

ABSTRACT
PARALLEL WORKING SESSION

HEALTH

Professor David Sanders
School of Public Health,
University of the Western Cape, South Africa

The Role of Universities in Addressing Africa's Health Crisis

At current rates of progress sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) will not achieve any of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in health. Nearly all key health indicators are much worse than those in other developing regions, with little substantive progress since 1990.

Central to poor health in Africa is widespread poverty, affecting a large and increasing percentage of the population. This is due principally to debt, the effects of structural adjustment programmes that restricted government spending in the social sectors, inequitable economic globalisation, and poor governance. National institutions, including universities, have been weakened and conflict has devastated health in several African countries.

In poor countries the dominant causes of ill-health remain undernutrition and infectious diseases, with HIV/AIDS a major contributor in eastern and southern Africa. In middle-income countries chronic diseases are accelerating, as are accidents and injuries. This large, complex disease burden is driven by low incomes, increasing inequality, poor female education, unhealthy and unsafe environments (poor diets, housing, water, sanitation, roads) and inadequate access to quality health services.

Despite impressive technical advances in disease control technologies, implementation is constrained by weak, underfunded health systems. Health personnel capacity has been undermined in many poor countries by the fiscal crisis and the impact of HIV/AIDS and out-migration. New 'vertical' donor-funded programmes may be delaying the construction of strong, sustainable, integrated health systems.

Key policy actions should promote the development of comprehensive health programmes, focussing on the district level. Increased production and capacity development of health personnel are key. Decentralisation of management responsibility has greatly increased the need for Public Health skills. Universities must respond by providing training that is appropriate, and accessible and applied research. Reorientation of curricula and innovative approaches are required, including distance learning. This requires increased investment in and strengthened capacity of African educational institutions, including equitable North-South-South partnerships.