

Global Health

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/12/global-health/>

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A spate of epidemics and pandemics has demonstrated the fragility of human health when diseases spread across borders. Their destructive social and economic impacts create political disturbances within states and disrupt international relations. The idea of global health connects an individual's private concern over their own well-being to the shared necessity to secure the health of everyone, everywhere. It is a modern concept that is a construct of the interconnected world we share. But at its roots are fundamental ideas that rely on innate human values that go back several millennia. Amidst the unprecedented turmoil of the effects of Covid-19 as it swept across the world, global health suddenly came centre stage in 2020. With 100 million infected within the first year and high death rates among vulnerable groups, states reacted by imposing unprecedented social restrictions and border controls. The situation grew more complex later in the pandemic due to a series of more infectious variants of the virus emerging. Few events in peacetime (if any) have so deeply affected the daily lives of so many individuals across the world. The impact of one virus has shaken our ideas of what a globalised world is, considering how quickly it can become an isolated one. Yet, it also allows us to explore whether such an event can act to unite us to some extent.

A comprehensive definition (Koplan et al. 2009: 1995) calls global health:

an area for study, research, and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide. Global health emphasises transnational health issues, determinants, and solutions; involves many disciplines within and beyond the health sciences and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration; and is a synthesis of population-based prevention with individual-level clinical care.

Global health bridges the individualised focus of a doctor-patient relationship with a worldwide concern for collective health, thereby recognising their interdependence. This is succinctly put by one of the many slogans developed around Covid-19: 'no one is safe until all are safe'. At its root, it is a construct of globalisation – the hallmark of which is the intensification of interactions between people at all levels across the world. As people mix and travel, or copy each other's habits, impacts on health status are inevitable. This could be through effects on the underlying determinants of health, for example, the spread of obesity and diabetes as certain diets and lifestyles become popular around the world. Or they could be because of the generation of new disease risk patterns, such as Ebola. Global health is projected as a public good but inherent in it are elements of both selfless benevolence towards others, as well as selfish self-interest. For example, when parents allow immunisations, they are concerned to keep their own children safe as much as protecting the children of others.

Text adapted from Kapila, Mukesh in McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

Below is a collection of multimedia and textual resources that help unpack, and explain the importance of Global Health to International Relations

Global Health 50/50 – Report

Global Obesity Observatory – Interactive resource

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GAVI: Facts and figures – Website

Food Supply – Interactive resource

World Health Organization: Global Action Plan – Website

Child mortality and causes of death (WHO) – Website

Nukes of Hazard – Article on the health impacts of nuclear energy

Establishing the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention: the upside of a crisis – Article (PDF)

American Perceptions of Africa during an Ebola Outbreak – Article

General overviews

Case Studies

About the author:

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