

Environment and Public Health

Public Health problems caused by Environmental Contamination and Emerging Infectious Diseases are a growing concern, world wide. These Public health threats are affected by the relationship between people and the Physical, Chemical and Biological nature of our Natural Environments. Population growth and the associated pressures of development are increasing the difficulties associated with sustaining effective public health practices and policy.

Vector-borne and zoonotic diseases, water contamination, air-borne contaminants, bio-accumulative contaminants in the food chain and environmental threats to public health the world over require marshalling of all our scientific knowledge and know-how to develop new solutions. Understanding environmental and ecological health is a pre-requisite to protecting public health.



MDG 7: Ensuring Environmental Sustainability

You may have heard of an open-access fishery that has been over-harvested to such an extent that no fish remain to be caught or a forest that was cut down to make place for a living settlement. Depletion of natural resources and biodiversity due to human activities is on the rise and continuing unchecked in many parts of India and the world.

You breathe unprecedented levels of local pollutants in the air that are reacting with an ever-increasing stock of greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere.

This Millennium Development Goal was a call for public action to examine environmental pollution and threats in order to alter the way in which we use natural resources, including forests, water and land.



However, the idea of environmental sustainability goes beyond the conservation of nature. Natural resources- and the environment in general- are different from many economic goods and services in that they are simultaneously an important part of ecological cycles, inputs to production processes, and a source of enjoyment for households and individuals. Economic production of goods often results in depletion or depreciation of the environment, and often does not have a direct price factored in.

The "art" of balancing nature and development so that social welfare does not decline over time is at the core of environmental sustainability.

India is on track to meeting the MDG on water coverage, though quality and sustainability remain key issues. On sanitation, achieving the MDG will demand massive investments in facilities and even more in changing hygiene practices. In 2004, Water coverage stood at 94% of rural habitations. Despite impressive coverage of some initiatives on safe drinking water facilities in rural areas, there is a great deal of concern about water quality and sustainability. The current situation also calls for an urgent transformation in managing fresh water resources and conservation and cooperation among water users through wise water management. Household access to toilets, as low as 5% in 1990, is accelerating, particularly during the last two years. According to government data, the percentage of households with some form of toilet is now about 36%. Presently, sanitation coverage stands at 35% among the rural population, which means this level needs to rise to 53% by 2015 to meet the MDG target. This is a huge challenge in terms of investment, creation of facilities and related hygiene practices. GOI has launched major reforms in the water and sanitation sector in rural areas through national water supply programmes (Swajaldhara) and the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC), which are demand-driven and community-managed.