BUILDING A WELLNESS ECOSYSTEM™ TO CREATE ACTIVE COMMUNITIES: WELLNESS VALLEY, A LIVING INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICE

Contribution of the Wellness Foundation to the WHO Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2035

Introduction

With this document the Wellness Foundation - an Italian non-for-profit organization committed to spread the individual and social benefits of the Wellness Lifestyle (the combination of regular physical exercise, healthy nutrition and a positive mental approach) – wants to contribute in a concrete and tangible way to the final version of the WHO Action Plan to promote physical activity.

Our contribution focuses on the importance of building what we call a Wellness Ecosystem™: a cultural, social and economic environment that incentives people to adopt healthier life choices, with particular attention to physical activity. We strongly believe that focusing on the social and cultural environment is the crucial factor in order to reverse the evidence underlined by the WHO itself:

“THE CAUSES OF PHYSICAL INACTIVITY ARE PREDOMINANTLY THE RESULT OF SYSTEMIC FACTORS, WHICH HAVE MADE DAILY LIVING AND WORKING ENVIRONMENTS INCREASINGLY SEDENTARY”

(WHO - Physical Activity Strategy for the European Region 2016-2025)

The creation of a Wellness Ecosystem basically means taking tangible actions that incentive people’s healthy choices in the places of their day-by-day life: schools, workplaces, outdoor, hospitals, homes, hotels. In this way, putting physical exercise in the places of the day-by-day life, we can create a seamless experience that makes people experiencing the benefits of an active lifestyle.

For the building of a Wellness Ecosystem we can consider two main founding principles:

- **Multistakeholder approach**: the first crucial step in the creation of a Wellness Ecosystem is the alignment of all the key Stakeholder around the common goal of improving people’s health and quality of life through the physical activity.
  This first step is crucial because of the different nature, culture and focus of the multiple key actors influencing the life of a community: Governments, Institutions of different levels, schools, hospitals, hotels, outdoor, fitness clubs, doctors, corporations, associations, sport clubs, and many others.

- **Human centric approach**: people’s lifestyle and health must be at the center of any decision taken and any action delivered.
  This can be considered commonplace but when it comes to the joint action of a variety of actors it is not granted.
The Wellness Valley: a living best practice of a Wellness Ecosystem

Since 2003 the Wellness Foundation is promoting and leading the Wellness Valley project, the first living example of an international district for knowledge and Culture on Wellness and the Quality of Life.

The Wellness Valley is a social and cultural initiative aimed to demonstrate that it is possible to develop a community that shares the culture of healthy lifestyle and that increases its levels of physical activity. The benefits of a Wellness community project are in two ways:

a. **internal**: to improve people’s health thanks to prevention of NCDs through the education to an active lifestyle;

b. **external**: to improve the attraction of capitals, investements, talented workers and researchers thanks to the better quality of life.

The Wellness Valley project involves a region called Romagna, which is located in north-east Italy and involves **1.1M residents** and **20M visitors every year**.

Thanks to the multistakeholder approach, today **more than 250 public and private Stakeholder** take actively part to the project. Each of them implements projects, initiatives, activities and events that helps their communities to move more in order to live better.

This strong commitment facilitated the creation of more than 60 best practices: programs that take place every year and involve the entire community. For example:

a. **“In Wellness”** is a full program of free physical activity open to all the citizens of every age and levels of preparation. The free courses, that are led by professional trainers of the local gyms, take place in some key outdoor places of the cities: parks, beaches, swimming pools, squares. In 2016 more than 65.000 people have been involved in the program and most of them have turned from sedentary to active lifestyle.

b. **“Play Wellness”** is an educational program to fight the epidemic of childhood obesity. The program provides professional trainers for additional hours of physical exercise in schools, educational tools for theachers and a Wellness Lifestyle guide for the families. In the last years “Play Wellness” has involved more than 10.000 students from 3 to 9 years of age, their families and more than 1.000 teachers.

c. the **“Wellness Week”** is an event that takes place every year during the last nine days of May. More than 200 Stakeholder have been actively involved in a schedule of events and activities with the goal of making people try the benefits of an active lifestyle

• the **prescription of physical activity** as a strong medicine for the prevention and treatment of major NCDs is a crucial component of an effective action plan to promote
physical activity. Doctors and practitioners have a strong power of influence over people’s lifestyle choices and every Country should adopt this legislation. After many years of experimentation, in 2014 the regional Government of the Wellness Valley has adopted the “exercise is medicine” Law in its healthcare system.

**The main results achieved by the Wellness Valley project**
*source: Wellness Valley report 2, February 2017*

- **the most active population in Italy**: people in the Wellness Valley moves 10% more than the average of the rest of the Country
- **the most active kids in Italy**: children of the age 3-14 move 9.2% more than the average of the rest of the Country
- **65,000 people** involved every year by the program of free physical activity in public spaces
- **10,000 kids** of the age 3-9 involved in the “Play Wellness” program against childhood obesity
- **10,300 students** involved in studies about the application of the Wellness Lifestyle principle to the day by day life
- **the prescription of physical exercise** as a medicine as part of the healthcare system
- **360,000 people** directly involved in the events of the Wellness Week
- **200M Euros** of economic added value for the community thanks to the Wellness Valley project

**Conclusion**

In the creation and implementation of an effective Action Plan for the promotion of the physical activity it is not possible not to consider the complexity and variety of a community. In order to have tangible and measurable effects it is crucial to involve the key actors and Stakeholder of the community and it is equally necessary that all of them are aligned on the same vision, values and strategy.

The Wellness Valley project represents the only existing example of a Wellness Ecosystem, a living lab where are implemented strategies and actions that promote the physical activity as part of the day by day lifestyle.

In the study “The Future of Healthy” (January 2016) the **World Economic Forum** has indicated the Wellness Valley ad the benchmark of how a sustainable ecosystem of health shoud look like.

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