



DIALOGUE

HEALTH IN THE BALANCE

Wars, economic and political crises, and instability have put the right to health to a severe test, with repercussions on individuals and communities. This is why CUAMM continues to focus on the most vulnerable people so that, in these turbulent times, they may also have that state of physical, mental, and social well-being that we call health.

TEXT BY / DON DANTE CARRARO / DIRECTOR OF DOCTORS WITH AFRICA CUAMM

We started the year 2024 among the suffering of wars and the deep wounds that the ongoing massacres of innocent people bring: men, women, and children are losing their lives in inhumane ways and experiencing unfathomable suffering in Gaza, Ukraine, and in the forgotten conflict in the Tigray and in war-torn Yemen. We have seen such situations too many times and are continuing to see them in our Africa.

Behind these deaths, there are equal numbers of situations of hardship, which are amplified in places of war. Health facilities become military targets, childbirth assistance and services for mothers and children are disrupted, and care for the chronically ill loses priority while violence, including gender-based violence, escalates.

We are too familiar with this reckoning when the burden of conflicts, economic and political crises, and social instability undermines all personal or community balance. Where there are these kinds of burdens, there is an enormous price to pay for health. Life trajectories are shattered and the identities of individuals and groups are torn apart. Health is compromised for generations to come. The connection is clear – where there is no respect for human beings, there is also no respect for fundamental aspects of the human condition such as health.

This ongoing deep global division puts health at risk and is why we have decided to focus this issue of the magazine on the major challenges facing those who work, as we do, in fragile contexts. It is fundamental to provide care and services for those suffering from chronic diseases (NCDs). These diseases kill 41 million people every year, accounting for 74% of deaths globally, and 77% of total deaths are in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2023). In these countries afflicted by conflicts and humanitarian emergencies, the treatment of chronic diseases that require continuity of care and constant monitoring is often the first to be interrupted, with emergency and urgent diseases taking their place. We experienced this firsthand on the CUAMM mission to the reception centers for Ukrainian refugees in Moldova (p. 17): in the outpatient day clinic that we managed, we mainly treated people with health problems not directly related to the conflict, proving how significant this healthcare problem is even in emergency contexts.

While keeping our attention on critical and conflict settings, we wanted to delve specifically into the problem of gender-based violence (GBV), which becomes even more dire in the absence of stability. This is confirmed in the article by Orsi et. al. Pg. 14), which considers the problem starting from WHO estimates that in countries with limited resources and conflicts, the prevalence of women who have been victims of violence in the last 12 months and during their lives is 22% and 37%, respectively (WHO, 2018); and in the article by Putoto (p. 4) delineating the situation, risk factors and strategies to combat this global phenomenon.

This issue also touches on other topics that we encounter more and more often, such as mental health as a decisive factor in individual well-being. We are introducing the mobile clinic with which CUAMM Bari provides health services to migrants in the Foggiano area, joining basic medical with mental health and psychological-social services.

Our attention to the most vulnerable groups and every person continues to stay true to the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of 1966, which are still relevant today. Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity; and health is a human right.

As health professionals, we will keep on fighting for health to be a right for everyone, including in these turbulent times.