Global Action Plan on Physical Activity

Submission from Insall & Coe

Preamble

This document is in response to the WHO consultation on a draft Global Action Plan for Physical Activity. Insall & Coe has contributed where possible in the work to date and believe that our input has been helpful.

Our comments are limited in number and mostly general in scope: we have not therefore responded paragraph by paragraph, nor have we burdened you with long lists of references – we know you are expert in the science.

The draft does contain some typographical errors, loose terminology etc – no doubt you will address this in the production phase.

Comments on the draft and on work to date

1. Our first comment is that we whole-heartedly welcome this initiative by the WHO, which in our view can be hugely influential in addressing the wide range of global, national and local policies and practices impacting on physical activity levels. It is really important that a body with the global influence of WHO should take the lead on physical activity.

2. It is evident from the drafting (and from associated work such as the Bangkok declaration) that the WHO team fully understands the complex linkages between so many policy areas – planning, transport, social etc – and the way all of these impact on physical activity. We welcome this, but we note that many policy- and decision-makers do not share your understanding.

3. We consider that the focus of the final plan, and whatever measures are put in place to implement it, must address this broad range of policy areas. This may require WHO to develop new high-level relationships with people and organisations working in sectors other than health. National and regional transport ministers, for example, may not have any understanding of how their decisions can affect physical activity and thus, health – they may not be aware when they negatively affect public health, nor of the opportunities for them to improve it.

4. We are aware of the work WHO is already doing in this area, particularly through your European region, and have supported this work where possible. We particularly welcome the working relationships WHO Europe has developed with transport and planning organisations such as Polis and the European Cyclists’ Federation – we see this type of collaboration as a crucial success factor.
5. We expect also that it will in some cases be necessary to educate organisations and individuals, already to some extent active in physical activity, that sport is not the pre-eminent pathway to attract currently inactive people into more active lifestyles. One specific comment we have about the draft is that the “Overview of the Global Situation” section is disproportionately about sport: we would like to see that imbalance corrected.

6. We are worried by the assertion in para 23 that “there is considerable potential to increase participation in physical activity through stronger policy actions on the promotion and provision of recreation and sports programmes aimed at reaching those not currently participating”: how true is this, in fact? Sport has had far greater resources, exposure and cultural status than other forms of physical activity, and may already have attracted the majority of its potential market, while the same is not true in most countries of cycling, for example.

7. We are aware that there is a historic imbalance in the academic evidence about what physical activity people do, who does it and who doesn’t, and how to increase population levels. What gets done gets measured:
   a. even today what gets done – and measured – is predominantly sport related. There is more evidence about sport than other forms of PA, but that does not mean that sport is the biggest potential contributor.
   b. and too much of the evidence is about (mainly individual-focused) behavioural, downstream, brief intervention types of approach. We are very uncomfortable about this, not least because interventions of this kind often allow only short-term impact monitoring. The decline in physical activity over recent decades has been driven above all by changes to the physical, cultural and information environments which make active lifestyles harder and inactive, easier. We think the priority should be to reverse those developments, and a research priority should be to investigate whether lasting environmental interventions give better impact and value by creating long-term lifestyle changes.

8. The draft is good on co-impacts, particularly those achievable by changing the built environment, transport options and choice. It is clear that a shift from private motorised transport to active travel means less road danger, toxic local pollutants, climate change emissions etc as well as increasing physical activity. In our view that is a central element of the physical inactivity problem and should be equally central to the solution. The final plan, and measures taken to implement it, should continue to make this clear – it should not be assumed that decision makers at any level will automatically understand it.

9. It is of course equally true that co-impacts can be negative – the changes in planning and transport policies and practice over recent decades have suppressed active travel while encouraging pollution, climate emissions, road danger etc. It will be important in the final GAPPA to identify policies and measures likely to discourage active living and correct them, as well as encouraging the positive changes which can encourage it.

10. We have one comment about the way the draft is structured. The “Overview of the Global Situation” section combines elements of four different questions:
   1) what is the current problem?
   2) what caused the problem?
   3) how it should be addressed, and
4) who is currently showing the way.
You might consider repackaging the content to make the message clearer and stronger.

11. Regarding the proposed actions, we are concerned that policy addressing social and public health objectives often has loose and subjective aims and is inadequately monitored. You illustrate this problem nicely in para 38, where “there has been an increase in the number of countries reporting they have developed a physical activity plan from 44% in 2010 to 79% in 2017, only two thirds report their plans are being implemented, and within these, the scale of implementation is not known but based on the limited evidence of impact on population levels of physical activity, progress is slow and mostly small scale”.

12. We would like to see decision makers setting targets for growth in the various types of physical activity – so for example land use planners and transport strategists should set targets for percentage growth in active travel, measure achievement against target and take corrective action where necessary. Performance against these targets should be monitored. We hope to see WHO get tough with administrations which fail to deliver in this way.

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