



## REVIEW

# CONTEMPLATING GLOBAL HEALTH ANEW

A new book that ponders and moves beyond the common conception of health as something merely “reparative”, encouraging readers to explore the myriad linkages between it and the wider world: climate, environment, economy, competing interests. Only by taking a global approach will we be able to build and take responsibility for a new world.

TEXT BY / CHIARA DI BENEDETTO / DOCTORS WITH AFRICA CUAMM

Published by CELID, this new book entitled *Un nuovo mo(n)do per fare salute*<sup>1</sup> includes pieces by various authors, all members of the *Rete Sostenibilità e Salute* [Sustainability and Health Network] that was founded in 2014 with the issue of the Bologna Charter for Sustainability and Health. The network numbers 27 diverse organizations including Bologna’s *Centro di Salute Internazionale e Interculturale (CSI)* [International and Intercultural Health Center], *Medicina Democratica* [Democratic Medicine], Slow Food, *Movimento per la Decrescita Felice* [Movement for Happy Degrowth] and *FederSpecializzandi*. Their shared goal is to deliberate anew our understanding of health in order to consciously (re)build both it and, hopefully, a new world. Edited by Jean-Louis Aillon, Matteo Bessone and Chiara Bodini, the nearly 200-page book alternates voices and vantage points from which to observe and deliberate in a critical and informed manner our conception of health, delving into the intrinsic, ever-evolving linkages and interactions between it and other spheres, including environment, economy, society, and the socioeconomic strata of communities, or “social gradients”. Too often left up to individuals, health is shown to be something of deep *collective* importance, a matter for which we all bear responsibility.

Although this may seem obvious to some, we need only look at our everyday lives to see that it is clearly not how things currently work. The book offers an unsparing look at the disturbing facts on the ground. Just 8% of the world’s population breathe air that complies with WHO air quality guidelines (WHO 2016 data). A quarter of adult diseases, and around one third of those affecting under-5 children, are attributable to preventable environmental causes. WHO estimates that every year some 13 million deaths occur due to the latter, 7 million of which are attributable to air pollution. There are also marked life expectancy gaps based on socioeconomic background: an unskilled worker in Turin can expect to live five years less than a manager, a gap that widens to



13 years in Glasgow and a shocking 25 in São Paulo.

Given the enormity of these inequalities, it is clear that the responsibility for health cannot be foisted on individuals alone. The experts here eloquently discuss how governmental responsibilities, commercial interests, and the endless push for economic growth in a finite world must all be part of the equation. Much more than a mere essay or critical assessment of health systems, then, what the authors offer here is a meditation of a primarily cultural nature: a suggestion that we seek to move beyond the common “reparative” conception of health as something to think about only when it is impaired and needs “fixing”. Urging us to put aside this passive vision and rid ourselves of the idea that health is something “done” only in

health centers, clinics and hospitals, the authors stress how critical the notion of *global* health is and show us how it is “built” through people’s everyday choices. For if the ecosystem we live in is not well, how can we be well as individuals?

This is even more true today, in the so-called Anthropocene, where the impact of human activities on our planet’s ecosystems has become increasingly momentous, necessitating urgent measures to change course. Climate change is set to be the biggest global health threat of the 21st century, according to an article published in *The Lancet* (Costello et al. 2009), while the World Health Organization estimates that it will cause 250,000 additional deaths every year between 2020 and 2050.

From Michael Marmot to Pierre Bourdieu, from Franco Basaglia to Gianni Tognoni, the book features numerous references and quotes that enable readers to take a sort of cultural voyage inside “the health system”, and provides us with new tools for thinking about how we conceive and relate to the notion of health, both underscoring its global dimension and affirming the necessity of individual action. Because, like every other common good, health belongs to each and every one of us.

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: The title involves a play on words that is difficult to translate into English, but approximates *A New Way of “Doing” Health for A New World*