OVERVIEW

Addressing the socio-economic determinants of health

Significant progress has been made towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals over the past 15 years. That progress has, however, been uneven, and MDGs three and four, aimed at reducing maternal and child mortality, remain furthest off target.

Maternal and child mortality is mostly preventable, and concentrated in socio-economically disadvantaged populations. Unsafe sex for women, for example, depends not only on access to and availability of contraceptives, but also on women’s ability to negotiate safe sex. Similarly, access to optimal nutrition often hinges on a redistribution of resources within the household and women’s power to make spending decisions. Stigma and discrimination of marginalized populations, likewise, drive the vulnerabilities that can cause diseases such as HIV, TB and malaria.

Evidence-based interventions can prevent maternal and child deaths and improve the health and well-being of women and children. Successfully addressing the socio-economic determinants of these challenges requires focusing on the rights of women, men, boys and girls. Only a rights-based approach to health and gender will allow us to reach our objectives.
Involve women and youth in the design and delivery of all health-related services at local, national and global levels

The Government of Canada should support participatory health policy design and delivery by expanding financial and technical support for women- and youth-led groups at local and national level.

Research shows that women will not access services that do not meet their needs. Meaningful space is needed within the global health architecture for all people – including women, youth, disenfranchised and poor people, and sexual minority advocates – to exercise their right to self-determination and to engage with and lead in the planning and delivery of health-related services at the community level.
Adopt evidence- and needs-based sexual and reproductive health and rights policies and programs, and champion sexual and reproductive rights worldwide

The Government of Canada should support reproductive health services that are commensurate with impact groups’ needs, and based on evidence about what makes health policies and programs accessible, effective and durable.

The Government of Canada should leverage its diplomatic resources to champion sexual and reproductive rights worldwide.

The achievement of positive health outcomes for women and children relies on their safe, affordable and confidential access to the full range of reproductive health services, including safe abortion and post-abortion care. In order to effectively safeguard young girls, laws restricting child and early forced marriage must be enforced through community-based interventions and protection services, which are critical for ensuring laws and policies lead to changes in social norms and more durable health outcomes. Sexual rights and justice must be part of the international development agenda, allowing for the full expression of sexual and gender identities as a basic human right.
Ensure that a health equity perspective guides policy and programming decisions

The Government of Canada should adopt global health policies and programs that treat the health needs of all people equitably, using a rights-based approach.

Health services must be provided to those most in need, and on the basis of their human rights. As the geography of poverty continues to shift, however, with over 70 percent of extremely poor people now living in Middle Income Countries, global disease distribution is also changing. Poverty, for example, is a key determinant of preventable maternal and child mortality. Refugees and people living in fragile states, by contrast, have a right to basic health services, but often cannot count on publicly provided services. Donors need new approaches to ensure they are equipped to respond to health needs where they exist, equitably and in a manner that upholds individuals’ human rights.
Coordinate investments and policies within and between departments

The Government of Canada should adopt a whole-of-government strategy for ensuring policy coherence and the coordination of investments in the promotion of women and children’s rights and health, both in Canada and internationally.

Health and rights are the responsibilities of governments. In an era of globalization, however, health challenges are also increasingly transnational. This applies equally to disease outbreaks, such as Ebola, as well as to diseases rooted in individuals’ socio-economic status. Within this context, it is essential that investments be coordinated across different funding mechanisms and departments – such as the Public Health Agency of Canada, Health Canada and Status of Women Canada – whose expertise could help enhance Canada’s added value.
Strengthen and improve the quality and resilience of national health systems

The Government of Canada should work with development actors and donors to help improve the quality of primary healthcare systems according to the World Health Organization’s six health system building blocks.

Equipped with knowledge and evidence about what constitutes quality and resilient national health systems, governments in low and middle income countries have an opportunity and an obligation to provide essential, population-based health services. These must be rooted in strong, particularly primary, health care systems (policies should resist disproportionate resources going to specialized curative care). Commitments such as the Abuja Declaration provide strong levers to encourage and advocate for national governments to invest adequately in order to reach all citizens. The World Health Organization’s Health System’s Framework establishes six building blocks to guide investments in quality health systems: leadership and governance, services, human resources, information systems, financing, and essential medicines and commodities.
Conclusion

Thirty years ago, Canada led the adoption of the Ottawa Charter (1986), entrenching the values of equity and social justice in international approaches to health. The MDGs have shown that, while much can be achieved through technological and indicator-driven interventions, such approaches also have limitations. Canada has an opportunity to demonstrate global health leadership by broadening its focus to consider not only results and accountability, but also an emphasis on rights and equity. This requires focusing on the socio-economic determinants of health, adopting well-coordinated, evidence- and needs-based policies, empowering people to engage with and lead in the planning and delivery of health-related services, and supporting the strength, quality and resilience of national health systems. By adopting global health and rights policies that meet these imperatives, Canada can help transform the lives of women, children and men, end preventable maternal and child deaths, and improve the health and well-being of all people.