United Nations Conference on **Sustainable Development** (Rio+ 20) offers the world an important opportunity to both acknowledge, and benefit from the inextricable
links
between
human health
and sustainable development.

Good health contributes to the achievement of sustainability goals

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 150 million people suffer severe financial hardship each year because they fall ill, use health services and have to pay for them on the spot. Many have to sell assets or go into debt to meet the payments. 100 million people are pushed below the poverty line for these reasons. Lack of access to health services impoverishes people because they cannot work; using health services impoverishes people because they cannot pay.

Protecting people from catastrophic expenditure and ensuring access to essential services through Universal Health Coverage is thus an essential element of any strategy to reduce poverty and build resilient societies. Health has the potential to increase economic development, improve educational opportunities, empower women, reduce impoverishment and foster social cohesion. Health is a beneficiary of sustainable development

A healthy environment is a prerequisite for good health. Reductions in air, water and chemical pollution can prevent up to one quarter of the overall global burden of disease. Cleaner energy policies could halve the number of childhood deaths from pneumonia and substantially reduce the one million people who die each year from chronic lung disease caused by indoor air pollution. Replacing biomass or coal stoves with cleaner stoves and fuels could help improve the health of up to three billion of the world’s poorest people.

As the world seeks to address the challenges posed by ageing populations, growing cities, increasingly mobile populations, competition for scarce natural resources, financial uncertainty, and a changing climate, it is no longer viable to think of solutions in terms of individual sectors. This calls for a greater policy coherence: for a move to address not only health in all policies, but environment in all policies too.

Health is a way of measuring the impact of sustainable development policies

Monitoring progress towards sustainable development means being able to evaluate the economic, environmental and social dimensions of policy. Investment in health alone cannot solve the problems of sovereign debt, volatile food prices or the environmental impact of climate change. But for those aiming to promote a fairer, greener and more sustainable approach to globalization, people's health remains vitally important as a measure of the impact of policies in all these areas. Not only are health outcomes readily measurable, health concerns are immediate, personal and local.

The original Rio Declaration of 1992 described "human beings as the central concern of sustainable development….living a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature". It is vital that those attending Rio+ 20 reaffirm this fact, and take concrete action to optimize the interactions between human health and sustainable development.

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For more information about the participation of WHO at the RIO+20 Conference, please visit:

http://www.who.int/hia/green_economy/health_sust_development/en/index.html