

Beginning the dialogue: public health and the environment

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Public health and the Environment are two broad sectors, which are rarely discussed together. However the two are so clearly linked that a change in one also impacts on the other. A closer examination of the issues revealed that what we do to protect and improve the environment, we also do to safeguard and promote health. People acquire the resources on which health depends from their environment.

A healthy environment is not only a Need it is a Right. The right to live and work in an environment conducive to physical, social and mental health is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Everyone shares the responsibility for ensuring that this right is duly acknowledged in an environment which is economically sustainable to ensure healthy lifestyles. The quality of the environment and the nature of development are major determinants of health. Health also depends on whether people can obtain food, water and shelter. Everyone also shares responsibility for health and for passing onto the next generation a World whose resources are not depleted and whose natural systems are not degraded to ensure the continuity of all life forms.

There is a powerful synergy between health, environment protection and sustainable resource use. Societies and Individuals who share the responsibility for achieving a healthy environment and managing their resources sustainably become partners in ensuring that global cycles and systems remain unchanged. The dominant social paradigm in contemporary societies today, is the belief that humans are not abject to natural laws in their use of natural resources and systems for economic purposes.

Western Science promised benefits for humankind in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the quality of human life has not improved, for we know that in spite of impressive developments in space travel, nuclear power, telecommunications, genetic engineering and computers, life has become significantly better for a small and diminishing proportion of the World's population. Even among this privileged minority, "the 20 percent of humankind who live in industrialised nations."¹ There are immense problems of economic disparity, malnutrition, prejudice, alienation, loneliness, violence, poverty and drug abuse which have increased rather than diminished.

The rapid and catastrophic degradation of the planetary biosphere has been the main catalyst for reassessing the power and limitations of the scientific insights and application. These signs and symptoms are everywhere, for example

- The disappearance of deciduous forests in Germany, Canada and America.
- The mysterious death of thousands of seals in the North Sea.
- The dumping of toxic waste and chemicals in once pristine rivers and seas, - killing marine and river species, now in danger of extinction.²

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Even weather and climate are changing while water tables plummet, deserts are expanding and forests disappearing. The once abundant stocks of herring, salmon and tuna are disappearing world-wide and many others. These signs indicate that all is not well with our planet. For often, most of us assume that they, the scientists and engineers will do something to pull us through but we are clinging to a faith that science and technology can forever resolve the problems they helped to create in the first place.

Consider pesticides, the powerful chemicals such as DDT, are relatively selective in that insects are more sensitive to it than other animals. Pests such as mosquitoes carrying Malaria were dramatically destroyed at first, yet no one predicted before the extensive use of DDT, that pesticides are biomagnified up the food chain to concentrations hundreds of thousands of times their original levels. These levels have been responsible for ill health in people who live in these areas, causing allergic conditions, life threatening forms of cancer and leukaemia. We know so little about the biological and physical properties of the planet that we cannot predict the long-term impact of our scientific endeavours.

A Stanford University ecologist Paul Ehrlich believes that the answer to the global difficulties will be “quasi-religious” and he further suggest that “our problem is inherent in the way we perceive our relationship with the rest of nature and our role in the scheme of things.”³ A Harvard biologist, E. O. Wilson proposes that we foster “Biophilia”, a love of life. This means that we must rediscover our kin, the other animals and plants with whom we share this planet.

Both these eminent scientists are suggesting that Science alone is not enough to solve the planet’s environmental crisis. We must rediscover for ourselves a sense of place within the biosphere that is steeped in humility and respect for all other life. To rediscover ourselves a sense of place is really to reflect on ourselves and who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. This was aptly put by Socrates a famous philosopher, who described identity as “knowing yourself”.⁴

As Samoans we have a history of knowing ourselves, our relationship with nature and other life forms central to our view of health. This relationship is the *va tapuia*. “The Concept of *va tapuia* pertains to many aspects of Samoan life and it refers to relationships between the person or human being and other life forms”.⁵ There is the *Va tapuia* between parents and their children, brothers and sisters, old and young members of the family or communities as well as males and females. However the most important of these is the *va tapuia* between the persons and their environment. This includes our relationship with the land, sea, air, soil, sky and other animals in our world.

Inherent in our Samoan way is the belief that we are the caretakers of the land. We live in harmony with the earth, the soil, the elements, our perspective and indigenous philosophies protected our soil, water, forests, the fauna, flora, birds, the river life and the marine life forms. Our traditional rules and laws ensured for us that the *va tapuia* is maintained as this keeps us physically, mentally and spiritually in tune with our Universe, in other words, it keeps us healthy. Our health and our environment are intertwined and dependent on us and our actions which are defined by our traditional values, our belief systems, norms and language. These are the core elements which defines our culture or *faasamoa*.

Aiono Dr. F. Le Tagaloa describes the Samoan identity as consisting of three important elements.

1. Matai titles (chiefly titles)
2. Eleele ma fanua (land and land tenure issues)
3. Gagana Samoa (Samoan language)⁶

Matai titles

The *matai* are the traditional authority figures, the epitome of decision making within the family, village district and central government. The Matai was described by Asiata Dr. Saleimoa Vaai as ultimately “responsible for the maintenance of peace and harmony within groups, families and communities.”⁷

Eleele & fanua (land & land tenure issues)

These are one’s family lands and land tenure rights, it includes the physical, social, chemical and biological setting in which people live and their access to water, soil, air and climate - in other words - their total environment.

Gagana Samoa (language)

This is the vehicle for communicating the elements of ones culture as well as symbols and signs which makes life meaningful.

Therefore, as Samoans our environment forms our identity. Any negative changes in the environment will be evident in the health status of Samoan People. Environmental degradation is therefore an indication of poor health status in this country. Most Samoans see Health as synonymous with wellness or the maintenance of the *va tapuia* between the Person (his identity and his culture) and their environment. Maintaining the traditional norms that guide behaviour in the maintenance of this *va tapuia* can assist our society in repairing the degraded environment and assist our future generations to maintain and conserve our natural resources.

Erosion of traditional cultural values and identities has impacted negatively on the environment. As a developing country, aspiring for economic growth we have accepted and introduced new technologies without proper Environmental Impact Assessments on how these can change our ways of life and ultimately degrade our environment and make us sick.

Development without regard for the environment will inevitably result in impairment of Health. Health is totally dependent on the continued availability of environmental resources and on the integrity of the environment. This however is changing as a result of pollution and decrease in natural resources, like water, land, air, vegetation and even genetic biodiversity. The quality of these resources have also been threatened causing ill health, for example, toxins and chemical agents in the water, that we drink, the food we eat, the pollutants in the air we breathe and the poisons in the soil that nurtures plant life which forms the basis of our traditional diet.

Traditionally the most common problems encountered in the Pacific are vector-spread diseases, such as malaria, filariasis, dengue and water borne diseases. The water borne diseases are caused from unsafe and inadequate supply of water, causing diarrhoea and dengue fever epidemics, unsatisfactory sanitation, acute conjunctivitis, Hepatitis B and more recently fish poisoning including Ciguatera which is becoming problematic.

All these health problems did not just happen. The once pristine and natural elements of the environment has now been contaminated by the introduction of toxins, chemicals and pollutants that we are pouring into our soil, our water, our rivers in order to achieve short term economic benefits without realising the long term opportunity costs.

We also witness a shift in disease trends towards non communicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. These are lifestyle diseases which come from the changes in what people consume as well as the type and quality of the food being consumed. More and more the emphasis is on introduced food rather than the locally grown and healthy natural food we have been used to.

To continue in these consumptive patterns is not sustainable and the consequences to both the Health and the Environment of our people will be irreversible. Today, we should call for a multifaceted approach to health dimensions. One which is not restricted to medical solutions but strategies that address health problems in relation to environmental concerns as well as poverty, unemployment and social integration.

In other words we need a paradigm shift - one which takes into account our traditional values of the *va tapuia*. We need to strengthen our Samoan Identity in relation to our respect for the land and our sense of self worth. We reinforce behaviour which determines sustainable consumption patterns with an emphasis on our material culture rather than the introduced culture. We need to re-educate ourselves on the value of our indigenous ways in order to save not only our Environment but to improve and protect our health. To comprehensively address Environment and Health issues, a holistic approach, is required by all before effective solutions can be implemented.

The paper will conclude with Jacques Cousteau's famous quote, that: "unless we do something radical today we will be unable to do anything tomorrow".⁸

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