



*African and Diaspora Women Fact Sheet Series:*

## **Africa's Health**

A child born in Africa faces more health risks than a child born in any other part of the world.<sup>1</sup> An African child has more than a 50 percent chance of being malnourished, and runs a high risk of being HIV-positive at birth. Additionally, malaria, diarrhoeal diseases and acute respiratory diseases account for 51 percent of child deaths. What is more, a child born in Africa is more likely to lose his or her mother due to complications in childbirth or to HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup> A child born in Africa has a life expectancy of just 47 years, and is very likely — at least once in his or her short life — to be affected by drought, famine, flood or civil war, or to become a refugee. People living in Africa are exposed to a heavy and wide-ranging burden of disease partly because of this region's unique geography and climate. These factors make malaria, for example, more intractable in Africa than it is elsewhere. At the same time, non-communicable diseases and injuries are emerging as significant contributors to the disease burden.<sup>3</sup> In short, nowhere has HIV/AIDS killed such large proportions of the population as it has in Africa. Nowhere has the old scourge of tuberculosis re-emerged to fuel the HIV/AIDS epidemic as it has in the African Region. No other region has witnessed so many armed conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies. Nowhere else is poverty so prevalent.

Africa is home to about 10 percent of the world's population, with an estimated 45 percent or more of its people living below the poverty line, on less than US\$ 1 a day. About 330 million people— one-third of the world's 1.1 billion poor — are caught in this poverty trap, in which low household incomes lead to low household consumption, resulting in, low capacity and low productivity in the countries where they live.. Agricultural productivity is lower than in other regions due to an unreliable water supply, inadequate irrigation and poor soil quality. High transportation costs for the continent's interior, due to the lack of navigable rivers and the slow diffusion of technology, also hamper development.<sup>4</sup>

In conjunction with this, there is mounting evidence indicating that the massive inflow of resources to fight Africa's 'big three' infectious diseases (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria) has also led to imbalances within the health system's policy priorities. These imbalances draw resources and attention away from some of Africa's most important and looming health challenges, such as maternal health, bacterial and parasitic diseases, and non-communicable diseases. One other major challenge, mental health<sup>5</sup> has received little to no international attention.

## **The Phelophepa Health-care Train**

Despite this bleak outlook, there are instances of extraordinary efforts made toward addressing these issues in substantive ways. One such project is the Phelophepa health-care train. For the last 14 years, the Phelophepa health-care train has been bringing health care and education to communities across South Africa. The train stops mainly in isolated farming areas, where the railway stations often have no platform and there is no hospital within a radius of 100 km (62 miles). About 42 percent of South Africa's population of 44.8 million live in rural areas like these. But Phelophepa, which means "good clean health" in the Sotho and Tswana languages, also brings health care to towns, such as Malmesbury in the Eastern Cape, where many people are too poor to pay for available health services.

The response has been overwhelming. *"I work until about 8 pm but sometimes there are still people waiting to be seen. Some of them sleep on the platform because they don't want to lose their place. It's heartbreaking,"* said optometrist Emma Rapoo, 27, one of the train's staff members, who are mainly final-year and post-graduate medical students. Phelophepa started as an eye clinic in 1994 and has since expanded to 16 wagons housing a primary care centre, dental clinic, counseling team and education unit. They are limited, however, to conditions and illnesses that can be treated on the spot. If a patient appears with symptoms of a serious disease that requires long-term treatment, such as malaria, cancer, HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis, that person will be referred to the nearest clinic or hospital. The train does try to address these needs, however, by training local community volunteers in home-based health care, which may include the DOTS strategy for tuberculosis or basic AIDS care. These volunteers are then placed under a local coordinator from the department of health, usually a nurse in the area. To date, the train has provided health care to 500,000 people and health screening and education to a further 800 000 people. Every year, Phelophepa stops for a week at a time at one of 36 destinations in four of the country's nine provinces. It is the goal of this effort that by providing education, the chances that something is left behind to sustain the community *"to the extent that some people will no longer need its services when it returns"* becomes a powerful tool in addressing Africa's health issues at a local level.<sup>6</sup> The key then, in essence, is to empower each person to control his or her life, a small but powerful building block in the overall effort to empower the whole of Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, *The African Regional Health Report: The Health of a People*, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Refers to the 46 member states of WHO – which includes Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central Republic of Africa, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Togo, Zambia, Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cape Verde, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Sao tome & Principe, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe

<sup>3</sup> *The African Regional Health Report, et. al*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> These challenges include the stress related conditions that are brought about from living in conflict, food and water deprived areas, etc

<sup>6</sup> Story from *The African Regional Health Report: The Health of a People*, pp. 108; Further information can be obtained from the following web site: <http://www.mhc.org.za/>