

Adolescent Well-being: Background Papers for Multi-stakeholder Consultations

Paper 1: Introduction to Adolescent Well-being and the Background Papers

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Summary

Adolescent well-being will be essential to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and a societal good in its own right. A Global Summit for Adolescent Well-being is planned for the second half of 2023. As part of the preparations for this, a series of regional multi-stakeholder consultations will be held in May and June 2021 to explore the key policy and programming issues related to the promotion of adolescent well-being. This paper introduces the definition and conceptual framework for adolescent well-being that was recently developed and published by the UN H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Well-being. It then gives an overview of the topics covered by the other fourteen background papers, which summarize the key policy and programming issues that must be addressed by programmes that aim to promote adolescent well-being.

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Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG) aims to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”.⁽¹⁾ Central to this goal are the concepts of *health* and *well-being*. This is as true for adolescents (10-19 years) as for any other age group. The United Nations Secretary General's Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016-2030), which aims to “ensure health and well-being for every woman, child and adolescent” within the context of the SDGs, recognizes that adolescents will be central to the overall success of the Strategy.⁽²⁾ Similarly, the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission calls for children (defined as <18 years of age) to be at the centre of the SDGs.⁽³⁾ A recent call was also made for Universal Health Coverage (UHC) to take a comprehensive approach to addressing the health and well-being needs of adolescents.⁽⁴⁾

Adolescent well-being is a personal and societal good in its own right, and at the same time, adolescence is a critical period of the life course when many of the factors that contribute to lifelong well-being are, or are not, acquired or solidified. Until recently, adolescents' needs were often overlooked as they fell outside the policies and programmes designed for children or for adults, ignoring the specific needs of adolescents in their transition to adulthood. The direct and indirect effects on adolescents' well-being of the COVID-19 pandemic and the responses to it have reinforced the importance of systems being in place to support the well-being of adolescents. But what is adolescent well-being? And how do adolescent well-being and adolescent health relate to each other?

A new framework for defining, measuring and programming to promote adolescent well-being is being developed to respond to these questions. This will provide practical programming guidance to complement the multi-stakeholder Call to Action to prioritise adolescent well-being⁽⁵⁾ and builds towards the 2023 Global Summit for Adolescent Well-being, which aims to mobilise political and financial investments for adolescents.⁽⁶⁾ Young people and youth-led and youth-serving organisations substantively influenced the conceptual framework through a series of consultations in 2019, and helped to define the policy and programming implications (Background Paper 2). Multiple stakeholders including governments, UN organizations, young people, youth-led and youth-serving organizations, funding agencies and academics, will meet in May and June 2021, focusing on elucidating practical suggestions for how programmes to promote adolescent well-being can be effective. This is the first of fifteen background papers that have been prepared as resources for these consultations.

The UN H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Well-being¹ has developed an agreed definition and conceptual framework for adolescent well-being⁽⁷⁾ and is going on to examine their policy and programming implications. The technical work related to this initiative will also contribute towards the expansion of the guidance provided by the UN H6+ partners to support country implementation related to adolescent health within the Global AA-HA!⁽⁸⁾ to more fully encompass all the domains of adolescent well-being.

Definition and Conceptual Framework

Based on a scoping of the literature and consultations across the UN H6+ Technical Working Group, youth networks and adolescent-serving organizations, a short and an expanded definition of adolescent well-being has been agreed by the UN H6+ Technical Working Group (Box 1).⁽⁷⁾

Box 1. Definition of adolescent well-being⁽⁷⁾

Adolescents thrive and are able to achieve their full potential.

Expanded definition

Adolescents have the support, confidence and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realising their full potential and rights.

This definition has been further unpacked in a conceptual framework with five interconnected domains for adolescent well-being and the requirements to support adolescents to achieve well-being within each of these domains (Table 1).⁽⁷⁾ The five domains encompass both subjective and objective constructs and include health as one of the five domains.

The domains are underpinned by principles of gender equality, equity and rights. Existing inequalities, expectations and norms have a profound impact on well-being. Given that adolescence is a time of increased gender role differentiation for both boys and girls, attention to the way that gender influences young people's experience of well-being is critical. Ability, ethnicity and other intersecting factors also influence well-being and access to the resources and experiences that determine well-being. Therefore, programmes and policy interventions that promote adolescent well-being must be responsive to existing inequalities, rather than viewing adolescents as a homogenous group. Challenging and overcoming deep-rooted social and gender norms and shifting exploitative power structures that adversely affect the potential of adolescents, particularly those most marginalized, will be critical to the success of programmes to promote adolescent well-being.⁽⁹⁾ Programmes must also be cognizant of the fact that adolescent well-being is not only dependent on the individual characteristics of the adolescent or even of their family, but also of the socioeconomic circumstances and the broader environment in which they live.

An adolescent's well-being, and the best ways of promoting this, will also be closely linked to their developmental stage and evolving capacity.⁽¹⁰⁾

The conceptual framework also recognises that all five domains of adolescent well-being are inextricably linked to each other. For example, an adolescent's connection to family, peers, community, school or workplace and the relationships that they have will contribute to their agency and resilience and vice versa, and their health and ability to benefit from educational opportunities are intimately related to each other.

¹ Includes representatives of PMNCH, UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Major Group for Children and Youth, UN Women, World Bank, World Food Programme and WHO.

Table 1. The five domains of adolescent well-being that underpin the adolescent well-being framework⁽⁷⁾

Good health and optimum nutrition	Connectedness, positive values and contribution to society	Safety and a supportive environment	Learning, competence, education, skills and employability	Agency and resilience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical health and capacities • Mental health and capacities • Optimal nutritional status and diet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connectedness • Values • Attitudes • Interpersonal skills • Activity • Change and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety • Material conditions • Equity • Equality • Non-discrimination • Privacy • Responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning • Education • Resources, life skills and competencies • Skills • Employability • Confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency • Identity • Purpose • Resilience • Fulfilment

Implications for policy and practice

The definition of adolescent well-being and its five domains applies everywhere and is relevant for all adolescents, including all genders, wealthy and poor and the able-bodied and those living with disabilities, for example. They also emphasize the multi-dimensional nature of well-being. Therefore, programming to improve adolescent well-being will require a multi-sectoral approach, and the measurement of adolescent well-being will require multi-dimensional indicators that encompass all five domains and include both subjective and objective measures. It is for this reason that, in addition to working towards an agreed set of health indicators, the multi-agency Global Action for Measurement of Adolescent Health (GAMA) initiative involves mapping and assessing indicators of adolescent well-being, with a view to agreeing on a core set of well-being indicators (Background Paper 10).⁽¹¹⁾

A series of multi-stakeholder consultations are planned for May and June 2021. These consultations will discuss the policy and programming implications of the agreed definition and conceptual framework for adolescent well-being given in Box 1 and Table 1, to address such questions as:

- What policies are needed to support adolescent well-being in different contexts?
- What multi-sectoral programmes are needed to support adolescent well-being in different contexts?
- How can each of the sectors best work together to support adolescent well-being?

Purpose and use of the background papers

Fifteen background papers (Box 2) have been prepared to support the multi-stakeholder consultations. The background papers will provide a basis for stakeholder discussions of the policy and programming implications, opportunities and challenges of the definition and framework for adolescent well-being.

Five of the background papers (Background Papers 4-8) are specific to each domain of adolescent well-being, while the others consider issues that span all five domains. Each of the papers has been prepared by a writing group that included policy makers and programme implementers, young people and academics and an earlier version has been reviewed by at least two independent reviewers, one of whom was a young person.

Box 2. Background papers

1	Introduction to adolescent well-being and the background papers
2	Adolescent well-being framework: Virtual youth consultation report
3	The economic case for investment in adolescent well-being
4	Domain 1. Good health and optimum nutrition
5	Domain 2. Connectedness, positive values and contribution to society: three building blocks of adolescent well-being
6	Domain 3. A safe and supportive environment for adolescent well-being
7	Domain 4. Investing in adolescent well-being through education, learning, competence, skills and employability
8	Domain 5. Agency and resilience - foundational elements of adolescent well-being
9	Lessons learned from adolescent well-being programmes
10	Monitoring progress in adolescent well-being
11	Opportunities and threats for adolescent well-being provided by the digital transformation
12	The forgotten population? A call to invest in adolescent well-being in humanitarian and fragile settings
13	Adolescent well-being in the time of COVID-19
14	Adolescent well-being and the climate crisis
15	Effective policies and programming to promote adolescent well-being

Paper 2 (Adolescent well-being framework: Virtual youth consultation report) summarizes the results of a series of virtual consultations on the adolescent well-being framework that were conducted with youth, youth-led and youth-serving organizations during July-August 2020. It summarizes findings on (i) how the framework can reflect adolescents' needs and be realized in their everyday lives; (ii) adolescents' perspectives on what is already being done and what needs to be done to address the key domains/sub-domains outlined in the framework, highlighting key programmes/interventions and their implications for adolescents' lives; (iii) identifies gaps in the existing programmes/interventions, and (iv) suggests next steps for operationalizing the adolescent well-being framework.

Paper 3 (The economic case for investment in adolescent well-being) summarizes the economic case for investment in adolescent well-being. It reviews what is known about current expenditure on adolescent well-being programming and what would need to be spent to provide a minimum package of effective interventions in different contexts. It then summarizes the results of modelling that has been carried out to date on the potential return on investment (benefit-cost ratios) for various packages of interventions to support adolescent well-being. It summarizes what is known and not known across the five domains of adolescent well-being and the potential synergies from programmes that address all five domains concurrently.

Papers 4 to 8 summarize effective evidence-based interventions in each of the five domains of adolescent well-being. Each paper provides the rationale for that particular area being one of the domains of adolescent well-being, and explains the subdomains that make up the domain, building on the summary that has been provided in Table 1 of this paper. The papers then summarize the effective policies and programmatic interventions within each domain. Each of the five domain papers highlights opportunities for policies and programmes in other domains that will strengthen or support the effectiveness of interventions in that particular domain and *vice versa*. These "domain papers" do not include a formal systematic review of the literature but provide an overview and refer to relevant supporting evidence.

Paper 9 (Lessons learned from adolescent well-being programmes) summarizes ten programmes that have explicitly aimed to improve adolescent well-being and that have been evaluated. These

case studies span small-scale and national or even multi-country programmes. They show that holistic programming to promote adolescent well-being across multiple domains and involving multiple sectors can be done and demonstrate the possibilities and challenges faced by such programmes.

Paper 10 (Monitoring progress in adolescent well-being) reviews potential indicators for monitoring progress towards adolescent well-being and summarizes the work carried out to date by the Global Action for Measurement of Adolescent Health (GAMA) initiative to review the landscape as an initial step towards defining a core and extended set of indicators of adolescent well-being that could be collected by countries.

Paper 11 (Opportunities and threats for adolescent well-being provided by the digital transformation) reviews the main opportunities and threats to adolescent well-being that are provided by the digital transformation.

Paper 12 (The forgotten population? A call to invest in adolescent well-being in humanitarian and fragile settings) highlights the particular policy and programming issues related to the promotion of adolescent well-being in humanitarian and fragile settings.

Paper 13 (Adolescent well-being in the time of COVID-19) summarizes the profound effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on adolescent well-being across its multiple domains, focusing on longitudinal studies in three low- and middle-income countries that have collected data on adolescents both before and after the onset of the pandemic. It reviews early interventions to minimize the negative effects and to maximize any potential positive effects of the pandemic on adolescent well-being.

Paper 14 (Adolescent well-being and the climate crisis) provides an overview of the current and likely future impacts of climate change on adolescent well-being and the urgent steps that need to be taken to avoid or mitigate these potentially devastating effects. It also highlights the opportunities for the development and exercise of personal agency, empowerment and contribution to society provided by adolescent and youth activism in this area.

Paper 15 (Effective policies and programming to promote adolescent well-being) synthesizes the main lessons from the series of background papers. It discusses strategies for operationalizing and adopting a holistic programmatic approach, including implementation of multi-sectoral programmes across the various domains.

Overall, the aim of the background papers is to provide an introduction and technical foundation for the discussions that will take place during the consultations. Selected issues from the background papers will subsequently be published as a collection of papers in the BMJ.

Conclusion

Maintaining and improving the well-being of its population is the fundamental duty of all governments, supported by the United Nations, civil society organizations, private sector, families and communities, and adolescents themselves, among many others. A clear definition and conceptual framework has been agreed by the UN H6+ Technical Working Group on Adolescent Health and Well-being.⁽⁷⁾ Given the multi-dimensional nature of well-being, spanning five domains, it will be essential that multiple sectors unite behind the common objective of improving adolescent well-being, using agreed definitions, concepts, objectives and indicators of progress. Adolescents represent 16% of the world's population, increasing to 23% in low-income countries, and their well-being is fundamentally important to future development.

The multi-stakeholder consultations, supported by these background papers, will contribute to defining the policy and programming implications of the adolescent well-being framework that will feed into future guidance on adolescent well-being programming.

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