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Redesigning public health for planetary health

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Redesigning public health for planetary health



The current state of planetary health inevitably leads to recognition of the failure of our current models of development, and it constitutes a call for each of us to profoundly revise our frameworks for action. The public health field, with its mission of protecting and promoting health and equity, is at the forefront of such an agenda. However, we are still ignoring the harmful effects of our current recommendations on planetary health. As practitioners and researchers, we need to invest in a new public health ecological approach.¹ This change requires both incorporating a new value—sustainability—into our discourse and practices and investing in the strategic political dimension of our role. We propose foundational elements that should be integrated in our practice, to address unprecedented threats to biodiversity and human health.

Nowadays, we realise the importance of ecological determinants of health, and how human activity has created an imbalance that has negative consequences for biodiversity. Pollution is considered one of the biggest threats to human life.² However, our idea of the role of public health has been focused increasingly on individual health, and the impact of the human footprint on the ecology of our planet (which is the primary determinant of human health), has been neglected. For instance, most national food guides still recommend fish intake as a source of protein. Although sensible at an individual level, such a recommendation is irresponsible when we know that, over the past 50 years, populations of commercially important species of fish have been reduced by 90%.³ It is essential that we prioritise sustainability in all of our actions and recommendations.

Solutions for building more sustainable societies exist in all sectors: food, housing, transportation, etc. The solutions range from being high tech, to implementing degrowth and supporting local initiatives. The challenge is knowing how to implement these solutions.

Public policies have remained unchanged, and we are far from making the drastic changes that are necessary to meet the sustainability agenda.⁴ For example, all industrialised countries that signed the Paris Agreement are failing to reach the targets set by the agreement.⁴ The major cause of this undesired stability is political. Even if people and communities

are mobilising in a growing number of localities, (with examples such as the Transition Towns movement) the positive impact of those initiatives is largely undone by macro policies, which are of larger scope.⁵ Furthermore, several authors have pointed out that such initiatives seem paradoxically to be maintaining the capitalist paradigm that was causing the problem.^{6,7}

What can public health professionals and researchers do? We suggest reinforcing the strategic political dimension of these roles. Several pathways for political action are open to us; we need to consider the political forces and economic interests that influence government decisions, and adopt more strategic action. Commercial interests are strong, and private sector lobbyists have extensive experience in influencing public policy.⁸ Building coalitions of actors to move the transition agenda forward could be one option.⁹ Also, an increased effort to shape public opinion is needed. Working with people in communications and in political sciences could help reinforce our actions.

The nature of the message that we would like to bring across also needs to be adapted in several aspects. It is our responsibility to frame our discourse differently and make it more accessible. We need to give meaningful and local representations of the impacts of climate change¹⁰ and relate a positive message to day-to-day life.

By showing that solutions exist, we can persuade people that change is possible. Public health has evolved in its approaches over the past century.¹ The ecological challenge requires us to profoundly revise our public health policies, to address unprecedented threats to biodiversity and human health. History has shown that such change is possible, but action must be taken, right now.

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