

BENDING THE TRENDS TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

**A strategic foresight on the future of
health promotion**



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Executive summary

In the rapidly changing world of the twenty-first century, this strategic foresight on the future of health promotion aims to inform future planning of the World Health Organization in support of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Thirteenth General Programme of Work, and the Implementation Framework for the Third Billion Target of the WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work (to be published in 2022) in relation to health promotion, sustainability and enhanced well-being. The strategic foresight conducted from August to November 2020 provides an analysis of health-promotion system capacity models and a horizon-scanning of global trends.

The key findings suggest to expand the capacity of health-promotion systems so they can bend future trends to promote health. By applying a health-promotion lens to global health challenges and opportunities, benefits can be made towards the development of healthier populations. The strategic foresight introduces the paradigm shifts needed to progress the agenda on planetary health, One Health and well-being, and presents transformational actions to support these shifts.

In the time of COVID-19, the proposals in this foresight are more prominent than ever. The pandemic has highlighted the need for more substantial investment in health promotion as a mindset, and professional capacity and practice supported by relevant digital infrastructure. Political instability needs global health diplomacy to sustain peace and security. A call is made for a global action plan to support countries to enhance health and well-being through health promotion.

Background

Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health (1). It captures physical, mental and social perspectives of health. It can be recognized as a mindset, capacity and practice. As a core function of public health, health promotion supports governments, communities, organizations and individuals to cope with and address health challenges. It embraces actions directed at strengthening the skills and capabilities of individuals, and actions directed at changing political, social, environmental and economic conditions to alleviate their detrimental impact on public and individual health.

Health promotion contributes to a vision of a world where people enjoy healthy lives and well-being, and live in a healthy, safe and supportive environment as members of an inclusive society. The Shanghai Declaration on Promoting Health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights action areas such as tackling the determinants of health; good governance for health; promoting health literacy; healthy cities and settings; and social mobilization and equity (2). The COVID-19 pandemic has made the need for health promotion more prominent than ever.

Health promotion embraces health from a life-course perspective that spans generations. It focuses on a healthy start to life and targets the needs of people in their everyday lives and at critical periods. It promotes timely investments with a high rate of return for public health and the economy by addressing the root causes, rather than only the consequences, of ill health (3).

The megatrends, drivers and uncertain factors that unfold in the next 100 years will impact on people's health and well-being in large and small ways. Current generations have been marked by social and political fluctuations such as globalization, welfare, emergencies, wars, economic crises and growth.

The roles of public health, health education and health promotion have changed over time. Rooted in economic and social developments, health in the nineteenth century was strengthened due to improvements in nutrition and hygiene and decreasing family sizes. Development of vaccines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and of antibiotics in the 1930s made it possible to deal with the spread of infectious diseases. Increased knowledge on the impact of risk factors on health qualified the role of disease prevention in reducing noncommunicable diseases (4).

The 1974 Lalonde Report (5) and the 1986 Ottawa Charter (6) launched the golden age of health promotion, followed by a focus on population health from 1990. Recent times have been characterized by a shift towards people-centred health. It is anticipated that the future of health promotion will see a transformation towards planetary health (7).

Since the 1990s, the world order has been described as turbulent, volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, and health-related provision, prevention and promotion are not linear, continuous, predictable or immune to disruptive change (8). Global emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the H1N1, Ebola and Zika epidemics, and the growing burden of disease related to noncommunicable diseases and mental health have changed the lives of many people around the world. The long-term effects are a stark reminder of the key importance of health and health systems in all countries and communities. Global disruptions such as climate change, armed conflicts, irresponsible business practices, corruption, and unsustainable production and consumption are impacting health. There has never been a greater need to progress health and the specific attributes of health promotion to enhance solidarity and sustainability.

“Learning from the past is obviously important, but in a rapidly changing world that just isn’t a complete approach to decision making... If we are to do better, we need a much more forward looking and integrated and flexible approach to the future which utilises the wealth of knowledge we have, rather than waiting for predictions to come to fruition before rising to tackle them” (9).

Being strategically prepared for the future enhances capacity to manage future trends and uncertainties. Conducting a megatrend analysis is critical for decision-makers seeking to drive ecologically sustainable human and social development and to remain resilient and agile as complexity increases and new ideas disrupt old ways of thinking and doing.

Megatrends are global, sustained and macroeconomic forces of development that impact society, cultures, environments, business, economies and people’s lives, defining our future world and its increasing pace of change. Once in place, megatrends influence a wide range of activities, processes and perceptions, possibly for decades – and thus they require a response (10). A robust strategic foresight process systematically considers a range of possible, plausible, probable and preferable futures, the hidden assumptions that underlie these futures, their potential consequences for policies and decisions, and the actions that might promote more desirable futures (11).

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