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Environmental & Health inequalities: a challenge to sustainable development

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Environmental & Health inequalities: a challenge to sustainable development

Since its introduction some 25 years ago, the concept of sustainable development has become omnipresent in our everyday life. Although the need for a radical transformation towards a more sustainable society has been widely acknowledged, there are many different readings, approaches or interpretations, depending on the dominant culture, central focus, disciplinary background, etc. Thus, the work in the field of sustainable development encompasses a wide range of topics, from the correction of any one of the consequences of unsustainable development, to comprehensive action on climate change mitigation.

The first question that one may ask is whether sustainable development can be considered as a technical object, represented, for instance, by proper resource management or carbon footprints of individuals or communities. The answer is obviously no, since sustainable development is tightly linked to a new set of values, for society as a whole, that have been highlighted in its definitions.

Now, most consequences of unsustainable development can be viewed as losses of opportunities, current or future, and affect human health and well being. Therefore, I shall elaborate on the way that we can use health impact assessment of policies as a proxy to establish their sustainability.

In order to complete the picture, I need to make reference to two additional agendas :

- The social determinants of health
- Environmental justice

Both stem from the recognition that environmental quality and health status are by and large socially determined. In other words, social unfavour is both correlated to reduced life expectancy, increased incidence of chronic disease and poor quality of living environment. The study of the tendencies over the past decades show that despite an improvement, on average, inequalities continue to increase. Another way of putting it would be that all improvements from recent environmental, social and economic policies tend to benefit the least to those that need it most. Thus, the widely observed inequalities or gaps which occur across continents, at levels from country to neighbourhood, are both unfair and avoidable. They result from political arrangements embedded in systems that maintain them. Our inability to tackle these inequities will pose a formidable brake to sustainability transition, while the psychosocial burden devolved on the socially unfavoured will continue to generate tensions and even turmoil. This recognition has a profound impact on the way we should reorient future policies, in order to bridge the gap.

