

## ***Ecohealth contributions to Millennium Development Goals***

**As Ecohealth researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, we promote sustainable health and well-being by pursuing transdisciplinary approaches addressing interdependent causal factors of health and well-being, while engaging communities to achieve lasting intergenerational solutions, without compromising the natural, social and cultural capital required for the health of future generations.**

This document shows that an opportunity exists now: we need to be engaged in the MDGs explicitly, and we are already using our approach to make a difference. In our communities we should consider our projects not just in terms of the Ecohealth approach, but in terms of how they will help attain the MDGs, and contribute to the development of the next iteration.

### **Introduction – the context**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 191 nations committed to significantly reduce poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. Since then, these Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have served as a source of inspiration, guidance and frustration to governmental and non-governmental organizations. Progress has been made toward achieving some goals; others appear to remain stubbornly out of reach. In part, this has occurred because, while we have improved in our ability to articulate and measure MDGs, much less attention has been directed at *how* such complex, interacting goals can be most effectively achieved. The global Ecohealth community, with a strong history of investigating and testing processes to achieve such complex goals at the intersection, can contribute significantly to attaining the MDGs in a timely fashion.

*The International Association for Ecology & Health (IAEH) acknowledges, and endorses, the long tradition of international, regional and intergovernmental organizations that have recognised the link between human health, animal health and the environment, expressed as a series of statements, declarations and agreements. The IAEH also reaffirms its commitment to a Call for Action from the International Ecohealth Forum in Merida in 2008 (Supplementary materials available online at [www.ecohealth.net](http://www.ecohealth.net)).*

### **Challenges faced by current MDG processes, and advantages of Ecohealth approaches**

The most recent MDGs Report for 2012 (<http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/mdg-report-2012.html>) lists important progress, including meeting targets on poverty reduction, improving the lives of slum dwellers and access to improved sources of water, but stresses the need for a true global partnership to achieve remaining goals and targets by the 2015 deadline. The current economic crises must not be allowed to decelerate or reverse the progress that has been made. Indeed, it states that the contributions of national governments, the international community, civil society and the private sector will need to take on the longstanding and long-term challenge of inequality, and press forward on food security, gender equality, maternal health, rural development, infrastructure and environmental sustainability, and responses to climate change.

The achievement of health as expressed in the MDGs is also dependent on creating and maintaining healthy ecosystems. These goals require broad involvement and cooperation among community members, practitioners and decision-makers from a variety of institutions. When different stakeholders are not equitably represented in the decision-making process, or they cannot communicate effectively with each other, solutions are stifled or not viable in the long-term. Similarly, when only human stakeholders are considered and reductionist approaches are adopted, solutions turn out to be only a temporary relief often leading to new levels of problems.

The Ecohealth community works from these suppositions. Ecohealth researchers and practitioners have already made a conceptual and structural move in research towards a scholarship that is adaptively oriented, and action-research based. Such a shift has been occurring not only at academic levels, but most importantly at civil society level including local communities, government (national, regional, local) and international (intergovernmental, non-government and multinational corporate) levels. Leadership in Ecohealth at all of these levels is important and recognised by organisations proclaiming an Ecohealth approach. The Ecohealth community also foregrounds the needs and aspirations of local and Indigenous peoples for whom these MDGs are also highly relevant.

This challenge is also a significant and timely opportunity for the IAEH and Ecohealth practitioners to raise the bar of global health targets. From the start, Ecohealth research and practice has emerged with the values and instruments to cross traditional boundaries of sectors, disciplines, and knowledge cultures. While the Ecohealth approach embraces the

tools of core domains such as public health, ecology, and ecosystem management, its emphasis on interdisciplinarity and cross-sectoral collaboration enables it to transcend important limits and blind spots of individual fields of expertise. Our commitment to accounting for and celebrating the interdependence and diversity intrinsic in human-centred ecosystems could yield solutions that remain viable and generative in the long-term. Our dedication to involving whole communities, and defining human health holistically in terms of its physical, mental, social, inter-species and ecosystem facets could make Ecohealth solutions widely accepted and deeply nourishing.

Ecohealth researchers and practitioners accept that continents, oceans and the atmosphere are undergoing significant change. They acknowledge that human societies are changing in response to these, and other drivers. They accept that as people we are behaving in ways that we have never before. There are no single solutions to the human condition in these contexts. And there are better ways of acknowledging their complexities and uncertainties.

### ***Specific recommendations for the Ecohealth community: current and future approaches***

Because of their inter-relatedness, and because they are deeply embedded in global progress toward sustainable development, we believe that the MDGs need to be explicitly situated within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed in the Rio+20 document, *The Future We Want*. Explicitly relating the MDGs to each other, and to the more broadly articulated SDGs, will enable more effective, integrative, sustainable action by all organizations involved.

According to Article 247 of the Rio+20 report, SDGs "*should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.*"

Focused on the period of 2012-2014, the IAEH is in the position to play a role as a member of the international MDG community, and to facilitate collaboration on:

- The development of integrated health, social and environmental impact assessments for policies and development.
- The consideration of trade-offs between ecosystem services and human health and well-being and animal health and their resolution according to the principles of sustainability and equity.
- The adoption of a people-centred approach for ecosystem management and research that does not diminish the (actual or perceived) importance of biodiversity in sustaining ecosystem services.
- The adoption of a deliberative rather than hierarchical approach in research design, inclusive of local people in their MDG aspirations and not defined by finance or positions of power.
- The identification of shared values of principal partners and responsible stakeholder groups, often across disciplines and between sectors.
- Taking action to remove barriers that limit consensus through engagement and skill sets such as humour, patience, tolerance, and a willingness to reciprocate; and seek to have the development of these skills included as part of national curricula or sustainability literacy.

The Ecohealth community is ideally positioned to promote the following strategies:

- The strategic development of appropriate mechanisms to enable health costs to be satisfactorily included in development options and ecosystem management.
- A development of price-based incentive mechanisms for ecosystem services that currently exist outside of markets, in order to adjust inappropriate personal and institutional behaviours.
- The elimination of subsidies that promote excessive use of natural resources;
- The development of proactive policy and incentive schemes that aim at measures to reduce consumption, raise awareness, develop curricula, empower communities and promote participation for the ecosystem - human health nexus.
- The need for appropriate cross-sectoral partnerships for capacity building: improving communication, and empowerment of groups particularly dependent on ecosystem services or affected by their degradation, including women, indigenous people, young people and the elderly.
- The recognition of connections among human, animal and ecosystem health through political commitment and policy interventions to maximize the likelihood of ecosystem services, social capital and human health co-benefits. These are achievable by, *inter alia*, the recognition of unintended consequences, an awareness of trade-offs, promoting appropriate cross-sectoral governance, and organizational change to better enable collaboration across mandates.