

## Think big, World Bank: time for a public health safeguard



Sometimes great changes result from small actions. Technical advances might grab headlines, but changes to administrative processes can potentially have an equally important effect on how public health actions are carried out on the ground. In the past six decades, the World Bank's increasingly diverse portfolio has grown to include more than US\$1 billion in annual commitments for health, nutrition, and population activities—about a quarter of all its projects.<sup>1</sup> That is why it is so essential that the global community pays attention to the discussion and any proposed decisions about safeguards against any unintended social and environmental effects of World Bank policies and investments.

In the 1980s, stakeholders became concerned with the unintended consequences of World Bank investments on lives and livelihoods, such as displacement of populations or damage to habitats during building projects. A set of safeguarding policies<sup>2</sup> was developed to help planners consider these concerns and manage risks during the planning process. In 2010, the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group<sup>3</sup> recommended an update of these safeguards to enhance their effectiveness, consistency, and relevance. In response, the World Bank began a multiphased review and consultation process. The proposed new Environmental and Social Framework,<sup>4</sup> which would become the new safeguards standard, is being reviewed by stakeholders worldwide.

The proposed framework includes ten draft Environmental and Social Standards to be applied throughout the project life cycle, covering issues as diverse as cultural heritage, biodiversity, and worker safety. One of these proposed safeguard standards does address community health and safety standards to mitigate safety risks (eg, ensure that designs and materials used in a project are in accordance with national legal requirements and international industry practices) and prevent transmission of disease through water, vectors, or by a mobile workforce. The draft standards also briefly reference endemic disease burdens, and a smattering of other references to environmental health risks appears in other standards. However, none of these standards—individually or collectively—adequately address the risks posed by the emerging, epidemic-prone, and endemic diseases recognised as high priorities by the international community, including the World Bank itself.

The World Bank has estimated that the Ebola virus outbreak in west Africa could cost the region thousands of lives and as much as \$32.6 billion by the end of 2015, undermining years of economic development.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, there is no reason to believe that this epidemic will be the last faced by the most affected countries, the broader region, or the world.

Stakeholders now have an opportunity to speak up for a real public health safeguard that explicitly recognises the importance of healthy human capital to the success of all investment projects. A public health safeguard would establish global standards for the assessment, prevention, management, and monitoring of potential vulnerabilities within health systems among other recognised social and environmental risks that imperil sustainable gains. The measurable outcomes do not have to be developed de novo; the World Bank Group has already established numerous measures of progress towards the strengthening of health systems, and the 196 States Parties to the International Health Regulations have already agreed to build the core capacities required to detect, assess, report, and respond to potential public health emergencies of international concern, with technical guidance from WHO.

From the community to the global level, this modest change in the World Bank investment processes could have an enormous effect on short-term and long-term plans to build the capacities to prevent, detect, and respond to public health threats. For the World Bank to adopt a public health safeguard would be an acknowledgment that achievement of measurable results in public health is necessary to end extreme poverty and promote shared prosperity. For the rest of the global community, the adoption of a public health safeguard would immensely increase the attention and resources directed towards building required public health capacity around the world.

We urge the global health community to actively encourage the adoption of a public health safeguard.<sup>6</sup>

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