

PROJECTS AND NETWORKS

Global Health



... fighting
conditions that
make us sick



medico international

A different world needs different aid

In solidarity with the excluded and marginalised in the global South, the aid and human rights organisation medico international has been campaigning since 1968 for conditions that strives for the highest possible level of health for all. Supported by an understanding of health that is based on social justice and social participation, we work with our partner organisations to combat disease causing conditions. The aim is not only to alleviate poverty and hardship, but to overcome their root causes and thus realise the right to a healthy and good life - for all people in every place.

English: www.medico.de/en

Español: www.medico.de/es

Français: www.medico.de/fr

Imprint Publisher:
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March 2024



Poverty makes you sick, illness makes you poor

A child born in Japan today has an average life expectancy of 85 years, whereas in Afghanistan they can only expect to live for 58 years. Of 1,000 live births in Nigeria, 101 children die before they reach the age of five; in Sweden it is fewer than four. In Sierra Leone, fewer doctors are working in the entire country than at the University Hospital Charité in Berlin.

All over the world, social and political living conditions make the difference between life and death. It is clear that this affects the poor in particular: because they are poor, they fall ill more often, are unable to pay for their treatment and die earlier. The sheer coincidence of where you are born determines life expectancy and chances, healing or suffering, life or death. Inequalities are not only found along geographical borders, but also within countries along socio-economic gradients. In Germany, for example, the poor die on average 5-10 years earlier than the wealthy. Unhealthy living, housing and working conditions contribute to this, as do environmental pollution, noise and social insecurity.

The right to access to the best possible health, enshrined in the human rights of the United Nations, is violated millions of times every day. Together with partner organisations around the world, whose work we present on the following pages, medico international is committed to ending this intolerable situation.

Medicine as a privilege


Millions of people around the world are dying from diseases that could easily be treated and cured. This is because access to good medical care is extremely unevenly distributed. In many parts of the world, there is a lack of doctors and medical professionals, as well as hospitals and health centres, due to underfinancing of health services.

The shortage of healthcare professionals in many countries of the Global South is exacerbated by the fact that ageing industrialised nations are specifically poaching skilled workers from there. One important reason is that working conditions have deteriorated so much in countries like Germany, UK or the US that it is not possible to keep skilled workers in their chosen profession for long. The global brain drain of health care professionals has become a systemic problem.

One third of the world's population does not even have access to the most important medicines. Patent rules in the interests of the pharmaceutical industry lead to high drug prices and prevent millions of people from having access to vital medicines and vaccines. As a result, health is becoming a commodity for the privileged.

In opposition to this development, medico is campaigning for the creation of universally accessible public healthcare systems.





BRAZIL : Network for "other" health

In Brazil, the right to healthcare for all is enshrined in the constitution. What's more, many years of civil society pressure contributed to the establishment of a universally accessible public healthcare system after the end of the dictatorship in the 1980s. The strong AIDS movement at the beginning of the millennium was also able to politically enforce the provision of those essential medicines to turn the deadly viral infection into a chronic disease for all infected. However, the political shift to the right in recent years has resulted in massive cuts to the health budget. The new government is limited by the chronic underfunding of the healthcare system. The trend towards increasing privatization of medical care has hardly been curbed so far.

The media in Brazil continues to be closely intertwined with the old political and economic elites. Outras Palavras [OP] is an all the more important exception. This news and debate portal stands for critical journalism that reports on everything that is suppressed by the large media monopolies. The editorial team in São Paulo and the network of authors publicise well-researched counter-perspectives. In view of the massive attacks on the public healthcare system, the network has also set up the Outra Saúde [„Other Health“] platform - with great resonance. The platform provided key impetus for a movement in defence of the right to health and continues to do so today.

Social inequality a health risk



Lacking access to medical care is only one part of the global health crisis. All over the world, social and political conditions determine life and death to a much greater extent than medical factors. The conditions in which we grow up, live, work and learn have a decisive influence on our health: two billion people globally have no access to clean drinking water. Those who are poor fall ill more often and die earlier.

If you want to protect yourself from illness, it is therefore sometimes better to join a trade union or go to a demonstration than to the doctor or pharmacy. After all, healthy living conditions for all can only be achieved through social struggles: decent working conditions and a secure income, access to education and food, decent housing, a political system in which people can live without fear and social conditions without extreme inequality don't come as charity, but through social struggles.

medico international supports initiatives and organisations around the world that work locally to improve living conditions and defend human rights.

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SOUTH AFRICA: Food security and advocacy

For decades, civil society groups in South Africa have been fighting for the health rights of the poor and marginalised population. This was the case during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1990s and 2000s and during the coronavirus pandemic. The People's Health Movement, a global network of health activists, is also strongly anchored in South Africa. The activists integrate the promotion of health knowledge with advocacy to improve social determinants, especially access to healthy food. Local health committees are supported in raising their voices. This is what the phrase „health from below“ means. The same applies to the critical monitoring of the legislative process for a National Health Insurance (NHI). This aims to provide better healthcare for millions of poorer citizens and opens up private hospitals and practices for all. In the best sense, this is an act of emancipation, because the two-tier health system in South Africa, which is still permeated by racism and perpetuates social inequalities even decades after the end of white minority rule, must be overcome.



BANGLADESCH:

Health rights instead of chains of exploitation

It all began in 1972 with the vision of a movement of health activists who wanted to build a solidarity-based network of basic health facilities. Today, Gonoshasthaya Kendra [GK] is the largest non-governmental health organization in Bangladesh. The health workers reach out to more than one million people in almost 600 villages and towns, sharing medical expertise and knowledge about nutrition, family planning and social conditions. The GK University trains doctors, pharmacists and other health professionals. GK cooperates closely with local health committees. The medico partner also campaigned for the development of the country's own pharmaceutical production and set a good example: GK now produces many essential medicines itself.

In 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza textile factory in Sabhar, in which 1,135 people lost their lives, also showed what solidarity can look like in the form of concrete aid. The health workers from GK provided emergency aid for those trapped, and injured people were treated

for a long time afterwards. GK is also calling for political measures to combat the deadly consequences of exploitation: „The ignorance of major fashion companies towards human rights violations in textile supply chains must stop,“ says Gulam Dulal from Gonoshasthaya Kendra.

Today's supply chains in the textile industry clearly show how closely globalised production conditions and health issues are linked. The working conditions in the sewing factories of South Asia are extremely harmful to health. The competitive pressure, for which the purchaser from the industrialised countries are primarily responsible, produces dumping wages and completely unlimited working hours. This is also made possible by unfair trade agreements that prioritise the interests of companies over human rights.

For this reason, medico is campaigning for globally binding rules on transnational business and human and labour rights of workers.



Health in globalisation

Behind the global health crisis is the global unleashing of capitalism, which is reflected, for example, in trade conditions enforced by the power of the strongest states or agreements on investor protection.

If we want to do more than just alleviate the symptoms, we need a global health policy that addresses the root causes of the conditions that make people ill. These include

- unfair trade agreements that prioritise corporate interests over human rights
- patent rules that prevent access to vital medicines and hinder research into the diseases of the poor
- the commercialisation and privatisation of healthcare, which makes medical treatment unaffordable for many
- the lack of effective action on climate change.



In favour of a braver WHO

With the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Geneva, the United Nations created a central authority for global health policy 75 years ago. In the „Declaration of Alma Ata“ 45 years ago, the member states of the WHO committed themselves to a Primary Health Care (PHC) concept in which health is always also a question of human rights and thus of justice, equality and participation.

Today, the World Health Organisation is further away than ever from its self-image of being the central voice for global health for all. As a chronically underfunded global institution with a budget not much larger than that of the Geneva University Hospital (also WHO Headquarters location), it is increasingly dependent on a few rich member states and private donors such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The world's largest foundation of market-oriented philanthropists in the healthcare sector is massively contributing to a technical-medical understanding of healthcare that is replacing the idea of PHC and that ignores questions of social justice. Furthermore it legitimises an economic system that distributes wealth from the bottom up and prioritises charitable aid over social rights.

Networks for global health

In order to defend the right to health, grassroots movements are needed. We act within global networks of local initiatives, social movements and non-governmental organisations. medico is working on alternative and emancipatory concepts for a society that includes the right to the best possible access to health.

German Platform for Global Health

Health affects all areas of life. Therefore, medico has teamed up with trade unions, social and welfare organisations, development and migration policy organisations, scientists and social movements to form the Platform for Global Health. We intervene in social debates on globally relevant topics such as the medical care for refugees and the consequences of policies that regard health as a commodity. The platform aims to help overcome the separation between domestic and global health policies.





People's Health Movement

In 2000, the People's Health Movement was founded as a global health movement from below to remind the WHO and its member states of the „Health for All in the Year 2000“ target set at Alma Ata, which has not yet been achieved. Medico has been a member and a strong supporter of the PHM ever since. The network of health activists and local NGOs from all over the world is fighting for this „Health for All“ goal with a combination of political protest, educational work and an active grassroots health approach that involves the population in the development of health concepts. The People's Health Movement also intervenes in global health policy debates.

Geneva Global Health Hub

The Geneva Global Health Hub, co-founded by medico, warns against the undue and growing influence of lobbyists and private sector actors on the positions of the WHO and other actors in global health policy. Through studies, events and grassroots lobbying at WHO headquarters, the coalition of civil society groups is campaigning for the WHO to regain the independence it needs to tackle the global health crisis.

It is up to us

We are campaigning for healthcare that is geared towards people's basic needs, understood as a public good that everyone everywhere in the world is entitled to. Free access to essential medicines, the right to a guaranteed income, access to education and land, food and water: none of this has to be a utopian dream. There is no lack of money or resources but a lack of political will to provide the necessary means. It is up to us to fight for this together.



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Read counter-perspectives: reports, interviews, commentaries and analysis written by medico international's team and partners. medico's English newsletter is published twice a year.

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Lisez les contre-perspectives : rapports, interviews, commentaires et analyses rédigés par l'équipe et les partenaires de medico international. La newsletter française de medico est publiée deux fois par an.

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Health is more than the absence of illness and cannot be reduced to medical care - especially not in places where people do not have enough food, a roof over their heads, education or work.

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In 1997, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines initiated by medico was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize.