

HEALTH ↔ ENVIRONMENT: Global Links

Making the Connection at AIDS 2006

Connecting people and ideas was the order of the week at the XVI International AIDS Conference, held in Toronto from August 13-18. Over 26,000 participants from 170 countries gathered to share best practices and research, to gain support and inspiration, and to press for international financial and political commitments.

Thanks in part to the media-drawing power of celebrities like “the two Bills” (Gates and Clinton) and Stephen Lewis, AIDS 2006 attracted worldwide attention to the fight against HIV/AIDS. The presence of AMARC journalists (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters), sponsored by IDRC, also contributed to extend the reach of discussions throughout the South.

Over 20,000 international AIDS experts gathered in one place is hardly an everyday event, and IDRC seized this unique opportunity to advocate for systemic approaches to the disease. In partnership with the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), IDRC supported the organisation of several interactive sessions highlighting the complex linkages between AIDS, health system interventions, nutrition, and food insecurity.

According to Stuart Gillespie of IFPRI, sessions like these have an important role in moving topics such as nutrition to the mainstream of HIV/AIDS discussions.

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An *EcoHealth* Journal, Association and Conference: Creating Synergy

“The synergy that the ecohealth platform provides is essential if we are serious about addressing today’s most challenging and complex environmental health problems,” emphasizes Dr. Jonathan Patz of the University of Wisconsin, a co-editor of the *EcoHealth* journal. The *EcoHealth* journal and the Association, officially known as the “International Association for Ecology and Health”, aim to make that possible by providing a venue that “cultivates a collective of people interested in ecohealth approaches,” adds Dr. Margot Parkes, the journal’s managing editor.

The journal builds on the foundations laid by its forebears, *Ecosystem Health* and *Global Change and Human Health*, and the knowledge base of the emerging field of conservation medicine. As Parkes explains, “there was much more integrated activity in the human health, wildlife and ecosystem research and practice field than was accommodated by the existing journals.” All this activity needed “to be put in one place.”

Launched in 2004, *EcoHealth* has already achieved a major milestone in the life of a small journal—Springer, its publisher, has indexed it on the web of science. “That makes it a legitimate place to publish scientific findings,” notes Patz.

Prior to *EcoHealth*, researchers endeavouring to be inter- and trans-disciplinary had difficulty finding the right venue for publication.

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Editorial

Are we making a difference?

By Dominique Charron

In the past several years, ecosystem health programs have assembled a substantial body of knowledge. But there are still times when we have trouble answering two fundamental questions about our work:

Are we making a difference? And if we still aren't sure, why is it so difficult to find the answers?

The challenge of effective program evaluation is hardly unique to the eco-health field. And there are shining moments like the Malawi legume cropping project when the results—in this case, the nutritional benefits—are clear and demonstrable. But we owe it to

ourselves, and to our community partners, to be clear about what we achieve through ecosystem approaches that would not have been possible with any other research method.

There are times when those benefits are harder to quantify, impossible to separate from macro-level factors, or longer-term than even a 10-year study can demonstrate. But these are precisely the circumstances when it's most important to document results, to remain accountable to communities and to guide future environment and health policy development.

We've certainly learned some important lessons. Beyond sound research

design, the researchers must ask questions in a way that generates information on health outcomes. And we know that information must go beyond the raw numbers of higher birth weights or lower lead or mercury levels to capture broader health improvements.

We won't answer these questions overnight, but it's essential that we ask the questions that reflect the promise and the complexity of the ecosystem approach itself.

Dominique Charron is Program Leader of the Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health Program at Canada's International Development Research Centre.

Making the Connection at AIDS 2006

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Gillespie participated in the first study to examine the potential long-term impact of AIDS on farming in 1989. Mainstream interest in AIDS and nutrition subsequently dissipated, however, and when Gillespie joined IFPRI in 1999, he found that little topical research had been done since.

Since then, organizations such as IFPRI have succeeded in demonstrating to the agricultural community that the AIDS pandemic can worsen food insecurity. The next step, Gillespie says, is to show the AIDS community how food insecurity, poverty, and malnutrition can increase an individual's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. "I think Toronto was a watershed in that," he declares.

The value of IDRC-sponsored satellite sessions, meanwhile, lay in their explicit efforts to establish multisectoral connections and build bridges between North and South, academics and individuals from civil society, research and

action. "Sitting in Toronto surrounded by 25,000 people, I had the sudden thought—what went wrong? Why are all these people here with all this energy and yet they haven't made an impact?" Gillespie says. "The biggest reason is sectoral, vertical programming, when AIDS is fundamentally cross-cutting."

The overall impact of AIDS 2006 may not be seen for some time—though Gillespie notes an upsurge in interest in and downloads of IFPRI's policy books and other materials, and says, "seeing the number of people engaged and involved in the issue provides inspiration and renewed energy." For Gillespie, however, the real value of the conference was in the connections made possible in face-to-face discussions like the IDRC/IFPRI satellite sessions. "The stimulation of the discussion of the issue, the arguments people make—and the fact that you later have their email addresses—to me, that's the main benefit."

FURTHER READINGS

AIDS, Poverty, and Hunger: Challenges and Responses

Stuart Gillespie, ed., 2006

Highlights of the International Conference on HIV/AIDS and Food and Nutrition Security, Durban, South Africa, April 14-16, 2005

<http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/books/oc50.asp>

What's Cooking: AIDS Review 2005

Centre for the Study of AIDS (CSA).

Examines the socio-economic conditions that underpin food insecurity and perpetuate the HIV/AIDS epidemic, with a focus on macroeconomic policies, historical context, and the politics of food access and production.

<http://csa.za.org/filemanager/fileview/127/>

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Chagas disease: Building relationships and better homes



Dr. Carlota Monroy conducting field research in Guatemala.

Dr. Carlota Monroy, an entomologist from the *Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala*, wants to be invited into every house in communities that host her IDRC-funded research. “We work house by house and get to know people by name,” emphasizes Monroy. Not only do Monroy and her team want to establish relationships and trust with the villagers in the Jutiapa region of south-eastern Guatemala, they also want a close look at the inside of their mud homes—the walls in particular. Chagas disease is transmitted by a blood-sucking insect that lives in cracks in those walls and can pay nightly visits to nearby, sleeping humans and house animals.

Chagas disease, an endemic parasitic disease, affects 730,000 Guatemalans each year, with infants and young children at higher risk of death. While there is no cure for the disease in its later stages, medication can be effective early on, which is why Monroy’s work focuses on children under 15.

Five years ago in northern Guatemala

near a forest reserve, Monroy discovered that the natural habitat of the insect vector (the triatomine or “kissing” bug) is the forest, not human dwellings—providing very strong evidence of a link between deforestation and invasion of the vector. This observation also meant that “control strategies had to go beyond the use of insecticides.”

She invited engineers, architects, medical doctors and nurses, anthropologists, and microbiologists to work on a novel approach to control Chagas disease. Once in the communities, the research team noticed “that houses with clean, crack-free walls had no bugs.”

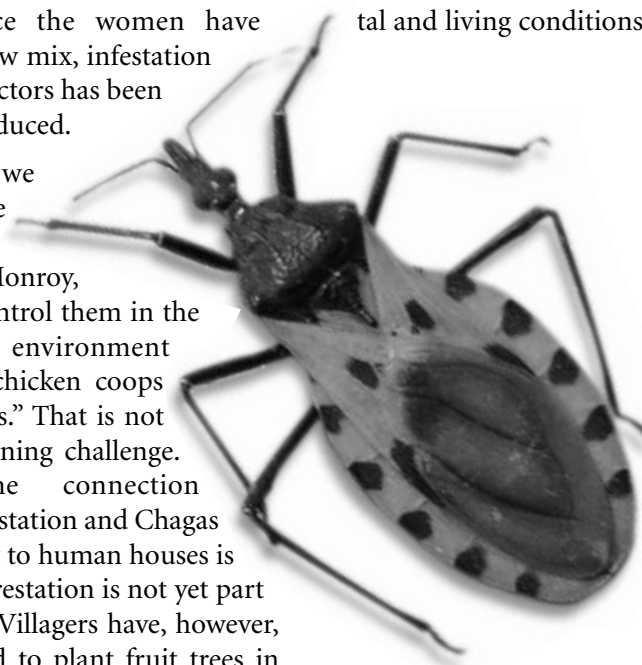
Working with an anthropologist who lives with villagers “to understand their way of thinking and cultural practices,” and with mud house experts, the team came up with a new plaster mix that lasts five years (rather than one) before cracking. Since the women have adopted the new mix, infestation with Chagas vectors has been significantly reduced.

Now that “we have moved the bugs out of the house,” says Monroy, “we have to control them in the peri-domestic environment that includes chicken coops and dog houses.” That is not the only remaining challenge. Although the connection between deforestation and Chagas vectors moving to human houses is now clear, reforestation is not yet part of the culture. Villagers have, however, been motivated to plant fruit trees in their yards for economic reasons.

Monroy and her team are preparing to disseminate their findings. “We are the only ones working on ecohealth approaches to diminish Chagas disease vectors, so communicating our results to other Latin American countries is important,” she says. To ensure that the modified practices will be carried out, Monroy will also train Ministry of Health staff.

A 2004 recipient of Guatemala’s gold medal for science and technology—and the first female recipient—Monroy confirms that her biggest honour is the knowledge that she has improved the quality of life for those at risk of Chagas disease.

According to Monroy, ecohealth approaches are central to addressing diseases “that are emerging due to environmental destruction of the reservoir of the vector of the parasite.” In Guatemala and around the world, ecohealth approaches provide a dynamic tool to explore the relationship between health, and environmental and living conditions.



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Building up and out: COPEH-TLAC is burgeoning

“Like a flower, the growth of COPEH-TLAC has been up and out,” reports Dr. Donna Mergler, one of the group’s principal investigators. Less than a year after the modest beginning of COPEH-TLAC (Communities of Practice in Ecohealth, Latin America and the Caribbean, Health Effects of Toxic Substances), it has more than tripled its members in all five of its regions, which are called nodes. “All the petals of this growing flower aim to integrate ecohealth approaches into research and practice that is ultimately linked to policy.”

Douglas Barraza, COPEH-TLAC’s coordinator,

explains that while “each node has a different approach and focus, they all share the goal of integrating ecohealth approaches into their work.”

Rather than starting from scratch, “we are building on their strengths,” adds Mergler, noting that the Mexican node, situated at the National Institute for Public Health (INSP), has an established summer course on ecohealth (supported by IDRC).

Each node developed its community differently but all used their members’ existing professional networks and made deliberate efforts to present their work at relevant meetings. Work in Brazil, for example, links to the national scale where ecohealth is being incorporated in the occupational and environmental health areas. “This is impor-

tant,” notes Mergler. “If you start with what is happening in the country the probability of success is higher.” Joining existing projects is another way to highlight ecohealth approaches and maximize efforts.

COPEH-TLAC has been busy. Since January 2006, the group has organized six regional meetings and members have put forward ecohealth approaches at regional and international conferences in Santiago de Chile (Society of

across nodes. The Andean region, for example, met in September 2006 to enrich members’ methodological approach to ecohealth. At every regional COPEH-TLAC workshop, core members from other regions are present to share their experiences. “Ideas grow from exchange,” says Mergler. Pesticide exposure is one example where Costa Rica’s expertise was instrumental in devising a research and intervention plan in Brazil.

Asked what challenges remain, Barraza notes the need “to translate research into policy and in turn, policy into action.”

Mergler elaborates that the “ultimate goal is to sufficiently integrate ecohealth practice into policy and research to make it sustainable and self-perpetuating.”

All the nodes are already working with government departments; Barraza is particularly optimistic about the Brazilian node’s close connection with the Ministry of Health. COPEH-TLAC also hopes to meet with the Pan-American Health Organization to “have the ear of decision makers.” The desire for the long-term integration of the approach is “why we emphasize consolidation and network building and maximize our efforts through partnerships.”

For more information about COPEH-TLAC visit www.insp.mx/copeh-tlac/.



Members of COPEH-TLAC at one of six regional meetings organized since January 2006.

Toxicology), Rio de Janeiro (International Conference on Public Health), Chihuahua, Mexico (Gender and Environment), Madison, Wisconsin (Ecohealth One), and La Paz, Peru (Mines, Metals and Health).

Each region aims to have two application/consolidation workshops per year that strengthen the network within and

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Documenting Ecohealth Intervention in the MENA Region

"We don't want projects to disappear once the funding dries up," says Mohamed Ramzy, Senior Program Specialist at the Center for Development Services (CDS), explaining the importance of COPEH-MENA's (Communities of Practice in Ecohealth, Middle East and North Africa) recent program that will analyze and present six case studies in the MENA region. With the projects already accumulating results, the group is keen to share its experiences and build the knowledge base for ecohealth interventions in the region.

The projects, two in Egypt, two in Morocco, and one each in Lebanon and Jordan, (some started back in 2001 with small grants) span the range of health and environmental issues in the MENA region. In Egypt, for example, sustainable livelihood strategies are being developed for agricultural settlers on the fragile ecosystem surrounding Lake Nasser, while an analysis of gender, socio-economic, and cultural factors influencing vulnerability to enteric disease is underway in Bebnine, Lebanon.

Given that information about ecohealth projects in the region is limited, the case studies will be extremely useful from several perspectives. Not only will they promote knowledge sharing

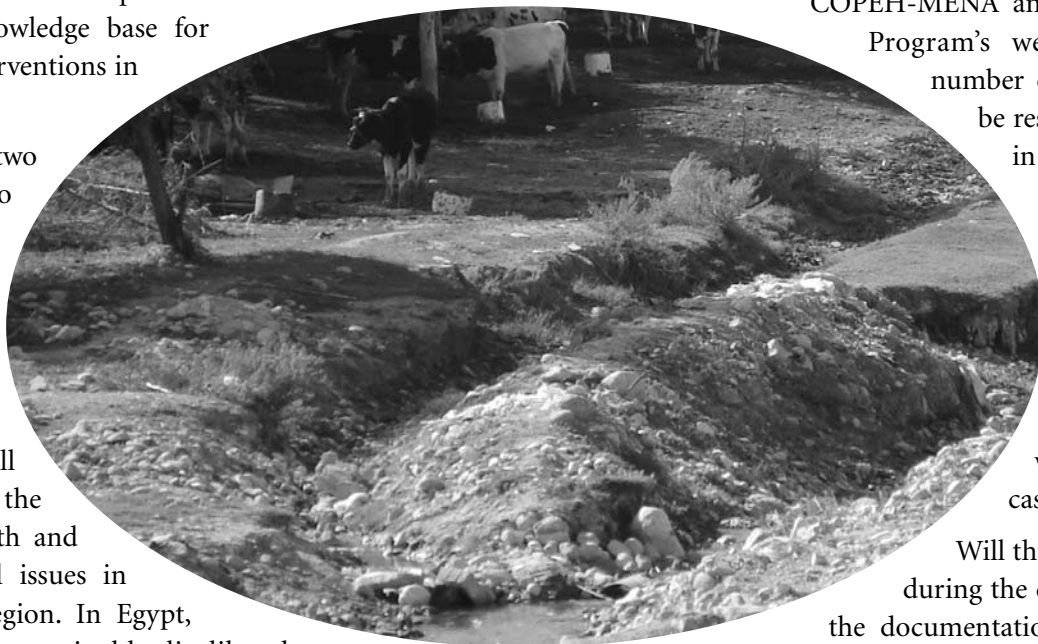
among ecohealth researchers and practitioners who are working to protect health and the environment in the MENA region; they will also illustrate the concepts and underline the effectiveness of the ecohealth approaches to those new to them.

The case studies will also provide a base from which future projects can build—a retrospective. As an advocacy tool, the case studies are expected to raise awareness of

ecies, and environmental health organizations. From the advocacy perspective, the audience will include international donors, foundations, and policy makers. The case studies will be built up through interviews of the researchers involved in the projects, field visits and discussions with project beneficiaries.

Once written, the case studies will be translated from English into French and Arabic to then be posted on the COPEH-MENA and IDRC Ecohealth Program's websites. A limited number of hard copies will be reserved for advocacy in meetings with policy and decision makers. A regional workshop in 2007 will provide one of the first opportunities to get the word out about the case studies.

Will there be any surprises during the course of preparing the documentation? There may be. The case studies will provide the platform to identify "the commonalities and differences between communities from an ecohealth intervention perspective," says Ramzy. The implementation, approaches taken, and challenges may, however, not be as similar as might be expected when communities share many aspects of religion and culture. "We may find that the project implementation and the interpretation of ecohealth are very country- or even project-specific."



Contaminated potable water sources, like this one in Jordan, are among COPEH-MENA's many ongoing projects.

health and environmental issues in the region as well as of the ecohealth approaches as a tool to address these issues.

Who is the intended audience? In addition to COPEH-MENA members, the case studies will be disseminated to other researchers, development agen-

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Innovative research partnerships working to halt a pandemic

As part of its focus on emerging and re-emerging diseases, IDRC is developing a portfolio of projects using systemic approaches to understand and prevent the transmission of pandemic influenza. The Asian Partnership for Avian Influenza Research (APAIR) received \$2 million in support for bringing together science granting agencies and ministries responsible for research in Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Thailand and Indonesia, and their Canadian counterparts. "The partnership addresses the problem with an interdisciplinary and regional approach," notes Dominique Charron, IDRC Ecohealth Program Leader. Six proposals are being funded, examining backyard farming; policy formulation for anti-virals and poultry vaccination; effectiveness of control measures and their socio-economic impacts;



human behaviour as it relates to transmission risk; and surveillance in wild birds.

Ecohealth also joined a \$2.3 million joint Request for Applications (RFA) on pandemic influenza, along with the Canadian Institute of Infection and Immunity (CIHR-III), its partners within the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies' Health Research Foundation 2006, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). The RFA is open until February 1, 2007. IDRC will fund the Asian components of two projects that use systemic approaches to understand and prevent zoonotic transmission of pandemic influenza in South East Asia and China.

For more information visit www.idrc.ca/ecohhealth

An *EcoHealth* Journal, Association and Conference: Creating Synergy

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"*EcoHealth* is going a step further than other new journals in that it is truly open to submissions from both the natural and social science fields with the criterion that there must be relevance to health," says Patz. Although "it may seem risky," he acknowledges, "interdisciplinary collaboration is much more accepted now and gaining importance in academia."

To date, the theme of emerging infectious diseases has received a high number of submissions with an ever-increasing number coming from the social sciences and conservation medicine. With its doors open to a wide range of disciplines, *EcoHealth* hopes to encourage innovation in ecohealth methodologies and to promote interaction among researchers, policy makers, educators, NGOs, and government agencies.

The Association, which Patz describes as having been "borne out of a natural

progression of the journal," provides a space to bring people together to network. It considers itself complementary to other societies rather than competing with them. "We want to bridge rather than subdivide," says Patz. That philosophy is already paying off with steadily increasing subscription for the journal and now participation in the Association.

The Association was launched at the international Ecohealth One conference held in Madison, Wisconsin in September 2006. The meeting provided a forum for collaboration, exchange, development, and practice for those working at the interface of ecology and health sciences.

The conference truly reflected ecohealth approaches, with sessions

ranging from medical history to communication science and everything in between. Some initiatives have already grown from the conference: one aims to address land use changes and infectious diseases in the Amazon; another is planning activities around Indigenous Perspectives on Ecohealth; and DIVERSITAS (International Programme of Biodiversity Science) is launching a new initiative on biodiversity and health. Most exciting, says Patz, is the student momentum. These emerging professionals will ensure that ecohealth approaches continue to be tested and promoted as important ways of tackling the world's health and environmental problems.



Conference Chair
Jonathan Patz (centre)
with participants from
several continents.

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NEWSBRIEFS

Public health congress links partners

Researchers, policy makers and members of the NGO community from 26 nations discussed and debated issues in public health at the 11th World Congress on Public Health and the 8th Brazilian Congress on Collective Health in Rio de Janeiro, August 21–25, 2006. The impact of globalization on public health emerged as a major theme with delegates uniting to formulate the Rio Declaration. The Declaration calls for action on public health issues including the recognition of the fundamental right to effective health care. IDRC-sponsored partners highlighted ecohealth approaches in their contributions to panels and case study presentations. At a satellite meeting prior to the congress organised by IDRC's Ecohealth and Governance, Equity and Health Program Initiatives, about 40 partners exchanged their experiences and strengthened their network. The Rio meetings set the stage for a potentially fruitful link for the Ecohealth program with the Associação Brasileira de Pós-Graduação em Saúde Coletiva (ABRASCO), one of the strongest public health voices in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Ecohealth engages environmental actors in West Africa

The link between health and the environment was explored at the 11th International Colloquium, June 11–16, 2006 in Bamako, Mali and the summer institute preceding it. It was IDRC's

first direct involvement with the "Secrétariat international francophone pour l'évaluation environnementale" (SIFÉE), a francophone network that focuses on environmental impact assessment in West Africa. Largely new to ecohealth approaches, participants at both events welcomed the concept as a novel way to deal with environmental and health issues. About 40 people from the environmental sector, graduate schools and the NGO community learned about how social and health dimensions could be included in environmental assessments from various ecohealth case studies presented by members of the Community of Practice for Ecohealth for Central and West Africa (COPEH-AOC). The institute and the colloquium also presented an opportunity for COPEH-AOC to link with new organizations in the region and to strengthen its relationship with SIFÉE. The collegial atmosphere of the meetings succeeded in enlarging and providing visibility to the existing network of ecohealth researchers and in enabling their contact with important francophone actors in the environment field.



Reforestation can help control Chagas disease

Ecuador ecohealth graduate program to impact vulnerable community health

Ecuador's new Master's program in ecohealth is part of a capacity-building strategy that aims to improve the health of vulnerable populations. Rather than taking trainees away from their home, this program provides relevant, on-site training with the goal to establish a national workforce that will effectively address determinants of health. The program is a collaborative effort between three Ecuadorian universities, the national public health institutes in Cuba and Mexico, and the University of British Columbia. Not only is the program intended to build professional and institutional capacity, but it will also establish an ecohealth network in Ecuador. The first 30 students have diverse backgrounds, but upon graduation all are expected to play a leadership role in promoting ecohealth approaches within their respective institutions, and to achieve measurable impacts in their communities. They will hit the ground running and be well equipped to deal with the ecosystem, wildlife and human health issues facing them.

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COMING EVENTS

September 5–9, 2007

19th Conference of the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE), Mexico City, Mexico

Hosted by Mexico's National Institute of Public Health (INSP), a long-standing Ecohealth partner, the conference will provide an excellent venue for panelists to discuss ecohealth approaches and their achievements in the context of environmental epidemiology. It will also allow the Community of Practice for Ecohealth in Latin America and the Caribbean, Health Effects of Toxic Substances (COPEH-TLAC) to forge linkages with other COPEHs. The meeting theme, "Translating environmental epidemiology into action: Interventions for a healthy future," encompasses a program that is far-reaching and multi-disciplinary and includes topics ranging from asthma and allergies to modified ecosystem effects on nutrition and public health policy.

For more information please see www.isee2007mx.org

September 10, 2007

CoPEH-TLAC 1st Regional Conference, Mexico

Immediately following the ISEE meeting in Mexico City, the core group from each regional node of COPEH-TLAC as well as the rapidly expanding wider network of ecohealth practitioners from Brazil, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, the Andean and the Southern Cone regions will meet to exchange experiences, grow the community and plan for the future. The conference will not only strengthen the existing network but will invite new members to integrate ecohealth approaches into their research and practice.

More information will be available in early 2007 at www.insp.mx/copeh-tlac/.

October 29–November 2, 2007

Global Forum for Health Research, Forum 11 Beijing, China

The theme of this annual Global Forum, "Equitable Access: Research challenges for health in developing countries," examines how changes in health care systems and access, social and gender inequities, and living/working conditions could bring about better population health, particularly in the poor and marginalized. The forum will bring together policy makers, researchers and the NGO community to debate critical gaps in research in this area and to mobilize campaigns that address the health needs of the poor and the marginalized.

Information is available at www.globalforumhealth.org/Site/004_Annual%20meeting/002_Forum%201/001_Home.php

December 2007

COPEH-MENA 1st Regional Workshop

The Community of Practice for Ecohealth in the Middle East and North Africa (COPEH-MENA) is planning a knowledge sharing regional workshop focusing on the impact of implementing ecohealth approaches in the MENA region. This event will bring together researchers, development practitioners and policy makers to promote the use of these approaches, exchange experiences and set the stage for future collaboration among participants. The aim is to create a critical mass of stakeholders with an interest in ecosystem approaches for the improvement of human health in the MENA region.

More information will be available in early 2007 at www.copeh-mena.org.

Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health Graduate Training Awards Call for Applications

Calls will be soon posted for applications for ecohealth training for graduates in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). These awards support graduate-level research by students at universities in developing countries on the relationships between the environment, human health and development. Proposals should use ecosystem approaches to analyze the links between human health and ecosystem conditions, and to identify natural resource management strategies that could improve human health and ecosystem sustainability. A similar call for applications is under development for Canadian students.

More information on these opportunities will be available in early 2007 at <http://www.idrc.ca/ecohealth>



Participants at the EcoHealth One conference