



Addressing the social determinants of global mental health in the Sustainable Development Goals era

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

The inclusion of mental health in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrates recognition of this important global issue. Within Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), poor mental health is increasingly recognised as a pressing challenge to individuals, families and communities, as well as a growing and significant economic burden at the national level. Although biological factors may be important, social determinants have also been established as key factors in people's mental health.¹ Identifying these determinants can help vulnerable groups and are crucial in developing effective interventions.

Many social determinants have an impact upon mental health in culturally and context-specific ways. Our understanding of the intersections of multiple social determinants is growing but further research is required.

This workshop aimed to develop an overview of current knowledge about social determinants of mental health, and to identify barriers and opportunities for tackling mental health problems. Participants discussed research gaps, opportunities for collaboration, potential points for intervention, and relevant determinants for five domains aligned with the SDGs: economic, demographic, neighbourhood, environmental events, and social and cultural domains.² The key messages from these discussions are summarised below and reflect the conclusions of the workshop participants.

Demographic

- Gender and age are important determinants but research is lacking on men's mental health, the impact of gender norms, early adversity in the life course and ageing.
- The impact of existing interventions such as gender empowerment on mental health, needs to be evaluated.
- Studying population movements, e.g. migration, provide opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

Economic

- Intergenerational poverty and changing dynamics of work are important determinants of mental health.
- Mental health needs to be included in more economics research, including as an outcome of economic policies and interventions.
- There are several interventions with positive impacts on mental health, however, all new approaches should be evaluated for potential negative impacts.

1. World Health Organization. *Social determinants of health*. https://www.who.int/social_determinants/sdh_definition/en/

2. Lund C, et al. (2018). *Social determinants of mental disorders and the Sustainable Development Goals: a systematic review of reviews*. *Lancet Psychiatry* **5(4)**, 357-369.

Environmental events

- Climate change and conflict negatively impact mental health through loss of support, extreme events, forced migration, and socio-political instability.
- Interventions and research should focus on resilience and preparedness.
- Strong leadership and global collaboration are important for tackling cross-country issues.
- Interventions should be developed with communities to raise awareness of the link between mental health and the environment.

Neighbourhood

- Understanding the role of neighbourhood should focus on both the built environment and community.
- 'Neighbourhood' must be defined and studied using a mixture of methods.
- The role of families and communities requires consideration when developing interventions.

Social and cultural

- Socio-cultural factors can affect access to or deprivation of resources, interpersonal relationships, and exposure to adverse events.
- Interventions should be developed and evaluated, focusing on wide-ranging social aspects rather than only mental illness.
- Existing socio-cultural platforms and new tools should be used in combination for mental health research.

Cross-cutting themes

Following discussion of important aspects of individual domains, a number of themes were identified as relevant across all five domains by the workshop participants.

- Collaborating with a wider range of academic disciplines on large cohort studies, and determining which metrics are best suited for addressing mental health. These studies could act as a starting point for building networks around social determinants of mental health.
- Identifying existing and new opportunities for funding, including for large cohort studies.
- Improving our understanding of the social processes that affect community engagement, and including cultural practices in our definition of 'community'. This will help us to mobilise communities to take action on mental health, and meaningfully engage them in the development and implementation of interventions.
- Differentiating and inter-relating macro, meso and micro-level questions and interventions, and identifying the targets for each level.
- Considering the rapidly growing field of technology and digital communities and how these relate to social determinants.
- Increasing discussion on the impact of men's mental health, migration and displacement, politicians, and political events, and their effects on resilience and access to interventions.
- Investigating the role of faith and religion in mental health.
- Focusing on the role and metrics for resilience in individuals and communities within diverse contexts.
- Using education curricula to provide comprehensive training and awareness on the social determinants of mental health.

Key messages

Having identified the issues and opportunities for mental health interventions, participants discussed actions different sectors need to take in order to address the social determinants of mental health.

Key messages for researchers

There was agreement from participants that researchers need to focus on some of the key research gaps and ensure research culture and infrastructure supports productive working.

- Investigate how different communities build resilience and mobilise to maintain good mental health.
- Investigate stigma and discrimination against staff working in mental health and psychiatry.
- Initiate longitudinal, interdisciplinary, multi-centre and multi-country collaborations.
- Share expertise with sectors outside of healthcare and beyond established collaborators.
- Help build more capacity for research around social determinants of mental health.

Use technology to perform studies and collect data.

Key messages for policy makers

Participants concluded that policy makers should make sure their policies across all areas consider and work to positively impact mental health. Policy makers are also well placed to collaborate with organisations and researchers to advocate for issues that affect mental health.

- Work with researchers to assess whether indicators used in studies, such as the World Happiness Report, are appropriate and effective.
- Assess how policies from outside the health sector (for example macro-economic and social welfare policies) can affect mental health.
- Regulate how the media discusses mental health to help avoid disinformation.
- Join scientists in highlighting climate change as a major risk to mental health.
- Review spending on mental health using research findings.
- Work with other areas of social advocacy such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the WHO and the World Bank.

Key messages to research funders

Workshop participants agreed that funders should support diverse research on mental health, and ensure consideration of mental health across all the areas they fund.

- Consider greater research funding support for social determinants of mental health.
- Support funding for larger, adequately powered, inter-disciplinary longitudinal studies – to move beyond documenting associations and towards identifying causal relationships, mechanisms and opportunities for intervention.
- Implement a mental health impact assessment on any proposal to improve consideration of mental health as a determinant and outcome in a broader range of studies.
- Simplify the research assessment process.
- Be more open to studies investigating mental wellbeing and resilience beyond a traditional clinical focus on mental disorders.

Key messages to civil society organisations

The participants agreed that civil society organisations should integrate mental health in their work where they do not do so already and build relationships to create impact across other sectors.

- Bring social determinants of mental health into their advocacy messaging and mainstream mental health into broader social actions related to the SDGs. This might include, for example, linking poverty alleviation, reductions in gender-based violence and advocacy on climate change to mental health.
- Build relationships between civil society organisations and research and vice versa.
- Empower people to speak out so that their lived experiences are strongly represented.
- Encourage government and research funders to recognise that in LMICS, professional expertise in mental health is often found among non-governmental, humanitarian, and professional organizations

Conclusions

The workshop identified the research and working practices needed to better understand the social determinants of mental health and develop interventions to tackle them in LMICs. The cross-cutting nature of mental health across many domains was evident throughout the event, with participants emphasising the need for more collaboration between research disciplines and policy sectors. In order to achieve this, workshop participants identified key next steps for researchers, policy makers, research funders and civil society organisations, focused on embedding mental health in diverse sectors.





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