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From Gro Harlem Brundtland, MD, MPH

Nice, 30 January 2012

To Whom It May Concern,

I believe in the Health & Ecosystems: Analysis of Linkages (HEAL) Initiative.

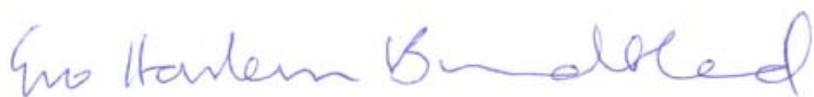
To my mind, such an initiative is long overdue. Today, January 30th, 2012, marks the release of the report of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability on which I have served. The report emphasizes that while many indices of human development have improved over the past twenty years, those improvements have coincided with accelerating degradation of our "global life support systems," two thirds of which are in decline globally. With the members of the HEAL initiative, I share the concern that the quiet, and often poorly visible, degradation of our planet's natural systems represents an enormous public health threat for hundreds of millions, if not billions of poor, vulnerable people who depend on this natural "infrastructure" for their wellbeing.

One of the core messages of the report we released today is that "integrating environmental and social issues into economic decisions is vital to success." We emphasize that doing this requires "what the economists would recognize as the pricing of 'environmental externalities.'" The human health impacts of degradation of natural systems have long languished in this realm of environmental externalities, and I applaud the HEAL initiative for its efforts to bring them into the light and rigorously quantify them. In our report we have articulated the dictum that "if it cannot be measured, it cannot be managed." What is innovative about HEAL is that it represents the first rigorous attempt to systematically measure the human health impacts of changes in the state of natural systems. Such an effort is an important step not only in building our scientific understanding, but in allowing us to make rational policy and resource management decisions that incorporate both environmental and human health outcomes.

We emphasize in our report that "as knowledge and awareness of the 'global life support systems' on which humanity depends increase, so the scope for global action to protect them may also grow." HEAL strikes me as an innovative and urgently needed approach for building just such knowledge about the ways in which the lives of poor vulnerable populations around the world depend on these natural systems and for incorporating such knowledge into our economic calculations, our policy, and our decision making.

In a world where competition for funding is so fierce, I am pleased to see the essential, proactive interdisciplinary approach the HEAL consortium has developed. To help support urgently needed change in the "business as usual" trajectory which is clearly bringing humanity to a precipice, we should get this work underway in earnest.

Sincerely,



Gro Harlem Brundtland