



Wilton Park



Report

Asia Pacific regional dialogue on healthy societies

Opportunities and challenges for collective action

Tuesday 8 June 2021 | WP1948V3

In partnership with:



Government Offices of Sweden



Alliance
for Health Policy
and Systems Research



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Background

Supporting text 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 Asia Pacific regional dialogue on healthy societies, held on 10 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?

Summary points

- COVID-19 provides us with potential for a progressive moment in health to shift the paradigm of health, change the narrative and drive action to build and sustain healthy societies.
- With current distributions of wealth and resources perpetuating vast inequities across the Asia-Pacific region, with differences across countries and urban and rural areas, a focus on gender, equity and human rights is fundamental, particularly on social and political rights.
- The health of the planet is deeply linked to the health of people and societies, which is in turn linked to climate, biodiversity, food systems and the reinforcing effects of poverty and inequity.
- How we organise economic and productive elements of our society is currently influenced by what can be termed as neo-liberal capitalism, with a concentration of power towards the private sector. We need to reimagine a governance ecosystem that is responsive, participatory and accountable and to create a governance platform for multiple sectors to work together for healthy societies.
- A whole of government and whole of society approach is needed to tackle imbalances of power, especially at the sub-national level where communities and locally elected leaders can play a major role to take forward the healthy societies agenda.

Main areas of discussion

1. Some main areas of interest to emerge from this Asia Pacific regional discussion included: equity, rights and gender; a healthy planet; governance; and changing the discourse and paradigm of health.

Equity, rights, and gender

2. Due to COVID-19, health is at the top of everyone's minds, which is unprecedented in modern history; but responses to the pandemic have generally been top-down, bio-medical and even militaristic with huge inequities in access to health services and vaccines.
3. The post-colonial phase of history has generated a focus on economic rights, which have trumped political and social rights, yet the experience of COVID-19 shows us that social and political rights are equally important, and provides us with unique timing for a progressive moment in health. The current distribution of wealth and inequality, with values of materialism and consumption driving lifestyles, is incompatible with a healthy society.
4. Gender and its intersectionality with other factors, including the interdependence of

"Is a healthy society compatible with the levels of inequality we are witnessing in the region?"

"Unless we address intersectionality, we will be remiss in addressing oppression."

"The idea of a post-growth world is often hard to convey to the poorest, who still do need to meet basic material needs. To them, "de-growth" is a bourgeois idea. It has to be combined with environmental and climate justice to make sense."

privilege and oppression, must be integrated into the healthy societies agenda, in order to address deep-seated inequities.

5. A healthy societies agenda ties together health, food systems and biodiversity with the multiple effects of poverty and inequities in access to healthy food.
6. Indigenous people's rights on the international agenda is a positive driver of healthy societies.

"We are right now living COVID-19 which is a reflection of our broken relationship with nature."

"There can be no healthy society without biodiversity."

A healthy planet

7. The health of people and the health of the planet are inextricably linked. Often, what is bad for people's health is also bad for the planet, such as global food systems, poor soil health and land degradation, water pollution, bad atmosphere, materialism and consumerism, and life in big cities.
8. The health sector should address the climate crisis and environmental changes that contribute to unhealthy societies and take into consideration bio-diversity and eco systems; if we forget about the healthy planet agenda in our pursuit for a healthy society, we will fail.
9. Land degradation is leading to poor agriculture and decreasing nutritional value in crops such as rice and wheat, which are staples for many people across the world.
10. Food systems play a crucial role in healthy societies, not only in contributing to the vast increase in non-communicable diseases worldwide, and ecological destruction, but also to infectious diseases and that most pandemics originate in the food chain and the animals we eat.
11. In some parts of the world, especially among young people, new trends such as veganism and healthy lifestyles are becoming more prevalent, which has connections with the notion of wellness and carries potential for positive change; however, is this evidence of the commercialisation of health where young people are spending to simply look healthy?

"We have to make a distinction between electoral democracy which sometimes undermines human rights, and democracy which is built through resistance."

"The obsession with endless growth and capital accumulation on a finite planet sits at the very centre of so many of the problems we're facing."

Governance

12. Many problems that the planet and societies face are currently about how we organise the economic and productive elements of our society through neo-liberal or extractive capitalism. For example, corporations' primary aim to extract profits from our environments and people is a core driver of unhealthy societies.
13. More than ever, democracy is faced with the challenge of making a historic choice. The contraction of the public sector, and the expansion and concentration of power in the private sector have devolved governance to the markets. Fiscal justice is lacking.
14. The problem of elected authoritarianism is leading to policy responses that demonise minority communities and shrink civic space. To build healthy societies, we need to rebuild trust in public institutions and advance an agenda which does not promote economic growth as progress.
15. Often resilience bonds, green investments and corporate social responsibility are discussed in relation to a fairer and greener world. However, when we rely on this as a substitute for proper regulation, or taxation and use of funds for public and common good, we are simply creating and supporting a widening imbalance between private sector and public sector work and funding.
16. Tracking wealth and understanding financial flows is a critical first step to demonstrate inherent biases and inequities and identify where to intervene. This includes both private sector and government spending, and identifying where the money is being distributed. Could government military spending be redirected into health, education and other sustainable forms of expenditure?
17. We need to reimagine a governance eco-system that is responsive, participatory and

accountable. What does it mean to participate in the governance of our societies? What does it mean to ensure people's voices are heard? If you are in a lobby group trying to affect change, you may be heard, but where are the voices of women, children and disadvantaged people? These fundamental questions need to be addressed when institutions are redesigned to ensure that people have a genuine voice in creating and making decisions about their communities and societies.

18. Social movements have power and are worth investing in, but we should also be cautious as civil society can sometimes provide excuses for governments to fail to provide public sector solutions. Civil society, and social movements, should demand more accountability and more effective access to services.
19. Social capital is important for wellbeing and we need to recognise people's voices and power to make change happen; voluntarism can promote social change for wellbeing and networks of people to improve social health.
20. The local and sub-national level has a strong role to play in building healthy societies, both through engaging communities and their elected leaders. In Latin America, many Presidents started out as mayors or leaders of provinces. Working at this level could be an important strategic approach.
21. A whole of government and whole of society approach is needed to tackle imbalances of power. Multiple sectors play a role in building healthy societies, and it is well understood that multisectoral and intersectoral action is required to promote a healthy societies agenda. Other sectors require better health literacy. However, the governance platform and the political will to allow sectors to work together is missing.

Changing the paradigm and discourse of health

22. Dominant medical and public health thinking treats health as an individual matter. It is important to shift this paradigm and recognise the relational dimension of health as relationships with others, with community and society and with the planet.
23. Health is made and maintained outside of the health sector; the medicalisation of health is therefore unhelpful, and we need to find ways to ensure this conceptualisation shifts to a more progressive and societal concept of health.
24. We need to change the paradigm and discourse around health and equity across other sectors. For example, we talk about smart cities but we never talk about equitable cities. We talk about slum-free cities but we never talk about poverty-free cities.

Asia Pacific - Healthy societies action agenda

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

- i. Change the paradigm, discourse and narrative around health and healthy societies to move away from a biomedical model to an all-encompassing healthy society definition.
- ii. Create a governance reform agenda and platform, which puts participation and access to platforms and policy spaces at the centre.
- iii. Work through the local and sub-national levels of local governance, and citizen and community engagement, to promote the healthy societies agenda.
- iv. Use evidence-based tools to understand the impact of longer-term investments in healthy societies from one generation to the next.
- v. Track wealth and resources to better understand financial flows to support a proper regulatory and tax environment.

“Health is about human flourishing and what makes us flourish as individuals and communities”

“Sustainable development will not happen if we do not embrace social solidarity.”

Alison Dunn

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