A person’s health and well-being are shaped by many different individual, social and environmental factors throughout life. Risk exposures in early life can affect health, wellbeing and socioeconomic participation decades later. The UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) for 2030 is to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”, a goal that crosscuts with the other SDGs. These global goals, to which all stakeholders in health and other sectors are working towards, offer a robust framework within which to optimize health and wellbeing throughout life, and enable their contributions to societies and sustainable development. This briefing explains why a life course approach is fundamental in delivering the SDGs and on promises to expand access to primary health care and to provide universal health coverage – all explicitly calling for a people-centred approach. It summarises WHO’s work in promoting health and human capital through the life course. We go on to recommend multisectoral actions that governments, health and development agencies, service providers and individuals can take to embed such an approach to achieve health and sustainable development.

KEY MESSAGES

What is a life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development?

A holistic strategy to optimize people’s health and wellbeing throughout life and interlinkages with human capital and sustainable development.

Why use a life course approach?

• The returns of a life course approach to health can be around 10 times the investment, with effectiveness, efficiency and equity; human capital constituting 2/3rds of nations’ wealth; and human rights and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) benefits.

• A life course approach provides a holistic view of people’s health and wellbeing at all ages and interlinkages with human capital and sustainable development. This approach can prevent lifelong ill effects. For example, around 70% of noncommunicable diseases and mental illnesses in later life are associated with exposures to risks and inequities in earlier years; these also limit socioeconomic opportunities.

• The world has committed to achieving health for all and SDGs using people-centred, multisectoral approaches; a life course approach brings together high-impact, evidence- and rights-based strategies to do so.

• Countries and communities that are implementing a life course approach to health and human capital are realizing far-reaching benefits for current and future generations and the planet.
A life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development

A life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development is a holistic strategy to optimize people’s health and wellbeing throughout life and interlinkages with human capital and sustainable development. Figure 1 depicts key strategic elements of a life course approach.

**Figure 1. A life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development**

Why should countries use a life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development?

1. Investing early in people’s health and wellbeing, and sustaining gains throughout life, can significantly reduce health challenges and promote human capital and sustainable development. Early investments in people’s health and wellbeing enable them to do what they value and enjoy throughout life and contribute to societies and sustainable development. For example, early risks to health and wellbeing in pregnancy, childhood and adolescence are associated with around 70% of mental illness and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in later years and affect socioeconomic participation by over 25%. The benefits of policies and programmes, for instance to prevent infections such as HIV in babies, would be lost if the adolescents and adults they grow up to be are not similarly protected.

2. The world has committed to achieving health for all and SDGs using people-centred, multisectoral approaches; a life course approach provides high-impact, evidence- and rights-based strategies to do so. This is not a new way of thinking: holistic, people-centred approaches have been at the heart of primary health care, universal health coverage, public health and development efforts for years. To support a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach, a life course approach helps brings together evidence- and rights-based strategies to target high-impact and sustained health, human capital and SDG investments. There are significant benefits in ensuring that health care is joined up with multisectoral action to address a range of factors that adversely affect people’s health and wellbeing at all ages, including rights to equality, education, sustainable environments, peace and justice. A multisectoral approach means that not only will we deliver on SDG3, but also on other goals such as those for education (SDG4), sustainable cities (SDG11), and clean water and sanitation (SDG6) and to the realization of rights and sustainable development overall.
3. The returns of a life course approach can be 10 times the investment, with better effectiveness, efficiency and equity, and contributions to health, human capital and sustainable development goals by 2030:

- **Survive**: save around 100 million lives\(^\text{10}\) and increase life expectancy,\(^\text{11}\) by ensuring that people have access to universal health coverage, including access to high-impact interventions, to improve their health and well-being at all ages.

- **Thrive**: add over 500 million healthy life years,\(^\text{10}\) a life course approach has evidence-based strategies to help realize each person’s potential and rights for health and well-being at and across life phases, which contributes to reduced ill health and longer lives.

- **Universalize**: reduce inequalities and ensure Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and health for all,\(^\text{10,11}\) by focusing on every person’s health, well-being and rights, at all ages; this a universal approach, leaving no one behind.

- **Capitalize**: boost the wealth of nations, of which 2/3rds is human capital,\(^\text{12}\) drive inclusive socioeconomic and environmental development;\(^\text{13,14}\) The wealth of nations largely results from human capital investments across the life course, specifically in health and education.\(^\text{15}\) A life course approach brings together evidence- and rights based strategies for targeted, high-impact and sustained health, human capital and SDG investments, which helps improve their equity, efficiency and effectiveness.\(^\text{6,9}\)

- **Sustain**: secure gains for current and future generations, and the planet.\(^\text{16}\) This is the central premise of the SDGs; ensuring people’s health and well-being at all ages (SDG 3) contributes to, and benefits from, all other SDGs.

4. Countries and communities implementing a life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development are realizing far-reaching benefits for current and future generations and the planet. Box 1 highlights country examples of how stakeholder have used a life course approach to improve health and sustainable development.

### Box 1. Country examples of using a life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development

**Australia**'s comprehensive policy on women’s health was informed by findings from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health showing how gender and health inequities accumulate throughout life resulting in earlier and increased risk of physical decline. To counter this, the government updated its policy to ensure age-appropriate health care and address inequities across the life course.

**Chile**'s national development strategy is based on the importance of childhood development to economic and social progress. Chile Grows with You (Chile Crecce Contigo) involves intersectoral collaboration between health, social protection, and education sectors to enable all children to reach their full developmental potential, which also enables their future contributions to the country’s development.

**In India**, the MITRA programme in a remote tribal area of Orissa holistically addressed people’s needs across the life course with health, education, environment and poverty reduction initiatives. The community collaborated with government and local health and multisectoral services and achieved a range of health and development advances, including reducing malaria incidence, halving the infant mortality rate in 15 years, and making progress on sustainable development.

**In South Africa**, a life course approach underpins the She Conquers programme to support adolescent girls and young women overcome challenges, including in relation to HIV and AIDS. The government supports this programme through investment in, and integration of, health, education, social and environmental services to holistically address people’s specific needs at different life phases and throughout life.

**In Europe**, many countries have developed life course-related policies and programmes based on epidemiological evidence that risk exposures before conception and during pregnancy, early childhood and adolescence are major contributors to chronic and non-communicable diseases in later life, including cardiovascular diseases, cancers and mental health problems. Programmes aim to mitigate risk factors and promote health and well-being across the life course.

**In the United States**, to address inequalities in maternal and child health outcomes, many community organizations use a life course approach based on a Department of Health and Human Services review of MCH programmes and recommendation to move beyond a focus on particular phases to an action plan that “promotes optimal health and health development across the lifespan, as well as across generations, and that promotes equity in health across communities and populations”.

Further information:

- Pratt BA, Frost LJ. The Life Course Approach to Health: A Rapid Review of the Literature (focusing on conceptual and operational considerations); 2016.
- Making multisectoral collaboration work. The BMJ. December 2018.
WHO’s work on a life course approach to health, human capital and sustainable development

In WHO’s General Programme of Work (GPW) 13, there is a dedicated platform on ‘Improving Human Capital across the Life Course’. WHO works with countries and regions to collect and analyse data to inform action, with open access, up-to-date information available on the Global Health Observatory. Box 1 highlights some key challenges related to a life course approach to health and human capital.

To help countries address identified challenges, WHO develops and regularly updates evidence-based strategies and guidelines on key health and multisectoral issues across the life course (examples in the Figure 2). WHO works alongside UN and other partners to support country leadership and strengthen services on the ground. Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and primary health care underpin WHO’s efforts to support countries strengthen delivery of, and equitable access to, high-quality health services to meet people’s needs at all ages. WHO’s UHC ‘Menu of Interventions’ will include packages of evidence-based, cost-effective health interventions across the life course as a resource for national health plans and insurance strategies. The Organization also works with countries to address multisectoral risk factors, including those related to equity, gender inequality, human rights, clean air, water and energy and other social and environmental determinants that affect people’s health and well-being throughout life.

Box 2.
Critical challenges across the life course, worldwide

303,000 women died due to pregnancy related causes in 2015, and 2.5 million newborns died in their first month of life in 2017, from mainly preventable causes.

5.4 million children under the age of 5 years died in 2017; 1 in 3 children is not registered at birth; and 1 in 3 children in low- and middle-income countries risks not developing their full potential, because of poverty, malnutrition, ill health and lack of nurturing care: this can affect their productivity in adulthood by over 25%.

More than 1.1 million adolescents died in 2016, with leading causes of deaths including road traffic injuries, suicide, interpersonal violence, communicable diseases, and drowning, and for adolescent girls, maternal causes too, and 3.9 million unsafe abortions were in girls aged 15-19; millions more adolescents also fail to reach their full potential having far-reaching consequences for current and future generations.

Only 1 in 2 women is informed and can make her own sexual and reproductive health decisions, 1 in 3 women experiences physical and or sexual violence.

Around 30% of older adults are care dependent with associated loss of functional ability, high health care costs and constraints to their continued contributions to society.

Around 50% of the world lacks access to essential health services; around 20% to 40% of global health expenditures are lost due to inefficiencies.

Around 50% of improvements in health are associated with multisectoral factors, and health contributes to multisectoral goals. There is an urgent need to strengthen multisectoral ways of working to address shared health, human capital and sustainable development challenges.

Also see:
Top Facts on Women’s and Girls’ Health across the Life Course
Statistics source:
WHO Global Health Observatory.
**Actions for stakeholders**

**GOVERNMENTS.** Countries can ensure that national benefits and insurance packages cover effective health and multisectoral interventions across the life course. Laws and policies should protect people of all ages from harm, uphold their rights, and ensure access to high-quality facilities, goods and services. A life course approach should be used to monitor and ensure accountability for progress on health and sustainable development.

**HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES.** Agencies can synthesize evidence from around the world on high-impact strategies for health and sustainable development and gaps in implementation. They can provide technical and financial support to countries and stakeholders and help monitor progress to inform collective action. They can also partner more effectively with more joined-up efforts across agencies to help achieve shared health and sustainable development goals.

**SERVICE PROVIDERS.** Health and multisectoral services can be tailored to what individuals value and enjoy doing at all ages, while taking account of their health and well-being, related risk and protective factors, and implications for the future. Providing integrated, people-centred services requires a reorientation of education, implementation and management to a life course approach.

**INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES.** Across the life course, people can improve their own health and well-being by: learning about their health and well-being and making informed choices such as being more physically active, improving nutrition, avoiding tobacco and limiting alcohol; and being aware of and claiming their rights, for example by using health and multisectoral services and helping improve them through feedback and participation with related policies and laws. They can care for others and the environment, and help promote health and well-being in their families, communities, and places of education, work and leisure.
For further information


