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ESSAYS ON THE GREEN ECONOMY

The Green Economy and Health

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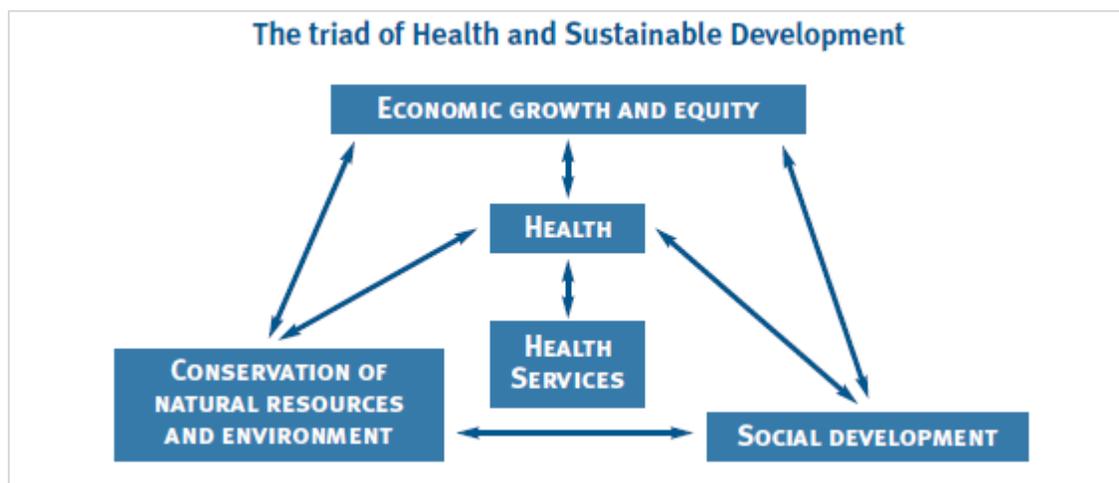
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The Green Economy and Health By Shanomae Rose

Twenty five years ago, the discussion on development highlighted the necessity to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, in what was defined as *Sustainable Development*. It was recognised that any development paradigm had to improve the quality of life of the people, while at the same time addressing the management of natural resources. Five years later the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) sought international consensus on the central role of health in the achievement of sustainable development. This meeting concluded with two outputs that sought to emphasise and reinforce this point. The first principle of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development states that “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.” This is reinforced by an entire chapter in Agenda 21 devoted to laying out the objectives and guidelines for ensuring the Protection and Promotion of Human Health. Health, defined by the WHO (1948), is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Thus the interconnectedness and interdependence of economic, social and environmental development on the health of a population must be a key goal of sustainable development.



Source: WHO, 2002

People are central since we are the ultimate drivers (resource for) of sustainable development. Sustained, improved health drives are an output of economic, social and environmental factors that foster sustainable development. Education is better assimilated and applied by healthy people, who in turn can become productive members of society contributing to its development. Development that addresses issues such as solid waste management and air, water, and chemical pollution will reduce the societal burden of diarrhoeal diseases, vector borne diseases, and chronic respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, to mention a few. Today it is evident that poverty, a cause and consequence of under-development, increases the burden of preventable and treatable diseases and death. It is also clear that inappropriate development despite growth can increase the burden of disease; for example, the outcome of policies on urban planning, and transport and housing development in many countries that create rather than reduce air pollution, noise and traffic injuries, and translate into ill health for the populace.

Today, Guyana and the rest of the world are advocating movement towards a green economy where the focus remains on sustainable development with emphasis on the need to address persistent poverty. The aim of the Green Economy, like sustainable development, is to improve human well-being and social equity. Social equity is a cornerstone of sustainable development and implies fair access to livelihood, education, and resources. It therefore means that greater attention must be placed on health, and the suggestion by the World Health Organisation that health be placed at the heart of Sustainable development is critical. Health must no longer be seen as the purview of the health sector since several of the important determinants of health and disease are external to its direct control. The sectors concerned with education, agriculture, urban and rural development, energy, transportation, housing, trade, water and sanitation and environment have a significant role to play in ensuring solutions to these determinants, and thus must be integrally involved in the efforts for sustained improvements in health.

This must therefore be the focus of Guyana's movement towards a green economy. Thus, when Guyana reports a decline in the infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) from 42.9 in 1992 to 14 in 2008, it must be recognised as an achievement in health derived from the efficient and effective workings of the sectors and not simply one, the health sector. Take for example two sectors in Guyana, construction and transportation, and their role in health for a green economy. Construction is a booming industry in Guyana. However, much of our construction, especially in urban areas, results in structures that are intensive fossil fuel energy users in direct contravention of the efforts to decarbonise the economy. These buildings are not constructed to maximise the use of natural ventilation or lighting, and as a consequence predispose persons who occupy them to building related and/or sick building illnesses. This is because airborne contaminants and pollutants can build up to high levels, all the while circulating as occupants breathe within these tightly sealed environments. Contaminants and pollutants may enter air conditioning systems where the pathogenic organisms multiply and are spread back into the interiors; creating a deleterious cycle of indoor pollutants.

The age of the vehicles that ply our roadways, and the fact that the overwhelming majority are reconditioned and benefit from irregular maintenance, does not bode well for the level of carbon emissions in a country with a green economy trajectory. The reckless disregard for our traffic laws and regulations result in frequent injuries and death to road users. These are the most visible and direct health impacts of transportation, however, the trauma to loved ones as well as the financial cost for recovery, rehabilitation, and/or burial leads to a number of other less visible but equally devastating health effects for a number of other persons. Accidents and injuries primarily affect the 15-44 years age group in Guyana—the productive sector of society.

Occupational safety and health (OSH), which ensures maintenance of a safe and healthful work environment, is also very important. But in spite of OSH legislation, the lack of sufficient regulations makes the implementation of the Act difficult. Employers thus have little incentive to invest in a safe and healthful environment for employees. The lack of adequate staff complement by the enforcing authority and a limited budget also mean that on many occasions they are made aware of unsafe and unhealthy work environments when accidents are reported in the press. This is a problem that needs to be arrested given the number of fatal accidents that have been reported in the press, within just the construction and sawmilling industries in Guyana. Laws for the protection of vulnerable groups such as the Protection of Child Act 2009 and the Domestic Violence Act 1996 are all strides towards improving the quality of life for Guyanese, but enforcement remains crucial.

Health can therefore be seen as both a contributor to, and an indicator of, a green economy. The evident interconnectedness and interdependence of these concepts necessitate that education, legislation, regulation, and policy must be fashioned to enable this move towards a green economy. However, central to all of these is the importance of integrated monitoring and surveillance and information systems to compile, analyse, synthesise and generate information that will drive the process. Actual information and not anecdotal evidence must inform our priorities and indicate our successes and failures. Improvement in human well-being, whether called sustainable development or green economy, is to all our benefits. Let us join WHO and make every effort to place health at the heart of sustainable development.