

Sundsvall Statement on Supportive Environments for Health

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Third International Conference on Health Promotion, Sundsvall, Sweden, 9-15 June 1991

The Third International Conference on Health Promotion: Supportive Environments for Health - the Sundsvall Conference - fits into a sequence of events which began with the commitment of WHO to the goals of Health For All (1977). This was followed by the UNICEF/WHO International Conference on Primary Health Care, in Alma-Ata (1978), and the First International Conference on Health Promotion in Industrialized Countries (Ottawa 1986). Subsequent meetings on Healthy Public Policy, (Adelaide 1988) and a Call for Action: Health Promotion in Developing countries, (Geneva 1989) have further clarified the relevance and meaning of health promotion. In parallel with these developments in the health arena, public concern over threats to the global environment has grown dramatically. This was clearly expressed by the World Commission on Environment and Development in its report Our Common Future, which provided a new understanding of the imperative of sustainable development.

Third International Conference on Health Promotion: Supportive Environments for Health - the first global conference on health promotion, with participants from 81 countries - calls upon people in all parts of the world to actively engage in making environments more supportive to health. Examining today's health and environmental issues together, the Conference points out that millions of people are living in extreme poverty and deprivation in an increasingly degraded environment that threatens their health, making the goal of Health For All by the Year 2000 extremely hard to achieve. The way forward lies in making the environment - the physical environment, the social and economic environment, and the political environment - supportive to health rather than damaging to it.

This call for action is directed towards policy-makers and decision-makers in all relevant sectors and at all levels. Advocates and activists for health, environment and social justice are urged to form a broad alliance towards the common goal of Health for All. We Conference participants have pledged to take this message back to our communities, countries and governments to initiate action. We also call upon the organizations of the United Nations system to strengthen their cooperation and to challenge each other to be truly committed to sustainable development and equity.

A Call for Action

A supportive environment is of paramount importance for health. The two are interdependent and inseparable. We urge that the achievement of both be made central objectives in the setting of priorities for development, and be given precedence in resolving competing interests in the everyday management of government policies. Inequities are reflected in a widening gap in health both within our nations and between rich and poor countries. This is unacceptable. Action to achieve social justice in health is urgently needed. Millions of people are living in extreme poverty and deprivation in an increasingly degraded environment in both urban and rural areas. An unforeseen and alarming number of people suffer from the tragic consequences for health and well-being of armed conflicts.

Rapid population growth is a major threat to sustainable development. People must survive without clean water, adequate food, shelter or sanitation.

Poverty frustrates people's ambitions and their dreams of building a better future, while limited access to political structures undermines the basis for self-determination. For many, education is unavailable or insufficient, or, in its present forms, fails to enable and empower.

Millions of children lack access to basic education and have little hope for a better future. Women, the majority of the world's population, are still oppressed. They are sexually exploited and suffer from discrimination in the labour market and many other areas, preventing them from playing a full role in creating supportive environments. More than a billion people worldwide have inadequate access to essential health care. Health care systems undoubtedly need to be strengthened. The solution to these massive problems lies in social action for health and the resources and creativity of individuals and their communities. Releasing this potential requires a fundamental change in the way we view our health and our environment, and a clear, strong political commitment to sustainable health and environmental policies. The solutions lie beyond the traditional health system.

Initiatives have to come from all sectors that can contribute to the creation of supportive environments for health, and must be acted upon by people in local communities, nationally by government and nongovernmental organizations, and globally through international organizations. Action will predominantly involve such sectors as education, transport, housing and urban development, industrial production and agriculture.

The Sundsvall Conference identified many examples and approaches for creating supportive environments that can be used by policy-makers, decision-makers and community activists in the health and environment sectors. The Conference recognized that everyone has a role in creating supportive environments for health.