



# People - Planet - Health

A position paper to support policy development on planetary health and wellbeing by the World Health Organization

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This position paper, written by local planetary health practitioners and initiatives representing all inhabited continents, intends to contribute to the new WHO strategies on health promotion and wellbeing by adding the comprehensive perspective of planetary health. It aims to illustrate the active participation of civil society in global policy development and World Health Organization's (WHO) strategy and initiate continued collaboration with the WHO. The paper represents the voices of local groups and initiatives, as well as some internationally-focused professional organisations, in a participatory process of global co-production (see Appendix A). Most of the voices represented are those of young people who work on a volunteer and non-profit basis to improve social, cultural, economic, and ecological wellbeing in their local communities, by supporting planetary health, and social justice towards achieving, amongst other things, the Sustainable Development Goals. The position paper invites the WHO, health promotion organisations, and local planetary health initiatives to contribute to a global process of change and collaboration.

## A NEED FOR NEW CONCEPTS OF HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Planetary health is a holistic conception of wellbeing that recognises the interdependence of environmental sustainability and human health (1). Health is conceptualised as a process, working towards a state in which natural ecosystems, humans, and other living beings can coexist indefinitely and in harmony. Planetary health emphasises human responsibility in overcoming anthropogenic disruptions and degradations of Earth's natural ecosystems (2). The perspective of planetary health demands fundamental changes in theory, policies, and actions that promote health. The Ottawa Charter states “The overall guiding principle for the world, nations, regions and communities alike is the need to encourage reciprocal maintenance - to take care of each other, our communities and our natural environment. The conservation of natural resources throughout the world should be emphasized as a global responsibility” (3). These principles require new ways of thinking about health that focus on interdependence, interrelation, and resonance between the health and wellbeing of both the Earth and humans, based on reciprocal, responsible and respectful relationships. The planetary health approach challenges top-down health and environmental policies as well as policy development processes. It also questions the sustainability of prioritizing the health and wellbeing of some over the health of other living beings and ecosystems, including all animals and plants (4)

Health and wellbeing imply an attitude of respect and resonance with resources, natural and human environments, with and between peoples. The health and wellbeing of a few can no longer be attained at the cost of the degradation of natural ecosystems, or human health inequalities. This demands a new conceptualisation of health and wellbeing in which a truly equitable relationship is realised between the Earth and humans. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that “no one is safe until everybody is safe”, and this is emphasised by the concept of planetary health. Health at the cost of nature, or the welfare of other humans, has no place in the pursuit of achieving wellbeing for all. The emergence of new infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, is linked to the destruction of natural resources, radical changes in land use, deforestation, and other forms of ecosystems exploitation (5). Planetary health initiatives addressing these causes can contribute to the prevention of future public health emergencies. Thus, the concept of interrelated health should guide practices that reinforce participatory action to inform policy, support local initiatives, and achieve policy development from the in a bottom-up process.

## MODELS OF SUCCESSFUL CHANGE

Across the globe, local groups are undertaking actions directed towards sustainability and planetary health (6). These groups do not value the environment as an object to be influenced, owned, or shaped, but rather understand it as a 'co-environment' with which they are intertwined. They seek to invest in natural ecosystems in the interest of greater quality of life for local people and supporting people to act as responsible inhabitants of those ecosystems. They create and develop cultures that promote a positive vision of the future, focusing on trust, solidarity, and mutual support. They establish and reinforce collaboration, communication and coordination between diverse sectors to promote the welfare of ecosystems, animals and humans, as per the One Health approach (7). In this sense, the process of sustainability innovation has already begun through the actions of groups around the world delivering these local initiatives. Locally, they serve as models of innovation, creating sustainable assets and undertaking sustainable actions. These innovations are often not recognised by the global public and or taken into account by policymakers.

These local initiatives need more visibility and voice. They are small-scale prototypes of potentially global solutions and may inspire the reimagination of participatory policy development. Local actions create relations among the socioecological determinants of health and wellbeing, that previously had not been interconnected, such as environmental and sexual health, or health equity and alternative sustainable economic approaches. Many of the initiatives display innovation in their design of comprehensive actions which achieve equity between the health of the Earth and the health of humans. Some initiatives also emphasise the need to learn from and authentically include indigenous leadership as well as ways of knowing and doing, recognising that Indigenous peoples are the original stewards of the land and have modelled and supported planetary health for millennia (8). The people who develop and implement these local initiatives engage communities with the Earth and other global stakeholders. This may be recognised and replicated in health promotion activity, policy, and academia. Local planetary health initiatives serve as a catalyst for change in creating environmental sustainability, social justice and human health.

# PLANETARY HEALTH ACTIVISM: THE BENEFITS FOR WELLBEING

Planetary engagement implies a health benefit for both the people engaged in initiatives and the people who benefit from them (9). The approaches taken by many local planetary health initiatives move away from a focus on risk factors that cause disease and environmental threats. Instead, they emphasise and support health-enhancing factors and resources to improve health and wellbeing. In doing so, the local initiatives aim to create health in a relational learning process (10). Recognizing and addressing systematic barriers (e.g., power structures, environmental colonization, resources extraction and degradation, racism, ageism, classism, gender disparities, and health inequities), they provide access to resources, influencing the way people, groups, and communities respond to life challenges. Many local initiatives promote planetary health by facilitating processes of “healthing” (11), i.e. creating health and wellbeing through processes of lifelong learning. From a salutogenic perspective, local groups engaging in planetary health activity build and strengthen Coherence (12):

- They translate overwhelming, enormous, worrying planetary threats into local projects, providing context that empowers local people to take action to solve those challenges (Comprehensibility).
- They provide a practical base upon which to act, by innovating physical solutions through which communities can gain a sense of mastery and empowerment to confront global problems (Manageability).
- They give local significance to planetary-scale challenges, motivating people to engage in addressing global threats in ways that speak to their local interests, cultures and histories (Meaningfulness).

By enhancing Coherence, the initiatives promote health and wellbeing, and can have a strong impact on improved physical and mental health. Coherence created by the initiatives acts as a buffer for environmental stress and create immediate and ongoing benefits for the people

involved (13). Although their impact on sustainability indicators is typically unmeasured, local initiatives contribute to planetary health by forming new, pragmatic linkages between seemingly disparate concepts, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, sustainable consumption, housing, food waste, quality of healthcare, climate change, and other challenges that affect wellbeing.

## VISIONS OF SUCCESSFUL CHANGE

The People-Planet-Health programme brought together local initiatives from across the world, to share their dynamic and diverse ideas about a future of planetary health, and the role their groups might play in supporting it (5). The visions described here reflect their reimagination of health, wellbeing, and sustainability according to the innovations and voices of those initiatives towards planetary health.

**Health and wellbeing** are lifelong learning processes, for which people need resources (14). Health is a resource for improving and sustaining quality of life. Learning to relate to and interact with resources and environments with respect for the Earth, is key to achieving health. Wellbeing is formed from health-ease and health-disease, reconceptualised as the comprehensive welfare of communities and environments.

**Planetary health** is the vision of equity and reciprocity between natural ecosystems, social environments, and human vitality, as well as the actions taken to achieve this equilibrium. Actions for health equity must be broadened to include the needs of a healthy planet and recognise the disproportionate burdens of environmental degradation on the health of people in the most afflicted countries and regions. There is no human health without planetary health.

**Community** is the basis of planetary health initiatives. Local community-based initiatives create trust and connectedness among groups, as well as respectful relationships with the environments they protect and sustain. Communities are formed through common interests in health and sustainability and transform neighbourhoods, professions, and organisations to create planetary health through collective action. These communities are inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds.

**Partnerships** between local initiatives, and health professionals provide valuable support for planetary health. They imagine and forward novel solutions and professionals can provide support by building capacity for planetary health promotion. Respectful partnerships that embrace participatory decision making strengthen community ownership of planetary health initiatives, support community empowerment, and facilitate connections across sectors to enhance the impact and sustainability of planetary health promotion.

**Human rights** are a transversal and guiding axis for all debates surrounding planetary health, wellbeing, and health promotion. The interdependent and interrelated nature of health and other fundamental social rights such as access to land, adequate food, and education are the grounding foundations for planetary health. The values that help us to support these rights can be developed through collaborative work, intersectoral knowledge exchange, mediation between different interests, and coalition-building for collective action.

**Education** is required to support health professionals to acquire specific competencies to work in partnership with local initiatives. They may strengthen community ownership, support empowerment, participation, partnership and equity by supporting people, communities and organisations to build capacity for planetary health promotion (15).

## VISIONS OF PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION

Local initiatives and organizations have come together to reimagine the intersection between health, wellbeing, and sustainability when working towards planetary health. Contributors voice their support to work with the WHO, global health policy development, and the collective support for planetary health promotion (16).

Local planetary health initiatives can:

- Be included in the conceptual development of WHO health promotion policies and their local, national, and regional implementation, as well as provide inspirational models of successful change in development of new health promotions strategies and policies.
- Be dynamic leaders and advocates of planetary health promotion, acting as powerful voices of support and advocates of WHO strategy and policy.

- Be partners in planetary health education, lifting up the voices of those who are experiencing disproportionate health impacts to leaders in global health policy. Connecting policy to the lived experience of addressing local, national, regional, and professional or sector-specific planetary health threats through capacity building and genuine knowledge exchange.
- Be a link between the 'local' and the 'global', using their work to connect international WHO ambitions to planetary health activity happening in local communities.
- Be partners in prevention of disease outbreaks by contributing to ecosystems conservation and restoration, to reduce spread of zoonotic disease as per the One Health approach.

The World Health Organisation can:

- Be an advocate of local initiatives by accrediting and commending their aspirations and achievements, supporting the credibility of their work.
- Be instrumental in encouraging national governments and funding bodies to take action on climate change, prioritising those who are most impacted by planetary health inequalities, amplifying their stories, and supporting new solutions.
- Be proactive in identifying unrepresented voices and visions of planetary health in global policy development and WHO decision-making, by recognising the voices in civil society which should be uplifted and authentically welcomed.
- Be willing to listen to the ideas of planetary health initiatives through authentic knowledge exchange activity in which the diversity of local initiatives is respected, celebrated, and recognised.
- Be respectful of the planetary health leadership shown by Indigenous peoples for millennia, and ensure that Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and doing are integrated throughout every stage of global health promotion policy development.

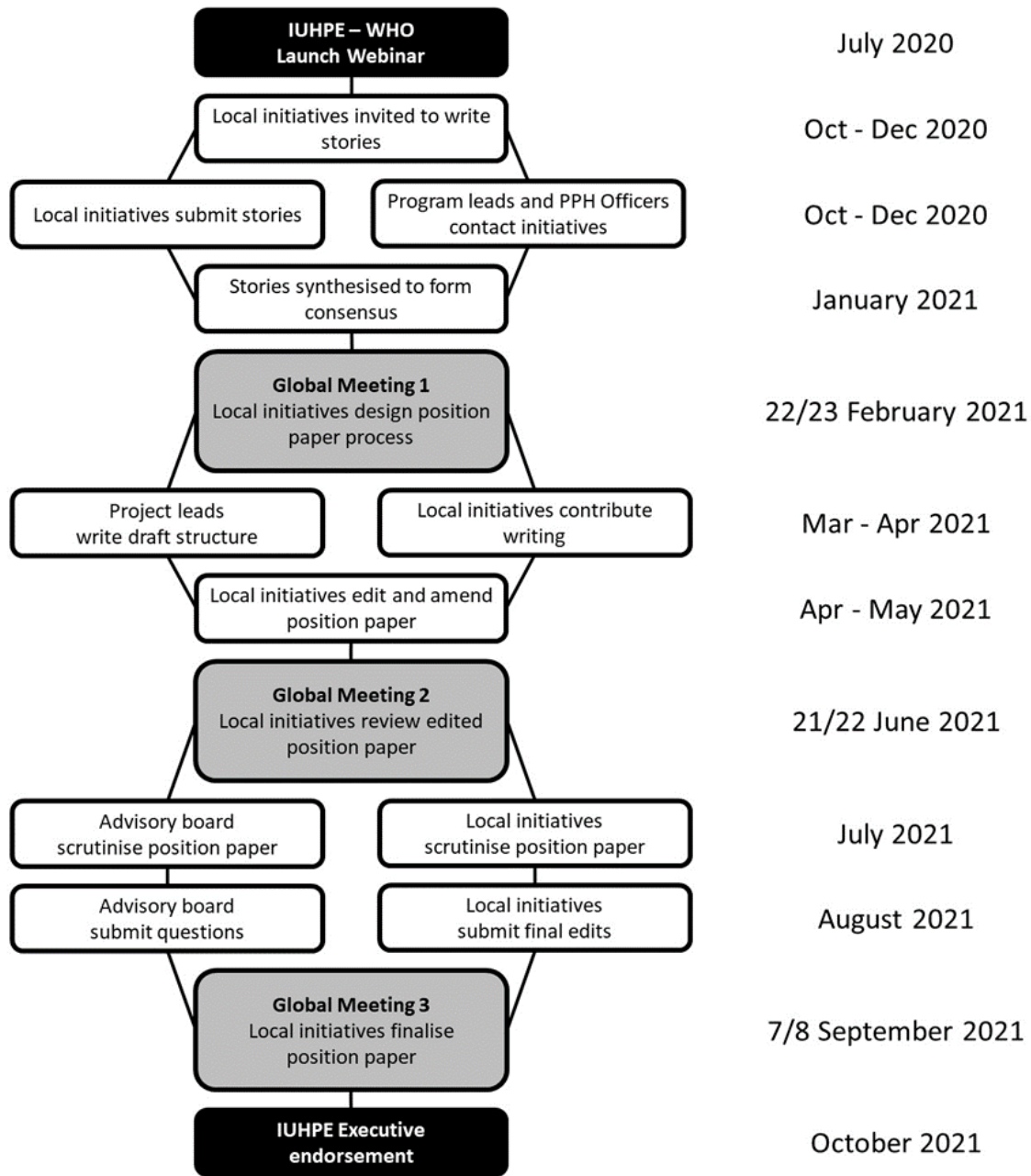


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# APPENDIX A



People-Planet-Health is a global participatory process resulting in the co-production of this position paper. Planetary Health Officers were public health placement students from Birmingham City University (UK). The local initiatives were civic organisations and activist groups representing multisectoral interests in planetary health, from all regions of the world. The advisory board was a group of health promotion academics and IUHPE members from the Global Working Group on Salutogenesis, and the WAIORA Global Working Group on Planetary Health. The project was initiated and lead by Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Switzerland), and the University of Nottingham (UK). The IUHPE Executive Board is the governing body of the International Union of Health Promotion and Education.

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