



Letters

Globalisation and health

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Informed and open debate on globalisation and health is needed

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EDITOR—We live in extraordinary times, but not for the reasons that Feachem celebrates in his eulogy on globalisation as “mostly good for your health.”¹ An informed, inclusive discussion of globalisation’s merits and demerits, including its impacts on human health, is needed, given the increasingly polarised nature of this debate. The mass demonstrations of anti-capitalist protesters at major international meetings, most recently at the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy, communicate the angst felt by many for the human, social, and environmental consequences of the kind of globalisation we are experiencing today. But the violence that has accompanied these demonstrations has undermined and confused the protestors’ message.

For the health community, a fuller review of the evidence begins with a disentangling of globalisation as a complex web of cause and effect.² Both sides of the debate have abused the term as a catch all to explain many natural and human induced changes. Defining globalisation as openness does not capture the multiple, often contradictory, forces at play. Globalisation can

also be defined as processes that are changing the ways in which people interact across boundaries, notably physical (such as the nation-state), temporal (such as instantaneous communication via email), and cognitive (such as cultural identity). The result is a redefining of human societies across many spheres—economic, political, cultural, technological and so on. As such, globalisation affects the health of different people in very different ways. How good or bad globalisation happens to be for you will be influenced by socioeconomic status, sex, education, age, geographical location, and other factors.

We are only beginning to understand these interconnections, but existing evidence about the adverse health impacts of globalisation cannot be readily dismissed.³ The role of global environmental change on diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and cholera has been well documented. The alarming rise of tobacco related diseases has followed recent global economic policies.⁴ The claim that globalisation will ultimately bring greater wealth, and thus better health, is open to challenge. What is needed is a comprehensive examination of the data bearing on each of the many components of globalisation, an assessment of the risks and benefits of each component, and innovative policy responses enabling us to act appropriately when choices are possible, and to adapt to changes that are inevitable.⁵ To do otherwise will reinforce a simplistic debate that is not only widely divided already, but will ultimately fail to benefit the health of all people.

References

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Challenges of globalisation deserve better than simplistic polemics

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