

Social Determinants and Health

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The past 30-40 years has seen a rapid expansion in the literature on the impact of the social environment on population health outcomes. Investigations on patterns of health outcomes in populations and health inequalities have led to deeper understanding of their social 'causes'. However, most of the evidence is from studies done in Europe and North America, while only a few such studies have been reported from southern Asia, Africa and poorer nations. As a result, issues related to health equity are not visible as priorities in the political arena or in the policy agenda of poorer nations, where disparities tend to be more obvious.

South Asia offers several other challenges and complexities. It is one of the most deprived regions next to sub-Saharan Africa, and home to almost a quarter of humanity. It has a rapidly increasing population that is undergoing remarkable socio-economic transformations. Its nations also have a number of unique social stratifications that have evolved though a common history. The latter includes a rigid class systems, elitism, castes, and gender. More recently, some of the countries have experienced spectacular economic growth, while others were ravaged by wars. They now face trade globalization, the spread of neoliberal policies and international diplomacy based on military force. All these social determinants form ingredients that would widen health inequalities in the region.