



Climate change and health

Thomas Mattig, Director, Health Promotion Switzerland, in: NZZ, April 7, 2008

These days few will dispute that Earth is undergoing a fundamental climate change. Melting glaciers, heat waves and storms of unusual intensity are its unmistakable symptoms. Climate change affects all areas of life. Most likely the health of vast numbers of people is in serious danger.

In Western Europe alone, the high temperatures during the heat wave of summer 2003 claimed some fifty-five thousand lives. When such extremes strike, those who suffer most are they who cannot adapt easily – the elderly, the infirm, children. The indirect effects of climate change are still unclear but we must expect infectious diseases to spread at breathtaking rates; high pollen counts over longer periods of time will cause greater numbers of allergies; crops will fail owing to droughts and floods. The list of negative impacts of climate change could go on indefinitely.

But it cannot be health promotion's mission to be alarmist. We should ask what a healthy response to the climate challenge would amount to. In his hugely successful documentary, Al Gore states that many people's stubborn ignorance suddenly flips over into despair. This is a reaction that will help no-one.

A healthy response consists in facing the "inconvenient truth" in order to search for ways out of the crisis. We must accept that some developments have already progressed so far that all we can do is to adapt to the new situation. But a healthy response also involves stopping fatal developments wherever possible.

What is health?

The WHO has defined health as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being". The definition dates from 1946, a time when no-one had environmental problems in mind. Faced with climate change we must expand this definition, because human well-being depends directly on Earth's natural systems and on their stability. Therefore, health issues are always environmental issues – and vice-versa. Well-being alone is not enough. Health must also mean to take responsibility for living conditions across the globe.

Integral health promotion goes beyond well-being. It must address issues of environmental policy – not as an abstract concept but by addressing individual people and their everyday behaviour.

This puts the focus on our lifestyles. It has become common knowledge that there is a connection between consumer-oriented lifestyles and environmental problems. It has also become much easier to behave in an environmentally sustainable manner. The difficulty lies in actually doing so. Individuals and policy-makers display enormous resistance against living sustainably. The new term to describe the discrepancy between knowledge and action is "attitude-behaviour gap". Wherever this gap occurs health promotion should intervene. Its core mission may be described as follows: health promotion should encourage the greatest possible number of people to take responsibility for their own well-being, and for the well-being of society and of the environment. We must perceive the ethical dimension of health. In view of scientific and technological evolutions, for example, we must ask insistently whether certain developments are healthy – for individuals, for society, for nature.

Individual and global responsibility

Health promotion begins with each individual. But it is not merely about individuals changing their behaviour – it is also about changing societal circumstances. Change must be initiated at the political level, which is where significant attitude-behaviour gaps exist. The European Commission's progress report on the EU Sustainable Development Strategy, for example, notes that a reversal of negative trends in regard to sustainability requires effective implementation at all levels. But no democratic state can implement such policies without a political majority. This is where voluntary action initiated by civil society and the private sector play an important role. They can drive processes of change that will affect all levels of society.

Health is an issue that concerns each one of us individually. It is also an issue of global dimensions. We cannot talk of health without talking of global living conditions. This is particularly relevant in regard to our climate. While affluent European countries with (as yet) intact health systems prepare for the impact of climate change, the leeway of response for developing countries is very narrow indeed. Areas already suffering from water scarcity, for example, will be devastated by heat waves. It is quite evident that this kind of climate-induced risk imbalance is politically unsound.

Over the next few years we will need to link up individual and global responsibility more closely. To put this succinctly, we must "think globally, act personally". Health plays a crucial role and health promotion needs to be able to rely on mature, educated and responsible individuals. Health promotion does not wish to patronise anyone – it wants to contribute towards building a healthy future.

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