



BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required
**Global Health Trends:
Managing the Impact of Disease on Business**

Breakout Session Summary

Thursday, November 6, 2008 | 10–11:30 a.m.

Speakers

- **Kristie Ebi**, Independent Consultant on Global Climate Change
- **Steven Phillips**, Medical Director, Global Issues and Projects, ExxonMobil Corporation
- **Diane Osgood**, Vice President, CSR Strategy, Business for Social Responsibility (moderator)

Highlights

- Companies need to work with NGOs and local and national governments to understand and address health impacts through substantive, cooperative projects rather than traditional corporate philanthropy.
- Companies need to understand local nuances of health issues. Local health effects of global warming, for example, can include flooding-related land mine deaths in Mozambique.
- Efforts by private companies and NGOs are fragmented, resulting in the lack of a concerted strategy to address health issues. Companies have different interests and risk calculations, and NGOs have different priorities and means of addressing issues.

Memorable Quotes

- “Current tools [to deal with global health issues] are not adequate to the task.”
—Steven Phillips, ExxonMobil Corporation
- “Diseases arise within systems, and sometimes you need to think about how you alter the system.” —Kristie Ebi, Independent Consultant
- Referring to health issues that cannot be predicted, such as the outbreak of Spanish Influenza or HIV/AIDS: “No matter how much you prepare, ‘unknown unknowns’ are quite possibly going to eat your lunch.” —Steven Phillips, ExxonMobil Corporation





Business for Social Responsibility

Overview

Ebi opened the session by pointing out that companies rely on healthy workers and healthy communities, and there are ways to ensure that health trends don't adversely affect operations. She noted that unlike non-communicable diseases such as cancer, mortality from communicable diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS is highly variable by latitude, with the highest rates in the growing populations of the tropics and subtropics. She suggested that companies' efforts to manage health risks should involve: understanding current and likely future risks that employees face; supporting efforts to reduce background disease rates; and developing approaches to manage risks from future trends.

Phillips noted that ExxonMobil's approach to health focuses on advocacy, research and development, and community health project partnerships. To explain the company's involvement in health, he pointed out that Africa is of growing importance to the company, and there are several significant health issues such as malaria and HIV/AIDS in the region that the company needs to address to operate effectively. He stated that health risk calculations differ depending on whether a company operates in an area affected by a disease, sells products in such an area, or makes health products. The value of company labor (in terms of training) should particularly be taken into account. He also emphasized the value of raising corporate awareness about the importance of health issues to core business functions.

Ebi noted that vector control in many places of the world has deteriorated and needs to be addressed. For example, a species of mosquito that carries a variety of serious diseases was controlled in the Americas and elsewhere, but control efforts were defunded and now the mosquito has returned and expanded beyond its original range.

In response to a question about non-communicable diseases in emerging markets, Ebi noted that cultures are very different from one another, and in many of them people believe that health issues are the government's responsibility. Such notions can be difficult to challenge, yet many programs have tried to do so without being fully informed about the cultural context. For example, some programs advocate a change in diet without understanding what is actually available to eat. Efforts thus need to be culturally appropriate.

To close the session, Ebi encouraged people to think about these issues in new ways, because the future is not going to look like the past. We now know what some large-scale health-related disasters might look like, and there is a need to develop means to deal with them. Phillips stressed that health professionals need to understand what leaders and decision-makers are trying to accomplish in order to communicate effectively with them.

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