

**Public Health and Security: Global Concerns**

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## **Purpose**

In this brief the lack of efficient public health systems in developing nations is limited to the review of the problems of infrastructure and cost, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa. The review of the AIDS pandemic is used to highlight some of the issues with infectious diseases in the developing world. Both of these concerns have the potential to destabilize security throughout the globe.

White papers, journal articles, press releases, and country briefs were all reviewed to gain a better sense of what the issues are. Not much research has been done and publicly released on the topic of lack of public health and its potential affects on global security.

## **Introduction**

The problem of public health in the developing world is a topic that is broad enough for several policy briefs. However the focus for this review is the focus is on how health policy can affect how a country relates diplomatically and economically to the rest of the world.

The development of strong public health systems in developing countries has always been undertaken as one part of an economic development program. It has also been used as a foreign policy tool, where mass vaccinations, improved sanitation, and improvement to health care delivery systems are seen as a stepping-stone to diplomatic goodwill and increased participation in the global economy. Prior to the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001 and the international SARS crisis, public health was viewed through the lenses of international aid and as a policy worked on a limited basis. But the threats have changed and that means global reactions need to change as well.

## **Background**

Since 2001 the world has changed and we are more aware of the dangers that surround us. Not only are we facing threats from rogue nations<sup>1</sup>, but the developed world is also being threatened by well-organized groups of people that share a cultural ideology and a distrust of the West. This hatred is so strong that traditional foreign aid packages or foreign direct investment may not change or

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<sup>1</sup> Rogue nations include North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, countries that are thought to harbor or support terrorist organizations.

influence their behavior in a positive manner. It may actually make the problem worse.

What needs to be done is a shifting of policy. Public health development needs to become a major focus in the global arena, without it many places in the world will continue to be breeding ground for terrorism, political and economic instability. The failure of public health systems in the developing world is a threat to the globe. One threat emerges as infectious diseases continue to spread many of which are proving to be increasingly resistant to current pharmaceutical therapies. The second illustrates how the instability that can be a result of an unhealthy and hopeless populace provides opportunities for terrorists to recruit members and wreak havoc, causing further instability through conflict.

### **Public Health as a Destabilizer**

In the developed world the mission of public health is to “fulfill society’s interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy”<sup>2</sup> Its mission should be carried out through the promotion of healthy behaviors, disease prevention, and interventions initiated to enhance or improve the quality of life.<sup>3</sup>

A well-organized public health system should be able to<sup>4</sup>:

- Prevent epidemics and the spread of disease
- Prevent against environmental hazards
- Prevent injuries

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<sup>2</sup> Institute of Medicine, Committee for the Study of the Future of Public Health, 1988

<sup>3</sup> Source Public Health Overview from Health and Human Services guest lecture, Global Terrorism and Public Health, George Mason University.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

- Promote and encourage healthy behaviors
- Respond to disasters
- Assure accessibility of health services

All of this is provided at a significant financial cost, if the public health system is chronically under funded in the United States, imagine what it must be like in a developing nation. If a government is barely able to feed and employ its people, providing such services maybe nearly impossible. And yet it is countries like this that pose a serious threat to global stability, especially when it comes to health.

Countries facing health crises may be more susceptible to political, social and economic instability. By not having the resources to provide for or improve their citizen's well-being, they become targets for protracted conflict and terrorism. But the problem is larger than that, declines in productivity, loss of income and decreases in life span hamper a countries ability to participate and reap benefits of the global economy. This is a vicious cycle that repeats itself until improvements are made, and all the while a country continues to fall further and further behind the rest of the world.

In some developing countries, money is spent on the development of military programs rather than improving the health infrastructure. A prime example of this is the arms race between India and Pakistan. While leaders in both countries were racing to build up their military as a show of power to the other,

aid workers in the region were scrambling to make up a multi-million dollar shortfall in the fight to improve public health.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers Association (PhRMA), healthcare spending in the poorest countries is \$57 billion short of the minimum needed for good basic care. Trained health workers are in short supply and the poor condition of health delivery systems complicate efforts to fight the most common infectious diseases and provide the basic health care people deserve.

In order for most developing countries to meet the basic health needs of their citizens, \$60 per capita per year needs to be spent.<sup>6</sup> To many governments this goal is nearly impossible when your people are subsisting on less than what the poorest American makes, are unable to find work, and suitable shelter is impossible to find. That \$60 necessary for basic needs just is not there.

Unfortunately the poor health of many citizens in these countries is one of the primary reasons these economies are not doing any better. To be productive and compete in the global economy, the populace needs to be healthy enough to work consistently. Without the steady jobs that would allow them to make the money necessary to do a better job of caring for themselves, they have a difficult time remaining healthy.

Poor health also has potentially negative effects on education. If you are too sick to work, you are probably too sick to learn. In many cases children may feel it is necessary to stop attending school in order to find work and help improve

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<sup>5</sup> "Arms Race Leaves Medicines Behind", Paul Watson for the Los Angeles Times

<sup>6</sup> Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufactures of America brief "Infectious Diseases Besiege Poor Nations" ([www.phrma.org](http://www.phrma.org))

their family's economic situation. Without a basic education these children grow up to become adults that may lack the skills necessary for more advance jobs.

Economics are not the only barrier to improved public health, the lack of political will and support are also stumbling blocks. People want jobs and the idea that health should be the first priority may be contrary to a country's immediate concern, which may be job creation and maintaining political power. In many countries, improved economic opportunities through the opening of manufacturing facilities, leads to more unhealthy behavior, like smoking.

If the costs of offering basic health care is often what seems an insurmountable obstacle for many developing nations, adding in the problems associated with the rise in the cases of infectious diseases and the HIV infection rate will cause you to have a crisis on your hands that is not limited to the affected country's borders.

### **The Problem of HIV**

The failure to adequately fight AIDS could be symptomatic of fundamental problems in a developing nation's health delivery system.<sup>7</sup> The cost of the pandemic is not only being felt in economic terms, but also in political and diplomatic ones as well.

According to the UNAIDS organization, increases in the number of cases of HIV cause infrastructures and divisions of labour in households, families, workplaces, and communities to be disrupted and weakened. It increases the strain on already vulnerable state institutions. This threat could be applied to an

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<sup>7</sup> Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America brief, "Health Care in a Developing World" ([www.phrma.org](http://www.phrma.org))

outbreak of any of the infectious diseases already ravaging the developing world. Tuberculosis or malaria could have the same destabilizing potential if left unchecked.

In sub-saharan Africa, many of those in power are also in the groups facing the highest rates of HIV infection.<sup>8</sup> This not only stunts the growth and spread of democracy, but also provides ample opportunity for these leaders to use less than democratic means to maintain power.

In Africa, 10 times more people are dying from AIDS than from war, which is hitting those of age to participate in the political process the hardest economically and politically. Infection rates are highest in the military, which negatively impacts preparedness and a nation's ability to protect its borders.<sup>9</sup> The cycle of war that has so ravaged the region has also accelerated the spread of the disease. Areas like Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Republic of Congo, and the Sudan are prime examples.<sup>10</sup>

This region is already economically stunted, the AIDS pandemic only exacerbates the poor condition it is in. With worker forces being decimated by illness there is no real incentive for companies to invest in the region. Healthcare costs alone should be enough of a deterrent. South Africa, which is the continent's brightest star, could become economically destabilized in the next decade as the HIV infection rates continue to skyrocket. The potential for continued political crisis in Africa will only be lessened if something is done about

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<sup>8</sup> Is HIV/AIDS a Threat to Political Stability in Africa?, a workshop summary

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: The use of rape as a tool of intimidation has accelerated the spread of HIV. In some cases soldiers feel they have nothing left to lose after becoming infected, and allow themselves to be carried away by reckless and destructive behavior.

the HIV crisis. The continent is just a harbinger of things that could come if the disease continues to spread unchecked in countries like China, Russia, and India.

### **Problems of Security and Public Health**

As the world economy has become more integrated, nations like the U.S. have become more threatened by an enemy that cannot be readily seen. Even having the most technologically powerful and advanced military will not suffice as a protection against drug resistant diseases and HIV.<sup>11</sup> We are all vulnerable to the threat posed by the spread of disease and infection. The danger increases as more Americans travel and as our military continues to stay involved in peacekeeping missions around the globe.

The cross border spread of disease poses dangers to public health at home. As was seen with the SARS crisis, infection abroad can very easily lead to infection at home. A traveler may unknowingly pick up a virus or bacteria while abroad, and once home begin to exhibit symptoms. By then it may be too late, the infection could have spread to those that individual lives and works with. Many diseases like tuberculosis and malaria are on the rise in developing nations. One danger emerges as people in the developing countries continue to seek a better life in the developed world, they unknowingly bring these viruses with them across the border. Not only may they be seeking economic prosperity, but they may also be fleeing political chaos.

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<sup>11</sup> "Make World Health the New Marshall Plan" by Robert E. Hunter, et al.

Countries facing health crises are less likely to be socially and politically stable, economically productive, and in some cases they become hotbeds for conflict and terrorism.<sup>12</sup> This could be the case in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and the Congo. As citizens watch their way of life deteriorate, they may become more tolerant of terrorism.<sup>13</sup> People may feel disenfranchised from the political system, that the current government cannot or will not do any thing to make life better. They make seek to lay blame on others because their way of life is better. They may feel that those in countries doing better economically seek to keep them in poverty. This frustration and provides fertile ground for terrorists to recruit members and negatively influence policy. Internally factions may stop working together to build consensus, and instead will begin to battle each other for power and dominance. Such struggles rarely may lead to armed conflict, which in turn negatively impacts an already weak health system.

Conflict may cause rapid health related deterioration as a result of infrastructure and distribution systems damage, resource constraints, declining health personnel availability and morale, and reductions in access.<sup>14</sup> During war medical assistance may be concentrated in small areas either by physical or military barriers to access. The medical system will be forced to shift from primary or preventive care to hospital based services. With this priority shift, there may not be enough resources to track infectious disease outbreaks or deal

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<sup>12</sup> Changing Concepts of Security, excerpt from Tapping the Power of Health In Foreign Policy by Ambassador Robert E. Hunter and C. Ross Anthony, PhD., pg. 70

<sup>13</sup> Ibid page 72

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 9: Complex Humanitarian Emergencies in the book International Public Health pg. 453, by Michael H. Merson, et al.

with the rise in chronic illnesses. All of this may could lead to higher mortality rates for illnesses that previously had been treatable.

Conflict undermines a government's capacity to make decisions; leaving aid organizations and non-governmental organizations with no point of contact and embroiled in a political tug of war. As warfare damages homes and threatens the lives of civilians, many flee becoming refugees in neighboring countries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) refugees and displaced populations are at a greater risk for infection and spreading of disease. We are all at an increased risk, not only do these conflicts give greater cover to terrorists, but put us at a disadvantage with an enemy we cannot see until many times it is too late. Another cause for concern is the failure of these nations to prepare for a terrorist attack. As groups like Al Queda continue to use unconventional methods to sow destruction and chaos, developing nations are not only vulnerable to an attack, but for an accident related to the preparation of one.

## **Conclusion**

The potential threat from the developed world is two fold. First, if infectious diseases continue to be spread unchecked, either through the lack of infrastructure or access to medications, the potential for infection in other parts of the world increases. Viruses do not get stopped at the border, and all though new immigrants to many nations get screened for illnesses like tuberculosis, the threat is greatest for those traveling abroad. As in the case of SARS they become unwitting carriers for disease.

If these countries do not even have the infrastructure to adequately deal with common infectious diseases, they are in no position to deal with an outbreak caused by a biological agent. Nor are they in a position to fight the influence of terrorist organizations. People in despair will often gravitate to those who offer them hope, regardless if the path out of their despair means participating in immoral activities. It becomes them against the world and they become convinced they must fight for something that has been denied them.

Strong governments are needed prevent and win such battles. Although inequality is rampant through out the world, it is going to take strong leadership to improve the situation. Coordination and coalition building are more effective when a stable government is involved and people feel more empowered in the political process.

If the solution to the public health crisis was simply an issue of money, more significant strides would have been made to improve access. The problem is as a global issue health has been secondary to other issues of security. Even in the U.S. health is not a priority for some, in fact it could be argued that it is taken for granted. The question then becomes, if it is not a priority in the most powerful country in the world, how do you make it a priority to those who are struggling to keep up? Once health becomes a top priority in itself, it stands to reason that improvements will be seen.

The global community faces considerable threats from hostile and well-organized groups, and from nature itself. The gains from improved health globally may do more to increase the security of all of us.

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