

Planetary Health as a Unifying Framework for Multilateral Organizations

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(check against delivery)



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Thank you so much for the opportunity to participate in this discussion today. The framing that UNDP uses to define development, is two-fold. We focus on:

- **Human Development** – that is ‘enlarging people’s choices and capabilities to live lives they value’ – and here, good health is critical; and
- **Sustainable Development** – defined as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’

As we are not exclusively an organization focused on environmental sustainability or human health (we do a lot of work on democratic governance, on crisis prevention, and post-conflict recovery for example) the question posed to this panel, on whether planetary health offers a useful framing to inform the work of our organizations is a bit more complicated.

But the simple answer, is yes – planetary health can be a very useful frame especially if there is enough attention to two areas: integration and equity. Let me say a couple words on each.

In terms of **INTEGRATION**, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will undoubtedly require new ways of working across silos and sectors, identifying ‘win-wins’, and forging new partnerships. The reason is simple: with 17 goals and 169 targets, countries are already starting to ask us about how to prioritize, resource, and advance this tremendously ambitious and complex, interconnected agenda.

For UNDP, this means offering policy advice that is aligned, supporting policy coherence (so that on one ministry isn’t subsidizing fossil fuels while another has committed to reducing emissions, for example) and considering co-benefits in planning and financing decisions.

What does this mean for researchers and others? I think it means that it won’t be enough to simply show associations (even causal ones) that environmental degradation leads to poor health. Evidence is important, but political decisions are taken with other considerations in mind too: interest groups, financial benefits/loses, and timing consideration – i.e. will the next government reap all the benefits of investments/sacrifices made today?

Policy makers will need some evidence on cost-benefits of certain interventions/actions, an understanding of positive (and negative) spill overs and to be persuaded that even where results are long-term, there are short-term ‘wins’ that can be had. And civil society, will need simple/clear messaging (derived from evidence) to push for/and hold governments accountable.

The second is that there must be a very clear **EQUITY** lens to the work – including an explicit focus on gender.

Agenda 2030 promised to ‘leave no one behind’ and to reach those furthest behind first. The question is whether a planetary health frame can help advance human health, in aggregate, as well as health equity. That is, narrowing the gap in health outcomes between the poor and most marginalized vis-à-vis the wealthy and more privileged.

In my mind, there is a very strong equity angle that can be highlighted. We know from the environmental justice movement that within countries, waste and pollution is not randomly distributed across a country. The poorest and marginalized – who have the least political power - are most exposed. Similarly, while low income countries as a whole are least responsible for climate change, they are also most vulnerable to, and least prepared to mitigate the impacts – so the numbers of lives lost to extreme weather events, the livelihoods lost because of environmental degradation, and more, is disproportionately harming the poorest countries.

So make sure your research doesn’t mask inequities – and highlights who is most impacted, and who should be held accountable. If a planetary health approach can help bring advocates of environmental sustainability, social justice and health equity closer together, it will be a huge success.

And let me end with stressing the political urgency: too many countries risk sliding back on previous commitments from climate change to sexual and reproductive health and rights. The time to align agendas is now.

Thank you.