Health: A Fundamental Right

The right to health is enshrined in international law but not everyone has equal access to health. Poor people suffer worse health and die younger.

"The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without the distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition".   World Health Organisation

★ Each day over 30,000 children die from preventable diseases;

★ More than 500,000 women die in pregnancy and childbirth each year. Maternal death rates are 1000 times higher in Sub-Saharan Africa than in high-income countries;

★ Five of the top 10 causes of death in low-income countries (HIV and AIDS, perinatal conditions, diarrhoeal diseases, malaria and tuberculosis) do not appear on the top ten list for high-income countries;

★ Infectious and parasitic diseases, such as HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria cause around 10.9 million deaths each year; and

★ HIV and AIDS alone causes three million deaths each year and directly affects up to 400 million people.

Poverty, social exclusion, inadequate housing and sanitation, lack of education and inefficient health systems are among the main causes of ill health. Improvements in health can only be achieved by tackling these root causes.

What are Irish NGOs doing about it?

Irish NGOs are working towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. Goals, 4, 5 and 6 directly relate to health, namely, the reduction of child mortality, improvement in maternal health and combating HIV and AIDS, malaria and other major diseases.

Irish NGOs are involved in:

★ Helping to prevent disease by supporting health intervention practices such as early and exclusive breastfeeding, measles immunisation, Vitamin A supplementation and the proper use of mosquito nets;

★ Providing funds and advice to grassroots organisations working to increase access to health services for marginalised communities;

★ Helping to create healthy and safe working conditions;

★ Promoting health education;

★ Training health workers;

★ Supporting research and development of new treatment and prevention methods;

★ Maintaining health during emergencies and post-conflict situations;

★ Helping to incorporate health issues, particularly HIV and AIDS, into all poverty alleviation and development programmes;

★ Working in partnership with local organisations and governments to help strengthen the capacity of their health sectors;

★ Working with governments to shape international health policies by engaging with them in strategic planning;

★ Lobbying governments to meet international health targets; and

★ Highlighting the global health crisis in the Irish media in order to contribute to a growing awareness of the reality of living in poverty and the plight of the millions who live on less than a dollar a day.

Throughout history only one infectious disease - smallpox - has ever been eradicated. Others, though, are on the verge of eradication: Thanks to international aid efforts, crippling diseases such as polio, guinea-worm, leprosy and river blindness no longer wreak havoc on societies and economies of developing countries.

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