-being and for keeping the foot print small that we leave on the resources of our habitat: from transportation, boarding and lodging, catering, sanitation, documentation, waste disposal, health care, cleaning. Health at a conference, in this optic, is more than having emergency room, a nurse and an ambulance at your disposal. That something that not many people think about.

We want this conference to serve as a model for designing our life styles and settings. The challenge lies in the details and what we actually do and not in the abstract concepts.

We want to meet it.

I see myself as a representative of a “third generation” health promoter preparing for the challenges ahead of us:

**The World Conference of Geneva on Health Promotion in 2010 is a call to see the needs of life as a whole and beyond sectoral perspectives**

It will be about building mental scaffolds and institutional bridges  
It's a beginning; we need to get on the path now.

I hope I have been able to stimulate your expectations and  
that I will be able to greet all next summer in Geneva.

Thank you for your attention.