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Improving Human Health:

Environmental and Social Considerations of Sectoral Reform

USAID's programs that improve human health help stabilize world populations and support the human capital that fuels economic growth. Since the human and natural environments are inextricably linked, environmental policies and institutions can support USAID's efforts to build human capital worldwide and keep it healthy. Environmental policies and the institutions that implement them can reduce many of the airborne and waterborne pathways that spread disease among communities and thereby increase the productivity of people in society. Environmental policies and institutions also protect and sustain an economy's natural resource base, which helps provide a safe and reliable supply of food and water as well as jobs and income enabling access to health care. Healthier families, in turn, reduce demands on public health and welfare programs. Understanding these linkages and the cycle between the human and natural environment offers broad opportunities to leverage environmental policies to deliver improved human health outcomes.

How Environmental Policy and Practice Affect Human Health

- Water quality policies prevent the spread of infectious disease. Polluted water is perhaps the most common vector for the spread of many microbial diseases such as dysentery, cholera, and schistosomiasis. Environmental policies that reduce or improve the quality of discharges to waterways can significantly reduce the spread of these diseases. Strong environmental institutions that enforce these policies preserve the quality of water resources for drinking, bathing, and recreation.
- Safe drinking water keeps people healthy. For many, especially in rural communities, access to pure drinking water is key to human health. Policies that enable proper planning and especially financing of these facilities ensure that families can safely drink and build good personal hygiene practices. As a result, the incidence and spread of debilitating, but easily preventable intestinal diseases is greatly reduced.
- Air quality policy can reduce exposure of at-risk populations to harmful pollutants. Policies that reduce the release of hazardous air pollutants, particulates, and ozone precursors directly reduce the incidence of respiratory diseases in children and the elderly.
- Natural resource policy supports healthier people. Policies that sustain or preserve ecological resources also help improve human health. Fisheries and aquatic habitat policies, for example, assure ready sources of protein to support healthy diets and reduce diseases that result from poor nutrition. Policies that promote sustainable forestry and agro-forestry provide long-term employment to entire communities and income to families without which, they could not access or pay for health care and medicines.

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- Policies that improve management of solid waste reduce both direct and indirect exposure to infectious diseases. Policies that require responsible management of solid waste help reduce populations of rodents and insects that can carry and spread many types of infectious diseases.
- Responsible management of industrial hazardous wastes reduces human health risks. Policies that require safe handling of industrial toxic waste reduce acute exposure to lethal amounts of toxins as well as chronic exposure to lower-level, but harmful amounts of toxics in groundwater that can cause neurological disorders and cancer.