



Health

Providing interdisciplinary analysis of current health challenges

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The issue

Good health is a key ingredient of human happiness and wellbeing. It is also a powerful contributor to positive change in fields such as education, labour productivity and political participation. In addition to the current Covid-19 pandemic, gains in global health are threatened by a range of risks, including the rising burden of infectious, non-communicable and neglected tropical diseases; risks posed by environmental hazards including increased urbanization and climate change; changing population dynamics and demographics; and the damaging impact of conflicts and other human-made disasters. Stresses caused by health risks, combined with inadequate health systems and financial protection, push people into poverty. Intersecting exclusions (including based on gender, age, sexuality, disability, class, race/ethnicity and location) may prevent the most marginalised from accessing even basic health services.

Our approach

ODI takes a holistic, cross-disciplinary, intersectional and systemic view of health. Our thematic and methodological expertise encompasses anthropology, economics, geography, sociology and political economy.

We generate evidence on health issues and provide policy and programmatic advice to international donors, foundations, governments, civil society and the private sector. We also collaborate with health experts outside ODI, providing a broad contextualisation and complementing the bio-medical lens offered elsewhere. Our in-country partners are critical in embedding evidence into country systems and processes. Sharing knowledge and co-creation is a key aspect of our approach.

Social norms, financing systems, health governance and societal conditions are all intimately connected. Our work therefore includes a focus on the social, economic, political and legal determinants of health, including analysis of health systems and ways to strengthen them. Much of the recent health work at ODI explores the effects of Covid-19 on the following priority thematic areas.

Global health policy

Beyond the immediate priorities of the Covid-19 pandemic, global public health covers a wide range of concerns linked to globalisation, development and migration. This includes the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola, the growth in antibiotic resistance and the rise in non-communicable diseases such as hypertension and mental illnesses – as well as broader concerns around health equity. At a policy level, many of these concerns are reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing. Our research and advocacy shapes global health policy, highlighting neglected health issues, generating evidence on social and environmental causes of poor health, exploring what policies work in which political contexts, convening national and international actors, and taking stock of efforts to ‘leave no one behind’.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

ODI's independence makes us especially well placed to take on SRHR issues at this critical juncture when a global backlash is threatening women's right to choose. Access to contraceptive methods, pregnancy termination, sex education and related services are critical not only for health but for girls' and women's autonomy, economic empowerment and political participation. ODI's work has contributed to a growing consensus on the crucial role of social norms and intersectionality in shaping SRHR outcomes. We research adolescent family planning, contraceptive use, access to comprehensive SRHR in crisis settings, child marriage, sexual health of LGBTQI+ populations, gender-based violence, maternal and child health, support to legal change on SRHR and, most recently, how Covid-19 has affected access to SRHR services. Our research also supports SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, which includes a target on universal access to SRHR.

Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Over the past few years, ODI has been developing a programme of work focusing on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. Complementing more bio-medical approaches, our analyses have explored drivers and risk factors related to mental ill-health in different contexts, including in less stable environments. We have also co-created digital and non-digital solutions with partners including end-users, using human-centred design approaches. An intersectional lens has also allowed us to explore different dimensions of wellbeing according to, for instance, age, location and gender. Most recently we have explored how Covid-19 has affected the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children, adolescents and young adults.

Climate and humanitarian crises

Humanitarian crises and climate change risks impact individual health and wellbeing directly, and indirectly by damaging health systems and affecting the wider range of institutions associated with the delivery of healthcare. Applying a resilience perspective on current and future risks, research at ODI aims to advance knowledge and explore sustainable solutions to minimise climate-related impacts on health and anticipate best adaptive practice. We also research health-related challenges and vulnerabilities faced by different groups of people (children, adolescents, older people, disabled people, people with diverse sexualities and gender identities, refugees, migrants, ethnic minorities); identifying barriers to accessing health and wellbeing-related services; providing suggestions on tailored (often age- and gender-specific) programming and interventions; and advising on policy implications and responses.

The politics and economics of health systems

Choices about which diseases to target and which population groups to serve are as much political as they are technical. Very often, these choices are determined by accountability relations, as well as the vested interests that may operate in the background of health systems. By researching these relationships, ODI's political economy experts can help assess the chances of success of specific policies and programmes, for example action on drug stock-outs, antimicrobial resistance or maternal mortality, and suggest ways in which technical interventions can be made politically smarter. ODI researchers also explore how improved budgeting and financial management can support more efficient, equitable and effective health spending. This includes understanding how health benefits packages can be linked to national budget processes, how financial management can balance flexibility at the front-line with control over waste, and how intergovernmental fiscal arrangements shape the health sector policy, financing and performance. This complements our experience in research and technical advisory work on the role of social protection policies in extending health services to poor and vulnerable households, on the links between social protection and health outcomes and on the relationship between social protection and quality of care.

This overview is updated on a regular basis. For information contact Fiona Samuels on f.samuels@odi.org.uk.