Population Health, Sustainable Development and Policy Future

December 23, 1999 – Sustainable development requires policies that address economic, social and environmental concerns in the medium and long-term time frames. The Discussion Paper by Michael Hayes, professor of geography at Simon Fraser University, and Sholom Glouberman, Director of the Health Network of Canadian Policy Research Networks, examines the overlap between the social dimensions of sustainable development and the socio-economic influences on health, and clarifies the similarities and differences between sustainable development and population health issues.

Population health research, which gathers information about the general health of populations rather than on individuals, suggests that such things as physical environment and genetics are far less critical in determining a person's health than are factors associated with social circumstances— such as the impacts of poverty, periods of unemployment, divorce or emotional stress. Policies to support sustainable development that might arise from this recognition could include investments in early childhood education, support for expectant mothers, reducing economic disparity to improve health, and government/employer collaboration to increase employees' control over their work.

The paper arises from the work done by Canadian Policy Research Networks to assist federal policy-makers to meet the Government's mandate to provide sustainable development policies. The Auditor General has noted that while good progress has been made in economic and environmental policy areas, there is less integration of sustainable development ideas into social policy areas such as health.

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