

# WHO Review - The First 20 Years of the Journey Towards the Vision of Healthy Islands in the Pacific (WHO)

Healthy Islands has remained an inspirational vision for health ministers and senior officials across the Pacific. Some countries have applied the Healthy Islands vision to their health policies and have reported great success in settings such as villages and schools.

However, there have been difficulties in bringing the approach to scale across the Pacific. Healthy Islands has played a significant role in energizing the approach to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) by supporting a focus on the environments in which people are nurtured, work and play. The vision has framed the approach health leaders have taken to engage with other sectors, and it has supported the largely successful efforts to bring global attention to the rising NCD epidemic.

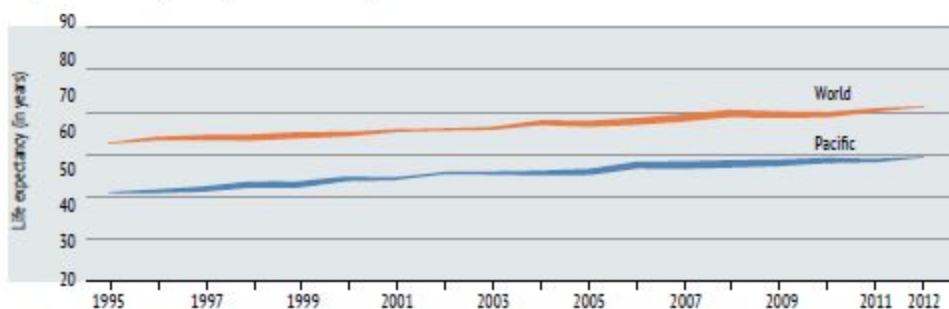
There is consensus in the Pacific that the vision is relevant and helpful and that it should be maintained and supported. The breadth of the vision is only now being realized, with its weave of health, environmental and Pacific cultural concepts. As one official noted: "Healthy Islands was ahead of its time, and its time has now come." At the same time, most people believe implementation has fallen short of expectations and see the need for greater focus by all.

## Health Outcomes - Last 20 Years

The health of Pacific peoples has improved over the last 20 years, with child survival and life expectancy increasing. The region has reduced the burden of lymphatic filariasis and reduced chronic hepatitis B infection rates among the younger generation, while remaining polio-free despite continuous threats of its importation. Most Pacific island countries and areas (PICs) have eliminated neonatal tetanus.

However, the rate of improvement has been slower than in the rest of the world. Many countries are unlikely to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for children. The rise of NCDs has further complicated the health situation. Adult populations in many PICs face an unprecedented NCD crisis, resulting in early deaths from preventable diseases.

**Figure 3. Life expectancy at birth in the Pacific**



Source: World Bank (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>).

The past 20 years have seen improvement in life expectancy in the Pacific (Fig. 3). However, life expectancy in the Pacific is lower than the world average, and the gap in this case is not closing. Life expectancy is influenced by deaths throughout the life course. The Pacific has the most advanced

diabetes<sup>8</sup> epidemic in the world, and the problem appears to be intensifying.

### Wider Context - Last 20 Years

PICs are confronting development challenges on a number of fronts. Economic growth is sluggish, with the exception of Nauru and Papua New Guinea during certain periods. Poverty and inequality are increasing, indicating an uneven distribution of wealth. The nutritional needs of many children in the region are not being met, limiting their potential to lead full lives. The ocean, which sits at the core of Healthy Islands and the Pacific identity, is rapidly absorbing carbon dioxide, and sea levels are rising remarkably as the result of human activities elsewhere on the globe – threatening the very existence of some Pacific island states.

### Responses to these Challenges

Pacific health ministers have played a significant role in placing NCDs on the regional and global agenda. With the support of development partners, innovative approaches to NCDs are being applied across the region, and there is a concerted effort to enlist wider government and intersectoral support to meet these challenges. Considerable progress has been made in areas such as tobacco control. The magnitude and long-term nature of the NCD epidemic is such that these efforts may take decades before they have an impact on health outcomes.

Over the last 20 years, Pacific health systems have made some progress. An increase in the medical workforce is anticipated due to the efforts of both regional and global training institutions. Governments are gradually increasing their investments in health services. However, the rate of increase in total health expenditure per capita over the past 20 years is lower than the world average. Considering the increasing NCD burden, the persisting communicable diseases burden and the impact of climate change – coupled with slow economic growth – sustainable health financing in the Pacific is not assured.

### WHO Recommendations & Conclusions - 2015 Review

The Yanuca Island Declaration created a unifying concept for health for PICs, and through the biennial Pacific Health Ministers Meeting (PHMM) has articulated a response to the specific needs of the region. There are many successful programmes and approaches throughout the region upon which this effort can be built. At the same time, there are a number of fundamental gaps – that unless closed – will further limit the health potential of the people in the Pacific.

The Healthy Islands vision should remain as the unifying vision for health development in the Pacific. The vision can be enhanced, and far greater use of the vision could be made of it by all parties. Currently the vision resonates mainly with health ministers and senior officials, and only at the policy level in some countries. In the future, the vision should be supported as a unifying brand, across various stakeholders and through all levels of health systems. The century-wide time horizon and aspirational nature of the vision still resonates with the current health leadership and also is likely to appeal to the coming generation.

The SDGs are a vehicle to improve the implementation focus, as they are fully consistent with the Healthy Islands vision, though less aspirational and shorter term. Universal health coverage (UHC) is an ideal construct that can focus on resource gaps for health development, which are identified as major impediments to progress of Healthy Islands in the Pacific.

*“Looking back on the first 20 years of Healthy Islands, the vision remains strong but the challenges are formidable.”*

**More Information - 1) WHO - Healthy Islands Review Report (2015) 2) WHO Framework of Action for Revitalisation of Healthy Islands**