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Life shorter in the tropics

A world-wide initiative to define the challenges facing the peoples of the tropics was launched today by 13 leading research institutions across 12 countries.

The group has released an early insight of its planned State of the Tropics Report with details of why life expectancy is lower in the region than in the rest of the world.

The full report to be published next year will shine a light on the critical importance of the people and issues of the tropical world, and contribute to efforts to improve the lives of the peoples of the Tropics and their environment.

The 13 institutions involved are:

University of Nairobi, Kenya;
Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral, Ecuador;
James Cook University, Australia;
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, England;
Mahidol University, Thailand;
Singapore's National University and the Nanyang Technological University;
Organisation for Tropical Studies, Costa Rican hub;
University of Copenhagen, Denmark;
University of Hawaii ó Manoa ó USA;
University of Papua New Guinea;
University of the South Pacific, Fiji; and,
Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia, Brazil.

Professor George Magotha, Vice Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, today issued "Life Expectancy", the first of four early insights ahead of the State of the Tropics Report.

"We have published today the facts and figures relating to life expectancy in the Tropics which show significant improvements over the past 60 years. But there is still a substantial gap between the Tropics and the rest of the world," he said.

The insight reveals that life expectancy in the Tropics has increased by 22.8 years to 64.4 years between 1950 and 2010 and the gap between the life expectancy of women and men has widened in favor of women over the same period.

Infant mortality in the tropics fell from 161 deaths per 1000 live births to 58 over the same period. However in the rest of the world it is 33 and the rate of improvement has been greater.

As a general rule, regions that have experienced large falls in the absolute infant mortality rate also report large improvements in life expectancy.

“The exception is Central & Southern Africa, where although infant mortality rates have fallen significantly, high mortality rates in the non-infant population, largely related to HIV/AIDS, have constrained overall improvements in life expectancy,” Professor Magoha said.

/Page 2

[The paper on Life Expectancy in the Tropics can be found at www.stateofthetropics.org]

Professor Sandra Harding, the Vice Chancellor of Australia’s James Cook University which initiated the State of the Tropics project, said that over the past half-century the Tropics has emerged as an increasingly critical region.

“More than 40% of the world’s population now lives in the Tropics and this is likely to be close to 50% by 2050,” she said. “The region generates around 20% of global economic output and is home to some 80% of the world’s biodiversity”

“However, the resources to sustain larger populations and economic growth are imposing ever-increasing pressures.”

Issues of concern include relatively poor health outcomes, with more than one billion people suffering from tropical diseases, unacceptable levels of infant mortality and reduced life expectancy; extreme poverty; poor educational outcomes; environmental degradation; and, in some cases, political and economic instability.

“The key objective of the project is to enable a better understanding of the tropical world, the key challenges of the region as well as the opportunities it provides,” Professor Harding said.

Professor Magoha said that in Africa, the reality was that there was still a considerable health “deficit” relative to other regions of the world.

“Greater national and international efforts are necessary to improve the health, living conditions and security of the tropical African population,” he said.

“Life expectancy in Kenya has increased by 12.7 years to 55.0, a modest improvement relative to the region, where life expectancy increased by 16.0 years to 52.8.”

Other findings relative to Central and Southern Africa include:

- Madagascar reported the largest improvement in life expectancy between 1950-55 and 2005-10, increasing by 29.1 years to be 65.8 years in 2005-10, with large reductions in both infant and adult mortality rates.
- Life expectancy in Zimbabwe declined by two years over the period, to be 46.6 years in 2005-10. Zimbabwe was the only nation in the world to record a decline in life expectancy. In regional terms Zimbabwe has a low infant mortality rate, but a very high adult mortality rate (it is the highest in the world). In 2008 more than half the deaths in Zimbabwe were related to HIV/ AIDS (again, the highest rate in the world).
- Of the ten nations with the lowest life expectancy in 2005-10, seven are in the tropical region of Central & Southern Africa.