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Health 2020: Education and health through the life-course

Synergy between sectors: fostering better education and health outcomes

Summary

The Health 2020 policy framework has been adopted by all Member States of the WHO European Region in order to address Europe's great social and health challenges, calling upon the health sector to reach out to, and work with, all the various sectors and parties in the continuous work of improving people's health and well-being. Investing in education also means investing in health throughout the life-course. Education is crucial to opportunities for participation in society, keeping people in the labour market and supporting their return if they lose employment, improving health literacy and strengthening community resilience. By working together, health and education can contribute significantly to individuals,

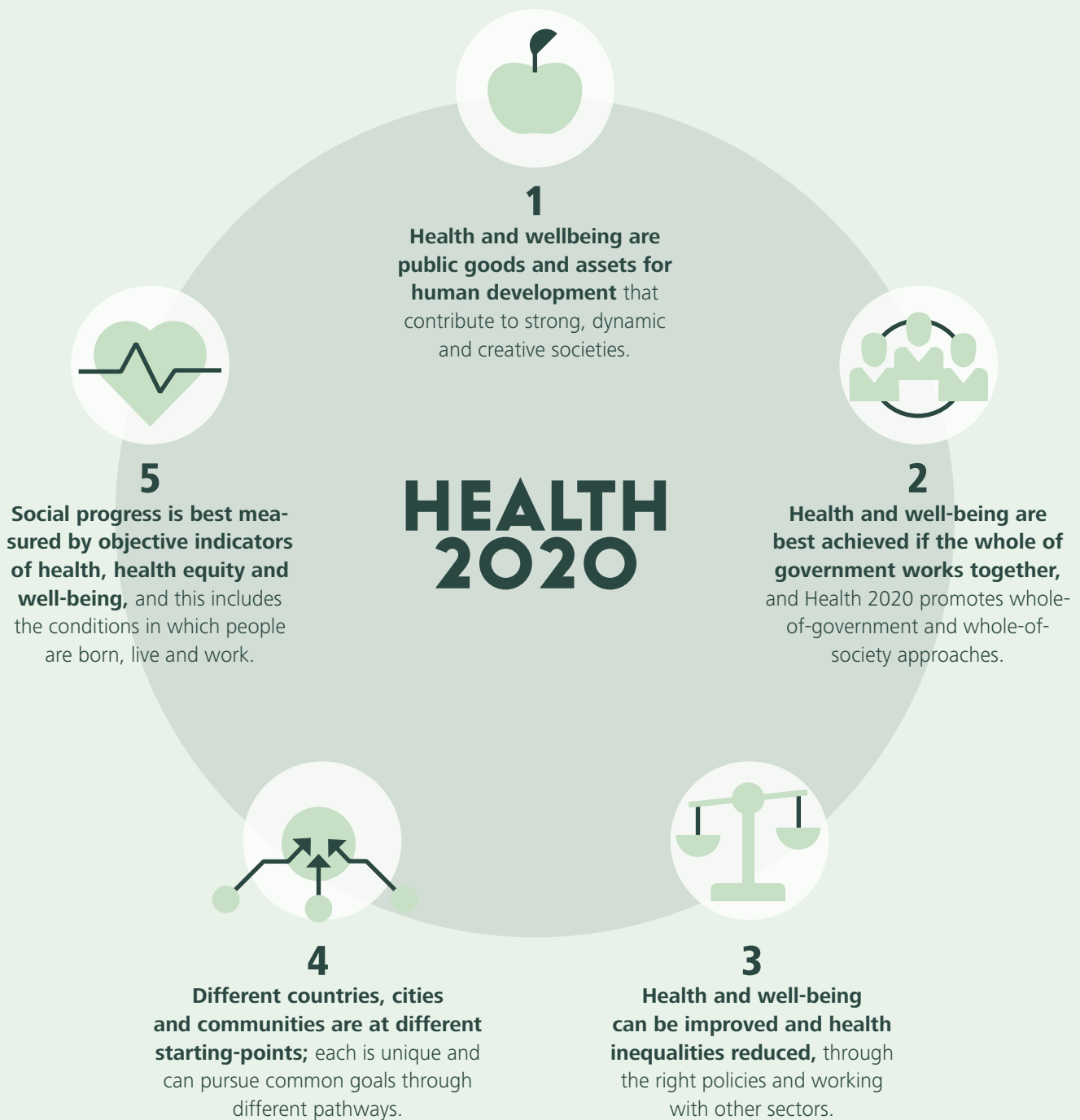
communities and societies, reduce inequalities and support human development, not only improving good health and well-being but also enhancing learning and personal growth as well as fostering healthy and resilient communities and economies.

The education sector can help create healthier people and communities by:

- ensuring availability and access to meaningful lifelong learning opportunities;
- creating learning environments that are both safe and supportive and focus on the development of the whole person – cognitively, socially, emotionally, mentally and physically;
- improving health literacy and strengthening essential life skills, including parenting, cooking and critical thinking as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- encouraging civic engagement and social inclusion through focusing on social and emotional learning, building people's self-esteem and confidence;
- supporting individuals in accessing the labour market and reducing their likelihood of exclusion through long-term unemployment; and
- working with the health sector to reduce gender-based inequalities, including in their roles as key employers of women.

Key messages

The goal of Health 2020 is to significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality.





Strengthening health and educational over the lifecourse

In 2012, all 53 Member States in the European Region adopted Health 2020, the new common European health policy framework, and committed themselves to developing integrative policies that engage with all sectors in addressing the social and economic determinants of health and well-being. A life-course approach in the pursuit of better health and health equity goals includes action at every stage of life – preconception, pregnancy, early childhood, adolescence and transition to adulthood, the transition to working life, employment and navigating the modern labour market and as people age. Family, peer groups and community settings are therefore crucial to implementing the life-course approach, and the education sector plays a key role in this.

Education has positive lifelong effects on health through increased employment

opportunities and income, better living conditions, confidence levels and literacy, including health literacy. In addition, adult learning can have positive effects on life satisfaction, mental health and changes in health-supporting behaviour such as smoking cessation, active lifestyles, healthy eating and duration of breastfeeding. Offering opportunities for continual education as well as a second chance for education in adulthood is crucial in promoting equity. Getting the courage to go back to learning is a particular challenge for people who have poor experience with education in their youth. Investing in accessible education throughout the life-course is therefore a priority in breaking the cycle of poverty, exclusion and the effects on people's health and well-being.

Health 2020: a framework for action

The goal of Health 2020 is to significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality.

All Member States of the WHO European Region have agreed to monitor progress against six common targets:

1. Reduce premature mortality in the European Region by 2020
2. Increase life expectancy in the European Region
3. Reduce health inequalities in the European Region
4. Enhance the wellbeing of the European Region population
5. Ensure universal health coverage and the right to the highest attainable level of health
6. Set national goals and targets related to health in Member States.

What makes societies prosper and flourish can also make people healthy, and policies that recognize this have more impact.

Building awareness and capacity to make health objectives part of society's overall socioeconomic and human development is essential. All policy fields, including health, need to reform their ways of working and use new forms and approaches to policy at the global, national and local levels.

Synergy between sectors: Education and lifelong learning to support population health

Strengthening the link between education and health over the lifecourse

It is well understood that the quality and number years of education are a crucial determinant of health and health literacy throughout the life-course. The amount of education and its quality reinforce the effects of early-years development and influence the subsequent social and economic well-being, health and other outcomes of individuals. A growing body of empirical research suggests that, when countries adopt policies to improve education, the investment also pays off in healthier behaviour and longer and healthier lives. For example, studies of compulsory schooling reforms adopted in several countries in the European Region conclude not only that the reforms lead to additional years of completed schooling but also that the additional schooling reduces the population rates of smoking and obesity. More than three decades of experience with a whole-school approach to health demonstrates effects on improving health behaviour, better learning outcomes, reducing school absenteeism and better school completion.

Numerous studies have found a positive association between a mother's education level and her child's chances of fulfilling his or her potential. The pathways through which this operates are varied but include a decrease in teenage pregnancy among

women with more schooling, increased birth intervals, increased awareness of good feeding practices, greater willingness to seek health care and lower financial barriers to access to health care.

Today's globalized economy, with knowledge societies and job markets that increasingly require high cognitive and academic skills, inherently relies on high-quality education and frequent knowledge update. Exclusion from high-quality education means people become more vulnerable to subsequent adversity and ill health. Education and lifelong learning can equip the population better with skills to adapt to a changing working environment, which could thereby influence health.

Research studies in education and adult literacy indicate that literacy influences the ability to access information and navigate in literate environments, affects cognitive and linguistic abilities and affects self-efficacy. Further lifelong learning (both formal and informal) improves health literacy, which influences health outcomes. Addressing inequity in educational outcomes means tackling inequity in educational opportunities and in outcomes. This means ensuring that the same quality of opportunity is open to everyone and, by providing

compensatory services, to ensure that learners receive adequate support to overcome disadvantages.

The health and education sectors share common goals to address the needs of vulnerable groups and ensure a healthier future for everyone, especially when political priorities change and during periods of economic decline and austerity. Investing in education also means investing in health and well-being. The numerous forms of synergy and overlapping objectives and targets between the health and education sectors means that working together enables better health and social outcomes for individuals, communities and societies.

Synergy between sectors: collaboration to support resilience and promote equity

How can the sectors work together?

Health 2020 provides a platform for such joint working between the education and health sectors. Working together, we have the power to intervene to address some of today's greatest health challenges, including health inequalities, social exclusion and support sustainable development, while ensuring that individuals and communities are able to fulfil their highest potential. In turn, intersectoral collaboration promotes and supports educational attainment by fostering healthy students, healthy adults and healthy learning environments.

KEY AREAS TO EXPLORE TOGETHER INCLUDE:

- how health and education can align policies that benefit both sectors and serve the whole person;
- how to pursue the shared goal of tackling health and educational inequities through the integrated long-term efforts of the health and education sectors;
- how the health and education sectors can work together in times of economic or external pressure; and
- how to optimize outcomes in health and education equity by strengthening the partnerships between the health, social, education and employment sectors.

How can education and lifelong learning make a difference to health?

- Build the foundations for health literacy (including media literacy) in early childhood and adolescence
- Develop and support health-promoting schools approaches
- Address the barriers to adult learning, including older ages, gender equity and work-life balance
- Include in education and lifelong learning the population groups at the highest risk of experiencing multiple exclusionary processes, especially people in rural areas, people with disabilities, migrants and minority ethnic groups such as Roma
- Ensure that all adults have basic skills, especially reading and writing skills, and complete secondary education also with a focus on practical learning
- Provide options for secondary education with adequate work-life balance



Collaborating to improve the well-being of people and communities

THE CHALLENGE

Too often both sectors serve the same individual, for similar issues, via varied and frequently competing practices and funding

For the most vulnerable young people and adults, educational and health challenges coexist with other social challenges

Children and young adults who have faced disruption in their learning may be reluctant to resume education

In times of societal and economic change, individual and community resilience is key

Social challenges require coherence across policies and new partnerships

THE RESPONSE NEEDED

Both sectors examine and better understand via dialogue the core mandates, constraints, attributes, processes and characteristics of each system to better integrate within them

The health and education sector work in partnership with other sectors to create coherence with active labour-market policies, including employment creation, reschooling and retraining, lifelong learning and other social protection measures such as affordable housing, childcare and income support

Jointly adopt participatory and community-based approaches, fostering understanding among professionals across the sectors on why people do not actively engage in learning activities as well as the systemic and structural barriers and policy enablers for learning

Work together to focus on joint outcomes that benefit each sector and the individual, such as strengthening literacy, including media literacy and health literacy, using the levers available to both sectors as well as in partnership with others, to strengthen community participation in decision-making

Work together across all levels of governance, including advocating for a whole-of-government approach that would include common goals such as well-being as measures of national progress

How can health make a difference to education and lifelong learning?

- Address the health-related barriers to student learning and school success, focusing on preventing school dropout, chronic student absences, key transitions and students at the highest risk of school or family difficulties through programmes such as accessible family planning and services, oral health programmes, child vision and hearing assessments, school meals and others
- Ensure equal access to high-quality health services emphasizing disease prevention, health promotion and integration with child and family services from other sectors as part of comprehensive health in all policies approaches

Using Health 2020 as a platform for joint work: a political mandate and evidence base

HEALTH 2020

The Health 2020 policy framework has a political mandate. It has been adopted by all European Member States and can be adapted to the different settings and realities that make up the European Region. It describes how health and well-being can be advanced, sustained and measured through action that creates social cohesion, security, a good work-life balance, good health and good education. It calls on the health sector to reach out to the many different actors within and outside government and provides inspiration and direction on addressing the complex health challenges of the 21st century. The framework confirms values, is informed by evidence and identifies strategic directions and essential actions. It builds on the experiences gained through previous Health for All policies and guides the actions of both Member States and the Regional Office.

Clear evidence indicates the association between levels of educational attainment and health outcomes, most profoundly demonstrated by disproportionately higher rates of premature mortality and morbidity among people of lower educational background, irrespective of other factors. People with less education are more likely to experience employment difficulties, poverty and social exclusion, receive inadequate health support, reside in hazardous environments and live shorter and more disability-burdened lives than people who have enjoyed better and more schooling. The link between education and health comprises a challenge for a society at large and not just for the most disadvantaged people, because more equal societies perform better on all levels of human development, including health. By working together, the health and education sectors can create synergy between the two and create an enabling environment that enables and motivates individuals to fulfil their potential.

Data indicate that the number of years of formal schooling completed is the most important correlate of good health. According to the Human development report 2003, education, health, nutrition and water and sanitation are mutually reinforcing, with investment in any one contributing to better outcomes in the others.

It is also well documented that health affects education. Research demonstrates that, when children's basic nutritional and fitness needs are met, they attain higher achievement levels. Similarly, using school-based and school-linked health centres that ensure access to needed physical, mental and oral health care improves attendance, behaviour and achievement. Developing a positive social and emotional climate increases academic achievement, reduces stress and improves positive attitudes toward oneself and others.

The public health challenges faced by countries of the European Region require an effective life-course strategy that gives priority to new interdisciplinary approaches to promoting health and preventing disease, based on the principles of engagement and empowerment. Governments that invest in education also invest in health. Health 2020 sees the education sector as a co-producer of health; a setting in which healthy behaviour is learned and promoted; a policy area with ownership over consumable goods that are key determinants of health; a physical and social environment that provides safety and models healthy, sustainable practices; an employer of a key workforce for children's health and well-being; a trainer of professionals who play a vital role in the health and well-being of the future society; and a partner in striving for investment in sectors that contribute to developing social capital and gender equity.

Reducing health inequalities

To reduce health inequalities, addressing the following is a good start:

LIFE-COURSE STAGE

- Social protection for women, mothers-to-be and young families
- Universal, high-quality and affordable early-years education and care system
- Eradication of unsafe work and access to employment and high quality work
- Coherent and effective intersectoral action to tackle inequalities at older ages

WIDER SOCIETY

- Improved social protection, according to need
- Co-creation and partnership with those targeted, civil society and civic partners
- Action to reduce social exclusion
- Gender equity approach

BROADER CONTEXT

- Promoting equity through tax and transfer payments
- Long-term planning through links with other policies

SYSTEMS

- Greater coherence across sectors
- Comprehensive responses
- Regular reporting and public scrutiny

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