

Mental health and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

Global inaction on mental health is putting the brakes on development



Summary

Researchers have identified close links between mental health and virtually every key issue in international development: mental illness can be both a risk factor and an outcome of inequalities in educational attainment, income, nutrition, housing and social support; it is exacerbated by conflicts and natural disasters, which may in turn be influenced by climate change; and the burden it places on carers disproportionately affects women and girls, limiting their opportunities to go to school and earn a living.

Cost-effective solutions to mental health care do exist, and there is also evidence that mental health can be improved through development interventions beyond the health sector. Yet mental health is too often sidelined from international development. This must change. Without global action on mental health, the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be met.

Key Recommendations

1. **Commit to improving and expanding access** to mental health care as a fundamental component of Universal Health Coverage and an integral part of primary and community health care.
2. **Integrate mental health into development planning**, with a special focus on prevention, promotion and holistic, life-course approaches that reinforce rights of people with mental health problems, and the right to health of all people.
3. **Deliver on existing commitments** under the 2013-2020 WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan and 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Mental health concerns us all

Mental health is relevant to all the Sustainable Development Goals and is explicitly mentioned under Goal 3 [Box 3]. Yet people living with mental illness are among those most likely to be excluded from development interventions, despite overwhelming evidence of the close links between mental health and virtually every major issue in development—from education and economic growth to conflict and climate change.

Mental health is key to health and well-being

Mental illness is a leading cause of the global burden of disease. Mental illness causes more years lived with disability (32.4%) than any other health condition and nearly as many disability-adjusted life-years (13.0%) as cardiovascular disease (13.5%). People living with mental illness are also more likely to develop physical health problems and have poorer physical health outcomes, including higher rates of premature mortality [Box 1].



Box 1. *Mental illness and other non-communicable diseases*

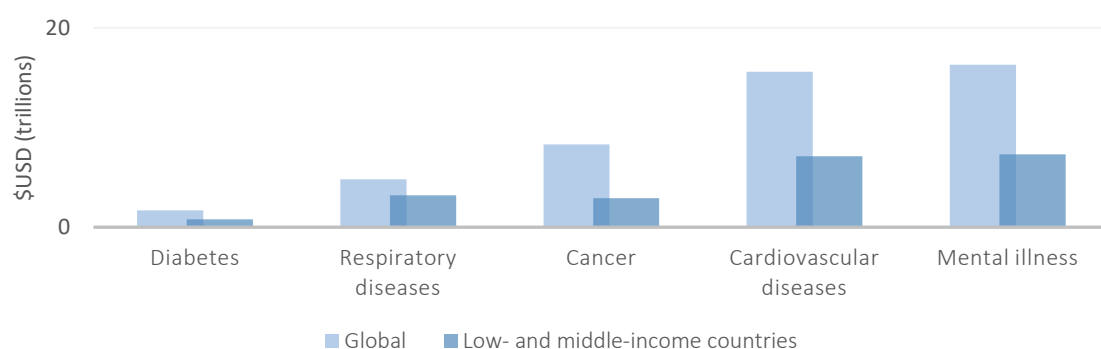
Mental health affects key risk factors for other non-communicable diseases, such as diet, exercise, and use of alcohol and tobacco. Partly as a result, people living with mental illness have a greater risk of developing other non-communicable diseases—and vice-versa. Those who do have both mental illness and other non-communicable diseases receive a lower quality of care and are less likely to adhere to treatment for physical health problems. Consequently, they often lead shorter, less healthy lives.

Global prosperity depends on mental health

There is a cyclical relationship between poverty and mental illness. Inequalities in educational attainment, income, nutrition, housing and social support are both risk factors and outcomes of mental illness. The effects extend beyond the individual. Family members (usually women and girls) are often responsible for providing care, diminishing opportunities to work and go to school.

The cost to the global economy is huge. Every year more than 12 billion working days are lost due to mental illness. Between 2011-2030, mental illness will cost the global economy \$16 USD trillion in lost economic output— more than cancer, diabetes, and respiratory diseases combined [Box 2].

Box 2. *Economic burden of mental illness compared to other non-communicable diseases*



Conflict and natural disasters are raising the stakes

Exposure to physical, sexual and psychological violence and situations of adversity are among the greatest risk factors for mental illness. New research shows the negative impact on mental health is passed down through generations. Exposure to these risk factors is expected to increase as climate change takes its toll.

“This is not just a public health issue; it’s a development issue. We need to act now because the lost productivity is something the global economy simply cannot afford.”

[Jim Yong Kim, 2016]

The time to act is now

Without global action on mental health, we cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Improving mental health is part of Goal 3 and has important knock-on effects on other goals, for example by keeping more children and young people in school. Ensuring that people living with mental illness are included in other development interventions also improves mental health and reinforces the principle of leaving no one behind.



Box 3. Sustainable Development Goal 3.4

Target: By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being.

Indicator: Suicide mortality

From evidence to action

Researchers have identified cost-effective solutions to the provision of mental health care even in low-resource settings. Invested correctly, just \$2 USD per capita could extend mental health care to nearly half of the population living with mental illness in low- and middle-income countries, with more than a two-fold return on investment. The return on investment is even higher for common mental illnesses like depression and anxiety, which are often overlooked by mental health services: \$3-\$5 USD for every \$1 USD spent.

From reactive to proactive

Promotion and prevention are key. Although there is an urgent need to scale up mental health care globally, mental illness would not disappear even if there were universal access to the most effective mental health care currently available. Mental health promotion and prevention of mental illness should be integrated into broader efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, to help mitigate the incidence and prevalence of mental illness, as well as achieve other goals for health, economic and social development. As half of all cases of mental illness onset by the mid-teens, it is particularly important to target children and young people in these efforts.

From making commitments to delivering results

It is time to deliver on the commitments that have been made. The Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan adopted by the 66th World Health Assembly outlines four objectives for the years 2013-2020 [Box 4]. Although progress has been made, these targets, and the health and well-being targets outlined under Sustainable Development Goal 3, will not be achieved without substantial further investment of energy and resources.



Box 4. Objectives of the World Mental Health Action Plan

1. Strengthen effective leadership and governance for mental health
2. Provide comprehensive, integrated and responsive mental health and social care services in community-based settings
3. Implement strategies for promotion and prevention in mental health
4. Strengthen information systems, evidence and research for mental health

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Ensure universal access to mental health care

Quality mental health care is not always available or accessible, despite high returns on investment in mental health. Integrate mental health into primary and community health care and ensure it is included in the essential package of services for Universal Health Coverage, so that even people in the most vulnerable situations can afford it.

Recommendation 2: Consider mental health in development planning

Broader efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals can also improve mental health, particularly in terms of mental health promotion and the prevention of mental illness. It is also important to ensure that people living with mental illness are included in and benefit from development efforts, as they are all too often left behind.

Recommendation 3: Deliver on commitments

Delivering on the commitments related to mental health that have already been made via the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and 2013-2020 Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan is a crucial first step to improve mental health worldwide. Further investment of energy and resources is essential.

More information

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