



Wilton Park



Report

Healthy societies and healthy populations: urgent actions for healthy futures - learning from COVID-19

Wednesday 21 April 2021 | WP1923V

In partnership with:



Government Offices of Sweden



Alliance
for Health Policy
and Systems Research



Report

Healthy societies and healthy populations: urgent actions for healthy futures - learning from COVID-19

Wednesday 21 April 2021 | WP1923V

In partnership with Government Offices of Sweden and World Health Organisation, Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research.

Introduction

This Wilton Park dialogue in April 2021 reconvened diverse international experts from a previous Wilton Park 'Healthy Societies' meeting held in [February 2020](#) and introduced new voices from around the globe. Participants reflected on the context of COVID-19 and steps needed for healthy societies in light of the pandemic and the world's response. The dialogue and this report build on themes and ways forward identified across both meetings from 2020 and 2021. An agenda to take these dialogues forward and a series of further meetings will take place across the rest of the year.

Healthy societies: the need for action

1. While people in many countries are living longer, they are not necessarily living healthier lives. Changes in societies have contributed to improved health but have also caused many challenges and risks to people's health and wellbeing.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on progress towards achieving all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global goals for health; notably, SDG3 to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all, at all ages, and the World Health Organization's 'triple billion goals' which includes a further billion people enjoying better health and wellbeing.
3. We must now take this moment to transform our approach to achieving these goals for health and reimagine how we build equitable healthy societies, all while we support a green economic recovery, address SDGs on climate and the environment, and act to uphold the Paris Agreement. The pandemic has drawn attention to the interconnectedness between health, climate, the environment, biodiversity and a need for 'One Health' and 'whole of society' policy approaches.
4. 2021 is a year for action, with the G7, G20, the Food Systems Summit, the Convention on Biological Diversity and COP26 all taking place. These landmark events and the policy agendas that emerge from them will set the trajectory for years to come. Fostering a multi-sector approach, through linking key policy goals across these important fora, will be key to successfully achieve a healthy, green future.

"Keeping people healthy requires drastic change to make societies healthier."

"The past year has shown how health is central to societies. Lots of opportunities exist for healthy and sustainable recoveries."

Summary of key points

5. The COVID-19 pandemic has derailed many decades of progress made in health, social and economic development, and brought into clear view inequities which run across ethnic, gender, and wealth divides.
6. Access to resilient and good quality health systems is important but insufficient on its own to ensure healthy lives and the wellbeing of everyone. Societies must enable people to live long lives with health at all ages.
7. Improving health and building healthy societies requires ambitious, decisive and cohesive action across a variety of sectors and actors; the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals provides a framework for finding synergies and mutual reinforcement.
8. Tensions exist over how to frame action for healthy societies. While a single global framework may support countries to measure results against a structure, there are many understandings and solutions for healthy societies at all levels from global to local and a plurality of approaches with a singular core aim may be most effective.
9. Multi-sector global governance for healthy societies is required but is challenging, as sectors are fragmented. Health urgently needs to get onto the agenda of groups and sectors outside health.
10. The world also needs to do better at bottom-up approaches to healthy societies, engaging ordinary people, communities and civil society in defining and implementing the agenda.
11. The health of people and the health of the planet can no longer be separated. Climate change and degradation of biodiversity is the biggest health threat of the 21st century and is crucial to achieving healthy societies and populations. Food systems contribute towards environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, while lack of access to proper nutrition together with poor diets cause more ill health than anything else.
12. The world must look to change financial systems and flows in line with the SDGs.
13. Including the right people, groups and organisations in mobilising, implementing and governing a healthy societies agenda necessarily means involving: a range of sectors across government; voices from all global regions; young people; indigenous people; diverse health and non-health social movements; civil society; private sector; universities and research institutions; faith leaders; key public proponents; other global institutions and UN agencies.
14. No single sector, organisation or group can shape or implement the healthy societies agenda alone. Leaders are needed who appreciate the urgency of cross sectoral action and who can develop platforms for sharing knowledge, ideas and resources across networks which are local and global.

“We must move beyond building back better to building forward better, greener and healthier.”

“COVID-19 has shown it is neither utopian nor abstract to integrate the social determinants approach in health.”

“We need a new global order - this is a human crisis.”

Healthy societies agenda in the context of COVID-19

16. Despite many warnings throughout the past decades, the world is currently living through the worst peacetime crisis of a century. COVID-19 has brought into stark relief the price the world now pays for not giving proper attention to a disease outbreak with the ability of turning into a global pandemic. Many decades of progress made in health, and social and economic development, have been lost. This pandemic is having extreme consequences and is exacerbating inequalities.
17. As we reflect on how societies can recover, we must strive to build more resilient and sustainable societies for the future. Access to robust and good quality health systems is an important backbone but it is not enough to meet our common goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing of all at every age.
18. Societies must enable and empower people to live long and healthy lives. This includes addressing living conditions and education, equity, gender equality, but also climate change and environmental degradation.
19. The global community has committed to healthy societies, and every one of us has a role to play. We need to strengthen this commitment and cooperation among all stakeholders to find global solutions to global problems. The pandemic has put health at the centre of attention of all humankind and has made it very explicit how health is created and destroyed beyond the health sector.
20. The pandemic has increased the need for long-term cross-sector public health dialogue and collaboration with a range of actors at national, regional, and global levels. Improving health and building healthy societies also requires ambitious, cohesive and decisive action across a variety of sectors including but not limited to education, agriculture, climate, and urban planning. Multi-sectoral action is necessary but difficult and we must use Agenda 2030 in an intelligent way and move in the same direction by finding synergies across sectors for ways forward. There is a need for clear policy proposals to address the structural, social and commercial determinants of health, to tackle inequities and make real progress towards healthy societies.

What are the lessons learned from COVID-19? What needs to change?

21. Participants discussed these questions in small groups with a focus on people power, global politics, private sector production and national policy.
22. Some key messages included:
 - Some COVID-19 responses have not engaged with people and communities, and this is a total failure. We need to understand the causes of this and address them, so that power structures and imbalances can be challenged.
 - Do not create a dichotomy between political, social and economic rights. We need a public health model that is inclusive, which takes social and economic conditions into account.
 - COVID-19 has highlighted the relationship between inequities (including gender, ethnic and wealth) and a lack of social cohesion. The metrics used to measure pandemic preparedness are shown to be completely inadequate, as they do not account for politics such as populism, which thrives on social inequities and a lack of social cohesion.
 - The world lacks the systems and frameworks to address issues through multi-sector action. However, when cooperation was really needed, it happened. In some places cross-governmental working has started to change during COVID-19 and we need to build on this and learn what works and what doesn't.

- We need to broaden the dialogue and talk about preparedness for health in general rather than looking at a pandemic as an entity in itself.
- It is important to affirm the importance of public sector coordination with the private sector. There are opportunities to innovate, and bring agencies to work together, with alignment of incentives.
- The world needs to move from sustainability to regenerative economies, and companies need to be shown how to do this.
- The common citizen may have learned that health is more than just health care, and that health is a political choice.
- Coordinated government approaches and engaging communities has worked well in places and demonstrates that positive outcomes can be achieved in short time frames.
- The social determinants of health agenda must be reframed and more deeply embedded within policies and actions we take to improve health. Equity often remains a consideration rather than a core goal to be centre of policy actions.

Tensions

23. In discussing critical questions relating to key actions needed across all the whole of society to ensure healthy populations, participants articulated some key tensions relating to the concept of healthy societies and approaches to achieving them.
24. Participants discussed creating single and multiple frameworks for conceptualizing, defining, understanding and taking action to build healthy societies. Some embraced the need for a single global framework, so that countries can measure results against a goal and structure. Others argued for caution about singular framings of healthy societies because global diversity shows there are multiple understandings and solutions at many levels. Theoretical frameworks should create a space for plurality and circulation of ideas and actions, built through participatory and enabling approaches.
25. There is also a fundamental tension between the biomedical model and the social determinants of health model. The biomedical model carries the assumption that macroeconomic growth is how we can create the tools and resources to improve health, while the social determinants of health approach integrates social, economic, and cultural rights, and provides a more holistic framing of health and wellbeing.
26. Some participants suggested that COVID-19 provides an opportunity to intervene, that it highlights the need for healthy societies, and therefore it is a good moment to push this agenda. Others expressed caution in allowing COVID-19 to frame our thinking, as it tends to generate a biomedical response. Creating solidarity and value systems to build healthy societies from the bottom-up and top-down requires a much longer-term process.
27. It is important to be aware of and consider these tensions as a range of stakeholders move together to build and implement the healthy societies agenda.

Significant areas that influence healthy societies

28. Recurrent sectoral areas significant to healthy societies include: food systems, health, climate and environments we live in. Cross cutting themes across all of these

“We need an inclusive enabling approach to thinking about healthy societies.”

“Nothing will change without civil society mobilisation.”

“Climate change, the NCD pandemic and the biodiversity crisis are all a result of the model of production and consumption.”

issues which affect the ecosystem include governance and participation, and financial drivers and financial flows.

Governance and participation

29. Multi-sector global governance for healthy societies is challenging as sectors are fragmented, yet it is crucial for success that we take this approach. We urgently need to put health on the agenda of groups and sectors outside health.
30. While multilateralism is much needed, and is an asset to countries, especially the poorest countries, it is not enough. Countries must be at the centre of efforts, and country choices are what matters most to populations.
31. Top-down and bottom-up approaches are needed simultaneously, but we need to do better at the bottom-up. It is time to engage ordinary people and communities in defining and implementing the healthy societies agenda, particularly as they have seen and felt the financial and social impact of inequalities as a result of COVID-19. Civil society organisations have a crucial role to play in advocacy, engagement and accountability in healthy societies governance.
32. Universities and educational institutions are not yet focused enough on the healthy societies dialogue, yet they can play a central role to move this agenda forward.
33. Including the right people, groups and organisations in mobilising, implementing and governing a healthy societies agenda necessarily means involving a diverse group of stakeholders. We need to create a space for sharing ideas and knowledge and for a diverse group of individuals and organisations to lead the healthy societies agenda.

Financial flows

34. The world must look to change systems and financial flows in line with the SDGs. A recent European energy report identified that \$1.3 trillion US dollars was invested in subsidising fossil fuels. At the other end, small-scale farmers, with less than five hectares, produce one third of the world's food. The farmers are disproportionately affected by climate change, but do not receive any funding in support.
35. If we can change financial flows, we can change incentives and move towards more innovative financing. Questions include, is it possible to redirect investments in fossil fuels to investments in public health? Can discussions about financial flows challenge and change public mindsets, and make people aware that humanity is subsidising its own demise?

Climate and health

36. The health of people and the health of the planet can no longer be separated. Climate change and degradation of biodiversity is the biggest health threat of the 21st century and is crucial to achieving healthy societies and populations.
37. Lifestyles and behaviours that have a negative impact on our climate are often the same that have a negative impact on people's health. Fortunately, the opposite is true. Positive changes in lifestyle can have a positive impact both on people's health and the health of our planet.
38. It is vital to maximise synergies and align incentives across the climate, food systems and health sectors. We face mutually reinforcing challenges and the solutions must also be mutually reinforcing.

Food systems

39. On a finite planet with eight billion people, we cannot have healthy people without a healthy planet; food is the intersection between people and planet. Food systems are

"We are subsidising our own demise."

"Health and class tend to co-create each other and we need to break this circle."

"We have an obligation for healthier and greener societies."

a driver of climate change and environmental degradation and poor diets lead to more ill health than anything else.

40. COVID-19 has resulted in millions more people facing acute food insecurity, with tragic consequences for maternal and child health and nutrition.
41. The experience of COVID-19 has made food systems real to many more people who saw empty shelves. This experience can be harnessed to spread the message for positive change.
42. We need to create long-term sustainable food systems and transform the food systems of today, shifting towards regenerative food production practices with healthy and nutritious diets affordable to all.

Key themes and areas for the healthy societies agenda to develop

43. Four key themes and areas of work have been identified as a convergence of steps that participants agreed upon at the first meeting in February 2020, and areas that participants re-emphasized and promoted at the second meeting in April 2021. These themes will be further developed through a series of Wilton Park meetings throughout 2021.

- I. **Conceptualisation of healthy societies**

Conduct further work on the vision, narrative and communication of healthy societies through a process of co-creation to ensure broadest possible ownership, including communities and citizens. Write and publish communication pieces to share the agenda and suggested ways forward.

- II. **Networked communities of practice**

Develop networked communities of practice to support community engagement to design people-centred solutions for healthy societies. Identify future leaders and champions of healthy societies and find ways to support them.

- III. **Research**

Develop a research agenda for the area of healthy societies focusing on understanding the context and drivers of healthy society. Facilitate a broader discussion around multi-sectoral work in practice – what works? What can we learn from previous experience?

- IV. **Political economy and financial flows**

Explore this area further in relation to healthy societies, with food systems and climate change sectors providing concrete examples of the potential positive impact.

Alison Dunn

Wilton Park | May 2021

Wilton Park reports are intended to be brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of an event. Reports reflect rapporteurs' accounts of the proceedings and do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur. Wilton Park reports and any recommendations contained therein are for participants and are not a statement of policy for Wilton Park, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) or Her Majesty's Government nor the Government of Sweden.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park events, please consult our website www.wiltonpark.org.uk. To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>

“A healthier tomorrow is possible.”

“We can move mountains where there is the political will to move things forward.”