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Health literacy and the SDGs

So much of the 2030 Agenda depends on improving people's health and life expectancy. Critical to this will be empowering citizens so that they are better able to access, understand and use information to lead healthy lives

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Good health is the key to productive societies. When people are healthy, they can go to school and work, and they are less likely to go hungry or live in poverty. This understanding is recognised by the central place given to health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Health has its own goal, SDG 3 (ensure

healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages) but health and its social determinants cut across all the goals.

Halting the rise of antimicrobial resistance and chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer requires policy support and implementation from all sectors and parts of society. Given the current health, social and political challenges, more action is required to promote and protect health through

a multifaceted response. This includes improving governance to promote healthy public policies and encouraging people to make the healthy choice the only choice. But people can only make such choices if they understand their implications.

The Shanghai Declaration on health promotion, endorsed at the 9th Global Conference on Health Promotion to support the SDGs, identified health literacy as a key action area to achieve the Agenda

◀ A child, 10, starts a fire indoors to cook for her family in Wakiso District, Uganda. More than four million people annually die prematurely from illness attributable to the household air pollution from cooking with solid fuels

for Sustainable Development. It reinforced the notion that it is not only about communicating information and developing skills (health education), but also about taking actions to enable individuals to “gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health” for themselves, their families and their communities.

This means going beyond merely being able to read a flyer, understand food labels or comply with a doctor’s prescription. In other words, health literacy is not just the responsibility of individuals. Health literacy is a strategic approach and a tool to empower citizens, using various forms of communication and action taken through health systems and other policies. It has the potential to support and determine the levels of citizen engagement, inform citizens’ arguments for their claims to the right to health and shape community action and government accountability.

We need higher levels of health literacy if the decisions made by policymakers and health advocates are to have a positive impact on health. Better health literacy promotes equity in terms of access and opportunities for health. It helps ensure that health systems support clear, accurate, appropriate and accessible information for diverse audiences.

The question now is to clarify and demonstrate more explicitly how health literacy can support the SDGs, using specific goals as examples. These examples go far beyond the health sector, however. Health literacy is the responsibility of, and requires action from, many sectors. Only through such coordinated action can the co-benefits of health literacy, across the SDGs, be realised.

SDG 1: No poverty

Levels of health literacy determine an individual’s response to health information and their use of health services. The higher the health literacy, the higher the protective behaviour adopted. When individuals are able to protect themselves, their family

and their community, they are less likely to adopt risky behaviour such as smoking or having unprotected sex, which can cause illnesses that may lead to job loss or catastrophic health expenditure.

SDG 2: Zero hunger

A good understanding of basic nutrition is essential to sustain a balanced diet and prevent all forms of malnutrition. A health-literate parent will try to ensure that their children obtain the required nutrition for healthy growth. This will substantially enhance the impact of government policies and interventions aimed to prevent malnutrition and hunger across all relevant sectors.

SDG 4: Quality education

A healthy child is less likely to have high rates of absenteeism from school. A health-literate school administration can ensure that the school curriculum includes sessions on health education. These will enable students to acquire the key competencies to better protect themselves, by promoting a healthy lifestyle and developing skills to handle peer pressure. Students develop habits in school that they may keep throughout their lives.

SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth

A decent work environment promotes the levels of health literacy of its workers through health education, and ensures workplace policies protect staff. Health literacy also empowers workers to demand better, safer working conditions.

SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure

The mobile revolution represents a unique opportunity to expand access to health information and communication, and therefore to enhance health literacy. However, governments need to ensure that the information provided is of high quality, and that any private-sector involvement is free from any conflicts of interest.

SDG 10: Reduced inequalities

Health literacy predetermines the right to health. It is a tool for the most vulnerable

population groups to ensure their right to health is respected.

SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions

Those with higher levels of health literacy are empowered to hold their governments to account – whether for access to essential medicines, universal health coverage, removing environmental air pollutants or tearing down discriminatory laws and practices.

A political choice

In summary, health doesn’t just happen. To save lives and improve wellbeing, governments must implement and enforce health and other policies to make healthy choices available. They must ensure that effective health systems are in place, and are strengthened across all functions to perform as societies deserve and expect.

Citizens must be given the knowledge to choose healthy options where those choices exist. Effective health literacy is not only about individual literacy but about putting in place health-literate systems that would make the healthy choice the obvious choice.

Rapid changes in communication technologies have democratised engagement in health, allowing more people to have the most up-to-date health information at their fingertips. These revolutionary developments have given people more control over their health than ever before. Health ministries and academic institutions play a critical role in ensuring that nationally available health information is accurate, relevant, accessible, understandable, reliable and timely. They need to work with communications outlets to package and disseminate information via multiple platforms – from social media to television and radio, to poster and megaphone campaigns.

As highlighted at the Shanghai conference, health is a political choice that requires investment in people and systems. We must ensure that people are part of the solution, and that no one is left behind, as we embark on this collective journey to transform our world for the better by 2030. ●