



Wilton Park



Report

Africa regional dialogue on healthy societies

Opportunities and challenges for collective action

Tuesday 8 June 2021 | WP1948V1

In partnership with:



Government Offices of Sweden



Alliance
for Health Policy
and Systems Research



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Background

Creating healthy societies requires collective action across different sectors and disciplines. Stakeholders across sectors need to identify shared ideals for healthy societies that they can build into their agendas. While the health sector can steward these efforts, success will require broad engagement and collaboration.

In February 2020, Wilton Park and partners held a dialogue to explore the social, economic and environmental determinants of healthy societies, the promotion of cross-sectoral approaches for better health and the prioritisation of health in other sectoral policies and settings. In partnership with the Government of Sweden and the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research, WHO, Wilton Park held a follow-up series to explore how we can deliver healthy societies and healthy populations; the first of these dialogues was held in April 2021 and the second in June 2021.

Ahead of the June event, several smaller regional discussions in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia Pacific and Europe and North America explored the visions and narratives for healthy societies. The aims were to explore the plurality of ideas about the narrative and vision for healthy societies and understand the similarities and differences between and within regions and across sectors, disciplines and levels. Through a process of listening and engaging across different levels and sectors, we can collectively build converging ideas around which to align actors and actions.

Participants at these regional meetings did not speak with one voice on behalf of the whole region, but rather represented different sectors and stakeholder groups in order to contribute their perspectives and ideas for future direction and collaboration. Some important stakeholders were not able to attend, so there was an element of bias. These conversations are a starting point and need to be part of a continuing and wider dialogue among the different countries in each region.

This is a report from the Africa regional dialogue on healthy societies, held on 8 June 2021. It complements and builds on previous reports from Wilton Park meetings on healthy societies in [February 2020](#) and [March 2021](#).

Introduction

1. The World Health Organization's triple billion targets focus on universal health coverage (UHC), health emergencies and healthy populations. Progress towards meeting the first two targets is well underway, and global and national responses to UHC and health emergencies are evident. The third target of healthy populations, or healthy societies, has become more tangible as a result of COVID-19 but still requires a collective effort to engage meaningfully with the agenda and take action. How do we address structural factors that affect whether people make healthy choices or not? How do we create opportunities and empower people to make healthier choices?
2. The meeting's discussion focused on answering some key questions relating to healthy societies such as what ideas, areas of action and social forces are essential and already engaging to make society healthier? What is enabling efforts to achieve healthy societies and how do we promote this? What is opposing or undermining these efforts and how do we confront this?

"Ensuring that people can make healthy choices is good for our health and is good for our planet."

Summary points

- A more holistic, political economy analysis of health and wellbeing can support action around building healthy societies, with equity as a focus particularly as it relates to young people, who comprise the majority of the African population.
- A paradigm shift and fresh narrative is needed to inform social thinking, public policy and financing systems away from over-medicalised, disease-focused and singular bio-medical approaches to health.
- Acting on the determinants of health, including immediate determinants such as food and living conditions and deeper structural determinants in political and economic systems is fundamental.
- Economic and material systems including food systems, embedding health in production systems, transforming resources and economic structures to realise people's role as producers and creators of wealth and how to address these issues in urban and rural spaces were also identified as key spheres of action.
- Promoting youth autonomy, power, voice and organisation is a critical area for action, and youth need to be informed, engaged and enabled in a participatory manner for meaningful decision making and leadership.
- The education system and curriculum require reform and adaptation to local conditions in order to de-medicalise health and promote action for healthy societies.
- Health services need to reframe public health approaches and ensure people are co-creators of their own health.

Main areas of discussion

3. Some main areas of interest to emerge from this Africa regional discussion were youth, sustainable financing, going beyond the health sector, the private sector, challenges and identifying an action agenda.

Youth

4. In Africa, 50-60% of the population is below 18 years old. Engaging youth in the health issues that affect them, particularly mental health is therefore crucial to address equity and ensure youth voice, agency and futures are an integral part of the healthy societies agenda.
5. A focus on youth needs to be applied from conception upwards. In South Africa, a recent review of one programme found that the first 1000 days between conception

"At an early age, children need to understand the healthiest food to eat, and to exercise. These are simple things that can be done."

“Young people spend a lot of time in educational institutions and this is where we can intervene.”

“It’s about giving people opportunities to access the information they need and encouraging them to ask the right questions.”

“We need community action to continue engaging with duty bearers and with each other to define health priorities and influence policy and legislation”

and 2 years old is the most important period in a child’s life providing the foundations for optimum health, growth, and neurodevelopment.

6. At the other end of the youth spectrum, another project is building healthy college and university campuses, which empowers students so they can become future leaders in their communities.
7. Some youth-based programmes and non-governmental organisations have started movements to build healthier societies, at both community and government level in order to influence participation and policy making towards this vision.
8. The health sector is very medicalised, and young people respond better to talking about ‘wellbeing’ in relation to their lives, health and healthy societies as this is a concept they can relate to. For example, relationship anxieties and stresses were related to poverty and impoverished futures.
9. Strong qualitative and participatory action research is needed to help understand young people’s perspectives and perceptions and to support them to take action for healthy societies.

Sustainable financing

10. An important step for countries to take to build healthy societies is around sustainable financing and an increase in domestic financing. Healthy societies must become a priority, and this must be supported with funds. If there access to funds are lacking, then systems will fail.
11. Redefining what partnership engagement means, for the government, for the private sector and other stakeholders would be beneficial to take into account how resources are mobilised for the healthy society agenda.
12. Marginalised and vulnerable communities can engage through participatory health policy and budgetary planning, which is a good way to demand healthy societies from the bottom up. An example of this has taken place in Kenya.

Going beyond the health sector

13. The health sector alone cannot address issues relating to healthy societies. The climate, education, water and sanitation, agriculture, the food industry, infrastructure and private sectors (among others) all play a huge role in creating and sustaining unhealthy or healthy societies.
14. Different government departments need to collaborate in order to achieve healthy societies. Currently, Ministries do not work together to fix what is seen as a ‘health’ problem, yet healthy societies also lead to peaceful, productive and prosperous societies.
15. In some sectors, particularly climate and education, there are huge co-benefits in engaging with a healthy societies agenda.
16. Initiatives across Africa are already working inter-sectorally to build healthier societies. For example, an initiative in Nairobi, Kenya is working to build healthier food systems and address climate change. Other projects are proposing actions to government for healthy societies such as encouraging consumers to demand healthy food, promoting appropriate baby and young child feeding and promoting healthy diets for the population.
17. While towns and cities might provide an obvious place for institutional collaboration around building healthy societies, many rural areas across Africa are deeply affected by private sector investments, such as the mining industry, which calls for a more integrated approach in rural and remote locations too.

“We won’t create health and wellbeing if we don’t look at what is happening to the wealth on our continent.”

Private sector

18. Food systems and climate play a fundamental role in driving the health of populations and societies, of which the private sector is an integral part. For example, global food systems are driving climate change through greenhouse gas emissions, and pressures on land and water are leading to reduced crop yields and nutritional value.
19. Encouraging the production sectors to internalise the issue of health is critical for the region. In some parts of Africa, extractive sectors such as the mining industry are being engaged to generate improvements to the communities and societies where they operate, rather than for example, generating epidemics.
20. The private sector should also be encouraged to see young people as an investment in the future, rather than as expendable, and empower them productively, particularly through improving access to the Internet.
21. Reclaiming resources for healthy societies relates strongly to food systems.
22. Private sector focus tends to be on big companies, however individuals are also entrepreneurs and significant creators of wealth. Institutions matter, but so do people and we should be aware of the structure of the economy and how we value it. How do we encourage investment in our own careful use of resources?
23. We need to reconceptualise the role of the state, and strive for a better balance between people, market and state.

Challenges

24. The world is at a turning point, but the discussion shows that there is no real definition of what a healthy society is and that each society is affected by its histories, interests and cultures.
25. While poverty can lead to poor health, some wealthy behaviours, such as over-consumption and lack of activity, can also lead to poor health. It is hard to develop universal messaging to reach all people in all countries.
26. Health has become over-medicalised and it is hard to shift perceptions to a broader notion of healthy societies.
27. The private sector is extremely good at marketing unhealthy products to young people and is miles ahead of civil society and governments in relation to labelling food and marketing. Laws and regulations tend to play catch up rather than drive positive practice.
28. It is very difficult to sustain lawsuits against the private sector, particularly those who manufacture and promote fast foods and unhealthy drinks.
29. In environments where people barely have enough food to eat, and will eat anything they can buy, it is problematic to push for healthy diets and lifestyles.
30. Youth participation, when organised, is too often top down and tokenistic. It is important to work with existing groups and networks and their own agendas and movements, rather than create new spaces and invite people in.
31. The healthy societies concept encompasses many aspects of health and wellbeing, so how do we measure the outcome of healthy societies? What would the indicators be? Is life expectancy the best indicator?

Africa - Healthy societies action agenda

Participants identified some concrete ways in which to take this agenda forward.

- i. Multi-sectoral engagement across Africa is needed, with a convergence of voices and values across sectors, stakeholders and disciplines. Broader engagement with youth, communities, governments, academia and the private sector is

“We need to shift the paradigm so the community can be more active as creators and co-producers of health.”

“It is not about talking to people, it is about acting with people - listening and sharing knowledge and ideas.”

- needed.
- ii. Focus on youth and engage from the early years onwards.
 - iii. Focus on improving the education system and all curricular to encompass a healthy societies agenda, including in medical schools.
 - iv. Address the over-medicalisation of health and apply a transformative approach to the health sector.
 - v. Track wealth and financial flows to understand the wealth of the continent and redirect it back to young people.
 - vi. Promote a paradigm shift where community engagement and a participatory action model are drivers and communities can be more active as co-producers of health.

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