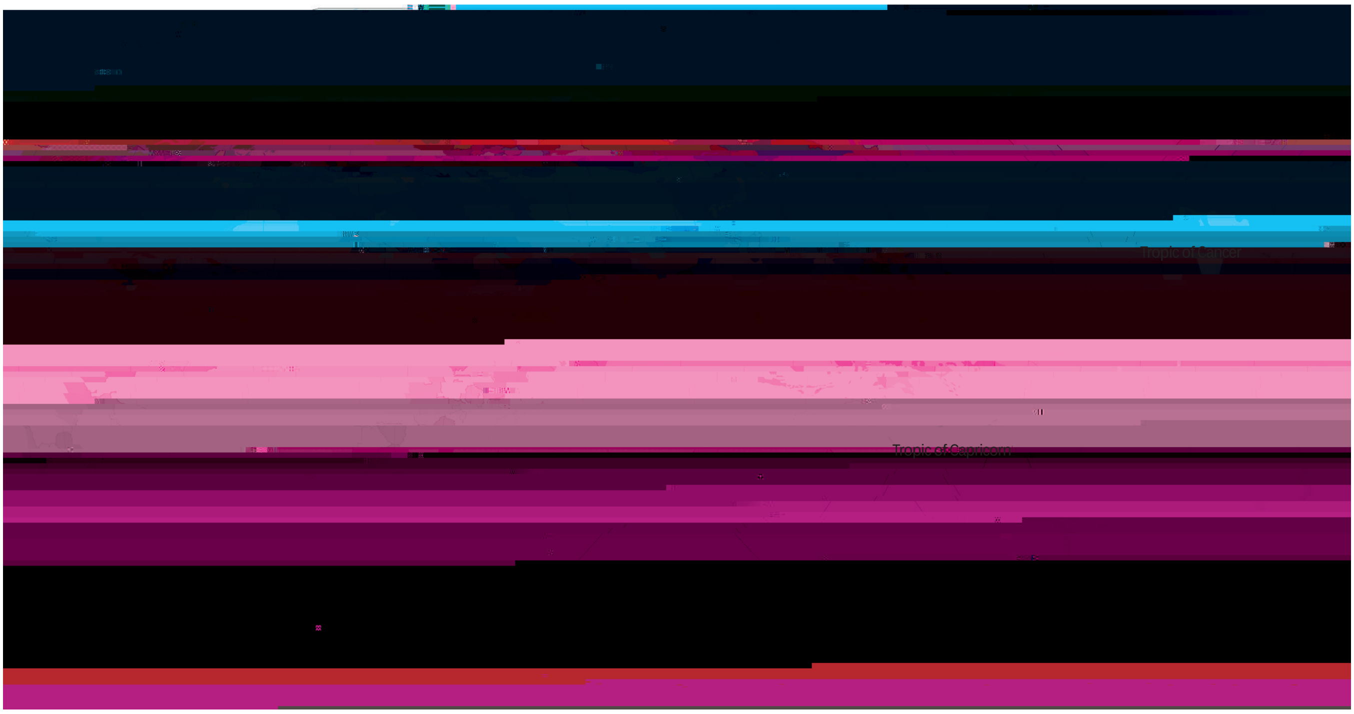
More than 2,000 years ago Aristotle described the world as being divided into three zones – the Frigid Zone, The Temperate Zone and the Torrid Zone. He decided that the Torrid Zone was too hot for civilised habitation, and that humans could only live and work productively in the Temperate Zone. While Aristotle's Torrid Zone was not precisely defined geographically, it is clear his uninhabitable region was what we know as the Tropics.

Other ways of viewing the world have subsequently waxed and waned: north/south was a focus of attention during early European expansion; east/west as this expansion accelerated and political and economic systems developed; as we became aware of economic, social and political inequalities there was a focus on a first world/third world perspective; and, in the post-WWII environment, it has been on

**Figure 1: The Tropics**



Since 1950 the life expectancy gap between the world and the Tropics has narrowed from 6.1 years in the period 1950-1955 to 3.5 years in 2005-2010[6] (see Figure 2).

However, the proportion of global population living in the Tropics has steadily increased from around 30% in 1950 to 41% in 2010. That is, the Tropics itself has a significant impact of on global outcomes.

Excluding the impact of the Tropics on the global outcome (i.e. comparing the tropical zone with the 'Rest of the World'), the life expectancy gap in 1950-1955 was 12.6 years, falling to 7.7 years in 2005-2010. This is a significant improvement in health outcomes in the Tropics over the past 60 years, though at 7.7 years the current gap indicates that a major health deficit still persists in the Tropics.

The relatively larger improvements in life expectancy in the Tropics reflect a number of factors including a lower starting point. Other factors include improvements in the social determinants of health including systems for accessing potable water and sanitation facilities along with improving public health infrastructure, and the

Lower life expectancy in developing countries, including in the Tropics, is usually associated with a higher burden of disease, including higher rates of infant

Global initiatives to address lower life expectancy in the developing world have been building over the past two decades. Progress is being made in many areas, and our understanding of the factors contributing to improved life expectancy and lower infant and adult mortality is increasing. A key factor affecting health outcomes and life expectancy is economic growth and its impact on household income and purchasing capacity, especially for food. Public investment in social services such as education and health are also essential, as well as improving access to clean water and sanitation. However, environmental, political, cultural, social and economic conditions within countries determine the level of access that various groups of people have to these resources. There is growing acknowledgement that focussing development efforts on improving the health of vulnerable populations benefits economic growth, worker productivity and poverty alleviation, while persistent ill-health undermines economic development and efforts to reduce poverty[11].

Directing efforts to improve health in the Tropics will ensure that investment is targeted to people who are among the poorest in the world, increasing life expectancy and, in so doing, generating pathways out of poverty and enhancing global productivity and wealth.

1. A two stage process was undertaken to assess which nations are classified as being in the Tropics for reporting purposes – a population-based stage and a data availability stage. For large nations that straddle the Tropics analysis and reporting is for sub-national provinces primarily in the Tropics. These nations are Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and the United States. The reporting covers 109 of the 144 nations fully or partially in the Tropics. More information on the nations and regions included in the report is available at: [illegible]
2. Isaac J, Turton S. (2009). [illegible] Retrieved on 5 March 2012 from: [illegible] 048832.
3. The system is based on the concept that native vegetation is the best expression of climate. Climate zone boundaries reflect vegetation distribution, and are defi