



Learn, Live, Lead,

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Description of Committee

The General Assembly (GA) is the key representative body of the **United Nations**. It includes all 193 member states; each member state has one vote. It is empowered through Article 11 of the UN Charter to "consider the general principle of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security." The GA addresses all aspects of UN work, including humanitarian; peace and security; and human rights matters. It refers threats to peace to the Security Council for discussion. Although resolutions, or written decisions, produced by the GA are **non-binding** but they are important international documents because they are supported by the majority of countries in the world. The actions of the General Assembly provide a code of sorts for other UN bodies, as well as for the international community as a whole.

As a representative of your country's government in the General Assembly of the United Nations, it is important to have a full understanding of the purpose, functions, and abilities that the General Assembly possesses.

The General Assembly has the power to 1) make recommendations on peace and security; 2) elect members to UN organizations; 3) decide admissions, suspensions, and expulsion of members; 4) consider and approve the budget; 5) discuss and make recommendations regarding changes to the UN Charter and organs of the UN; 6) initiate studies and make recommendations to promote international political cooperation.

Every nation in the United Nations holds a seat in the General Assembly and has one vote during voting procedures. This system is used to promote equality – all votes hold the same amount of power regardless of a country's size or population. For designated important issues, a two-thirds majority is required for a resolution to pass; all other votes are held as a simple majority.

Topic: Sustainable Development and Environmental Health

Introduction

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This means that the resources we use today must not only meet current human needs, but more importantly, they must also be made available for generations to come. When thinking of sustainable development,



it is important to look at the world as a single, interconnected system. The actions our grandparents took directly affect us today, and our actions will similarly affect the lives of our grandchildren. One example of this can be seen in how the economic policies that were endorsed many years ago continue to have an effect on our current-day environment.

Environmental health includes both the direct **pathological** effects of chemicals, radiation, and some biological agents, and the often indirect effects on health and wellbeing of the broader physical, psychological, social, and cultural environment. These include things such as housing, urban development, land use, and transport. Thus both natural and **built environment** can affect human health.²

Environmental, Economic, Social Sustainability

The 2005 UN World Summit outlined three pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social development, and environmental protection.³ Economic and environmental developments are the most addressed aspects of sustainable development.

Environmental sustainability calls people to interact smartly with the environment, leaving it as pristine as possible to preserve it for future generations. Since the concept of environment is global, it encompasses all ecosystems, including oceans, fresh water, the atmosphere, and land. Clean and healthy environments are a vital component of every living thing.⁴ An unsustainable situation is one where the **natural capita** is used faster than it can be replenished. One example of this is deforestation, which occurs when a large amount of trees are cut down in order to convert a forested space into an area to be used for other, non-forested purposes. In such a case, the benefits of the forest are lost much more quickly than they can be replenished, since it takes hundreds of years for a forest to regrow. The results of this deforestation are significant not only for wildlife but also for humans; it negatively affects human health, decreases a country's GDP, and causes potential problems for the future generations.

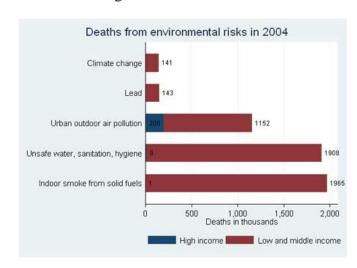
Environmental sustainability and social sustainability are also impacted by economic activity, making economics another important aspect of sustainable development. Economic sustainability is a tool for sustainable development because economic strategies define how much natural

capita can be deployed so that the future generations are provided with the same or sustainable amount of capita.

Effects of Unsustainable Development

The Environment and the Cycle of Poverty

The negative effects of unsustainable environmental development on human health do not affect all segments of society equally. Instead, the biggest burden of disease due to environmental factors generally falls on the poor, many of whom





As many as 13 million deaths can be prevented every year by making our environments healthier. -WHO

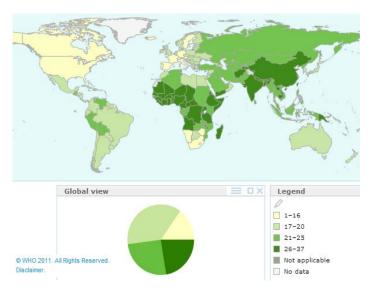
still live in rural areas. For these individuals, the absence of medical care increases the risk of diseases and infections, and this in turn perpetuates the problem of poverty. Poverty, therefore, is cyclical: when a working member of an impoverished family

falls sick and cannot work – or when a child in such a family falls sick and the family has to either pay for medical care or take off work in order to care for the child – the household loses income. This plunges them deeper into poverty, creating a cycle that helps contribute to the

development of many socio-economic problems.

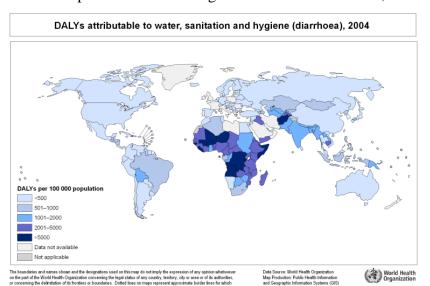
To make matters worse, areas of extreme poverty also tend to be in the worst environmental conditions. This too reinforces the cycle of poverty since the environment is one of the most important influences on human health today. In particular, **climate change** contributes a lot to the social and environmental health of humans by affecting clean air, safe drinking water, and the availability of sufficient food and secure shelter. Climate change therefore can be said to affect everyone – especially the poor.

Public Health and Environment (PHE): Percentage of deaths and **DALY**s attributable to the environment, 2004 Deaths



Effects of Climate Change

Over the last fifty years, human activities, including the burning of fossil fuels, have released large quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, which trap additional heat in the lower atmosphere and affect the global climate.⁵ As a result, melting glaciers are causing sea



levels to rise, and extreme weather is becoming more frequent and intense. In addition, health conditions caused by diarrhoeal diseases, malnutrition, and malaria are highly climatesensitive and are expected to worsen because of the effects of global warming. Most of these diseases – which kill millions of people every year – occur in the most impoverished areas of the world with the least ability to combat



disease.

All populations will be affected by climate change, but islands and coastal states should be especially concerned due to the danger that rising sea levels presents to their population. In addition, **developing countries** are also among the most vulnerable because their weak **health care infrastructure** will be unable to handle any strains that result from an increase in disability or disease due to climate change and the accompanying extreme weather. Even more than adults, children from developing countries are likely to have their health affected by climate change. The extreme heat caused by global warming directly contributes to cardiovascular diseases and also causes an increase in pollen and aeroallergens, affecting people with asthma, cardiovascular disease, and respiratory disease.

The effects of climate change can also be seen in global weather patterns. The number of natural disasters that are weather related has worsened three times in the last sixty years, and this causes numerous problems for the world's population. Extreme weather destroys buildings and results in widespread death. Increased flooding also destroys homes and lives, forcing populations living close to the water to move. More than half of the people in the world today live within sixty kilometers of a sea or an ocean, and the mass migration of this many individuals could lead to the spread of many diseases. In addition, a rise in sea level and temperatures may lead to shortage of the fresh water that is essential to human survival. A lack of safe fresh water would result in a decline of hygiene and an increase in infectious diseases. It would also cause a decline of **staple foods**, which can lead to malnutrition and even famine, especially for the world's poorest.

Current Situation

It is almost impossible to calculate the effects of climate change on environmental health. However, the World Health Organization concluded that by 2004, the modest warming of the earth since the 1970s had already caused over 140,000 excess deaths annually. It is estimated that by the 2090s, climate change will widen the area affected by drought, double the frequency of extreme droughts, and increase their average duration six-fold.

Some recent statistics regarding the deaths caused by lack of environmental health are:

- The heat wave of summer 2003 in Europe left more than 70,000 dead,
- Urban air pollution causes about 1.2 million deaths every year,
- Natural disasters result in over 60,000 deaths, mainly in developing countries,
- Diarrhoeal disease kills 2.2 million people every year,
- Malnutrition and under nutrition currently causes 3.5 million deaths every year,
- Exposure to indoor smoke from cooking fuels results in two million deaths every year,
- Each year, thirteen million deaths are due to preventable environmental causes,
- Environmental hazards are responsible for as much as a quarter of the total burden of disease world-wide, and more than one-third of the burden among children,
- In children under five years old, one third of all disease is caused by the environmental factors of unsafe water and air pollution,



• In the least developed countries, one third of deaths and cases of disease are a direct result of environmental causes. 12

"Investing into people health and environment as a prerequisite for sustainable development " -Rio Declaration 1992

International Action

Many actions have been taken to push forward the notion of sustainable development, one of the most challenging issues for the world community to resolve. Among the most important of these international actions is the Rio Conference.

Rio Conference

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the Rio Conference, was the international community's first step toward addressing environmental sustainability. For the first time ever, issues such as environmental protection and socio-economic development were addressed together. The most recent result of the conference was a nonbinding document "The Future We Want" that was signed by 192 countries at the Rio +20 Conference in 2012. The document stated countries' commitment for a sustainable future and a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a commitment to phase out the usage of fossil fuels, and a commitment to make some fundamental changes in terms of human consumption and production.¹³



The SDGs are centered on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – eight international development goals agreed upon by all members of the United Nations. Although the specific SDGs will be proposed in the fall of 2013, the MDGs can easily be applied to the issue of sustainable development and environmental health. The majority of the MDGs correlate to the problem of sustainable development and environmental health.

The Rio conferences have had many successes. Although the international progress has been very slow, many **grassroots** level projects have been started. The Conferences also raised awareness in the world population on the issue of

sustainable development, and resulted in agreements such as the Biosafety Protocol of 2003, which seeks biological diversity and safety of **genetically modified organisms**, and the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, which is a treaty aiming to eliminate **persistent organic pollutants**.



Actions like these give hope for a healthier environment. However, one of the main challenges the Rio Conferences have faced is combining economics with environment, as economics continues to take importance over environmental sustainability on the world stage. As a result, **overconsumption** is still a feature of many developed societies that leads toward high levels of pollution and environmental unsustainability. ¹⁷

In 2013, the General Assembly established a new high-level political forum. It will replace the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and focus on tackling and providing momentum on environmental, economic, and social challenges of the global community.¹⁸

Considering Solutions

The path towards sustainable development does not have a final destination; it is a process that humans will have to work on for as long as we want to call this planet our home. Properly addressing the issue *can* make a difference in the earth's environment, but such positive change requires the commitment of every nation. Consider the following as you try to come up with solutions to this worldwide problem:

QUESTIONS/IDEAS TO CONSIDER

- 1. Why is it so important for the world community to address the issue of sustainable development? What would happen if we do not reach the goal of sustainability?
- **2.** What are the ways of achieving sustainability?
- **3.** Why will people in impoverished areas be most vulnerable as a result of climate change?
- **4.** What can be done to prevent the negative effects of natural disasters from occurring?
- **5.** What can be done to help developing countries mitigate the effects of climate change?
- **6.** Look at the world map; which areas of the world are most likely to be affected by the climate change?
- **7.** What can the United Nations do to encourage countries to seriously address the issues of sustainable development and environmental health?
- **8.** What other organizations work on this issue?
- **9.** How does the interconnectivity of this world play into the issue of sustainable development?
- **10.** Which MDGs correlate with the problems of sustainable development?



TERMS AND CONCEPTS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

United Nations: international organization that promotes international law, security, economic development, social progress, human rights, civil rights, civil liberties, political freedoms, democracy, and world peace

Humanitarianism: concern for human welfare, especially as manifested through philanthropy

Non-Binding: a written body that cannot produce into law

UN Charter: foundational treaty of the United Nations

Pathological: extreme, or excessive to the point of being abnormal

Built Environment: human-made surroundings for human activities

Natural Capita: the extension of the economic notion of capital (manufactured means of production) to environmental goods and services

Climate Change: the change in global climate patterns apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards, attributed largely to the increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels

DALY: disability-adjusted life year; a year lost of healthy life, calculated across the population by adding Years of Life Lost (YLL) due to premature mortality and Years Lost due to Disability (YLD); measures the gap between current health status and an ideal health situation¹⁹

Global Warming: a gradual increase in the overall temperature of the earth's atmosphere generally attributed to the greenhouse effect caused by increased levels of carbon dioxide, chlorofluorocarbons, and other pollutants

Developing Countries: nation with low living standard, underdeveloped industrial base, and low Human Development Index

Health Care Infrastructure: the basic facilities, services, and installations needed for the functioning of the health care system

Staple Foods: food that makes up the dominant part of a population's diet

Grassroots: the most basic level of an activity or organization

Genetically Modified Organisms: plants or animals that have been genetically engineered with DNA from bacteria, viruses or other plants and animals, resulting in combinations of genes from different species which cannot occur in nature or in traditional crossbreeding

Persistent **Organic** Pollutants: chemical substances that persist in the environment, bioaccumulate through the food web, and pose a risk of causing adverse effects to human health and the environment

Overconsumption: the action or fact of consuming something to excess; in terms of environmental sustainability, the situation where resource-use has outpaced the sustainable capacity of the ecosystem



Additional Resources

Websites:

World Health Organization website; contains data on environmental health www.WHO.org

Information on sustainable development and its impact on the world www.IISD.org

sustainabledevelopment.un.org

United Nations. 1987. "Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development." General Assembly Resolution 42/187, 11 December 1987.

2005 World Summit Outcome Document, World Health Organization, 15 September 2005

TED Conference Speaker on importance of sustainable development http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sJ-uixn7Jg

A short video describing the interconnectivity of the world and sustainability http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxmjMH600aw

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¹⁹ WHO. www.who.org



² WHO Environmental Health" http://www.who.int/topics/environmental health/en/

³ 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, World Health Organization, 15 September 2005

⁴ "WHO Environmental Health" http://www.who.int/topics/environmental_health/en/ 3 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, World Health Organization, 15 September 2005

⁵ WHO Climate Change and Health http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/

⁶ Global Plan for Children's Helath and Environment, WHO http://www.who.int/ceh/en/

⁷ WHO Climate Change and Health http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/

⁸ WHO Climate Change and Health http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/

⁹ Climate change 2007. Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Geneva, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007 (Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).

¹⁰ Global health risks: mortality and burden of disease attributable to selected major risks. World Health Organization, Geneva, 2009.

¹¹ Arnell NW. Climate change and global water resources: SRES emissions and socio-economic scenarios. Global Environmental Change – Human and Policy Dimensions, 2004, 14:31–52.

¹² WHO, Children's Health and the Environmental Annual Report 2011,

http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/ceh annualreport 2011.pdf

¹³ http://ictsd.org/i/news/biores/136257/

¹⁴ "List of goals, targets, and indicators". Siteresources.worldbank.org. Retrieved 2012-10-18.

¹⁵ New open working group to propose sustainable development goals for action by general assembly's sixtyeighth session, Press Release United Nations, retrieved 26 February 2013.

¹⁶ "List of goals, targets, and indicators". Siteresources.worldbank.org. Retrieved 2012-10-18.

¹⁷ Sustainable Development Successes and Failures Since the 1992 Rio Earth

Summithttp://www.iisd.org/briefcase/ten+ten_contents.asp

¹⁸ General Assembly sets up new UN forum to boost sustainable development effortshttp://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45376&Cr=sustainable+development&Cr1=#.UfsHO41yG So