

Health Promotion: A tool for fostering comprehensive health development agendas in the African Region



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Introduction

Health promotion as a public health specialization has emerged over the last two decades because of the realization that health is affected by a broad range of physical, socioeconomic, biological, lifestyle and environmental factors, all of which must be addressed in order to improve the long-term health and development of individuals and communities.

These factors, commonly known as the broad or underlying determinants of health, underlie the double burden of communicable and noncommunicable diseases in the African Region. To reduce the impact of the determinants on peoples' health, it is necessary to apply approaches which enable comprehensive responses in specific circumstances. Health promotion is a public health field that facilitates integration of various methods and techniques resulting in comprehensive health actions that simultaneously address several underlying determinants of health.

What does health promotion mean?

Many definitions of health promotion exist.

Health promotion is usually regarded as the process of enabling people to increase control over the *determinants* of health and thereby improve their health. According to this definition, health promotion is a comprehensive social and political process which involves actions directed at strengthening the skills of individuals to improve their health or change the conditions that impact on public and individual health.

Health promotion may also be viewed as a set of tools employed in the course of health action. From this perspective, it is any health education with appropriate legal, fiscal, economic, environmental and organizational interventions to achieve health and prevent disease.

In the WHO African Region, health promotion has been defined as a means of increasing individual and collective participation in health action and strengthening programmes through integrating various methods.

Key strategies of health promotion

Enabling in health promotion involves taking action in partnership with individuals or groups to empower them, through the mobilization of human and material resources, to promote and protect their health; it is a key health promotion strategy. In this regard, health promotion seeks to strengthen people's health knowledge and the skills required to prevent ill-health, and to promote and protect behaviour that is favourable to health.

As a health promotion strategy, **mediation** is a process by which the different interests of individuals and communities, domains of activity, and public and private sectors are reconciled in ways that promote and protect health. This may be achieved through regulation based on legal, fiscal, economic and environmental laws, norms and measures; policy development; and reorientation of organizations by changing structures and services or institutionalizing actions initiated by individuals or groups.

Advocacy as a health promotion strategy implies a combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and systems support for a particular health goal or programme.

These strategies are most effective when used in combination.

Principles of health promotion

The key principles that guide health promotion implementation are:

- Health as a basic human right;
- Multisectoral approaches and methods that address the broad determinants of health;
- Equity, justice, peace, shelter, environmental stability, economic security;
- Coordination, empowerment and government regulation;
- Multisectoral collaboration;
- The potential for education, social services, agriculture, and others;
- Partnerships, networks and alliances;
- Preventive, promotive and curative services.

Approaches and methods

Approaches are combinations of methods or techniques to address a health issue or problem. Common examples are discussed below.

Individual approaches involve counselling, patient education, health risk assessment and dietary assessments.

Group approaches involve lectures, seminars, skills training, peer education, role play and simulation.

Setting approaches include places such as schools, islands, markets, workplaces and offer unique opportunities for health promotion.

Issue approaches aimed at diseases, such as malaria, and risk factors such as physical inactivity, require specific sets of activities.

The **population approach** has potential for maximum programme impact. It focuses on addressing the determinants of health in populations or sub-populations (as opposed to individuals). The approach emphasizes the understanding that factors outside the health care system or sector significantly affect health. Efforts and investments in this approach are directed at root causes to increase potential benefits for health outcomes. It involves application of multiple strategies, multisectoral collaboration and people's participation. It may involve mass media campaigns, social marketing, advertising and community development.

Health promotion interventions usually combine various methods and techniques to support health action. Methods commonly used are briefly described below.

Health education is the process of assisting people acting separately or collectively to make informed decisions on matters affecting their health.

Behaviour change communication (BCC) refers to strategic communication designed to foster behaviour change, enhancement or creation actions in the home, community or health facility so as to improve healthy living and prevent health problems.

Social marketing is a consumer-oriented approach of defining, promoting and making accessible practices or products that are socially beneficial. It combines education and the provision of health products and services.

Information education communication (IEC) refers to comprehensive programming interventions that aim at achieving behaviour changes in designated audiences using a combination mass media or smaller scale material distribution (posters, pamphlets) to inform or establish positive norms among the general population.

Social mobilization is an operational strategy that enlists the support and active involvement of many sectors within a society that can play a role in achieving an agreed objective. Social mobilization brings together those who are affected by the problem and those who can contribute to the solution,

through linking, networking and organizing. Such efforts include (among other things) publicity campaigns, logistical support, transportation and transmission of information.

Advocacy means to speak up, to plead the case of another, or to champion a cause. It is used to shift public opinion and mobilize the necessary resources and forces to support an issue, policy or constituency. Advocacy for health involves a combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and systems support for a particular health programme or goal.

Lobbying is the communication of interests to a carefully chosen person or group with the aim of influencing decision-making. Lobbying always involves advocacy, but advocacy does not always include lobbying. The objective of lobbying is to influence legislation or policy-making. In order to lobby effectively, health promoters must have knowledge of the legislative process as well as the decision-makers.

In practice, there is much overlap between the methods of health promotion defined above. For example, BCC, IEC and health education may not be completely distinct.

Practitioners

While many players are involved in health promotion, a distinction can be made between those who take part in health promotion in a general way and those who have health promotion as their profession or speciality. The health promotion professional or practitioner usually performs all or some of the following actions: Articulates the meaning of health promotion; advocates for health action to address the underlying determinants of health; generates, analyses and facilitates application of evidence on health promotion effectiveness; advises on appropriate use of approaches and methods in health action; designs, motivates or coordinates health promotion interventions; and facilitates partnerships and networks for health promotion.

Health promotion in disease prevention and other programmes

Empowering individuals and groups through awareness and knowledge about appropriate diet and physical activity is an example of how health promotion is used in primary prevention of noncommunicable diseases. Enhancing motivation for behaviour change through promotion of positive attitudes is another. Enhancing skills can assist people in making the proper dietary choices. Health promoters can tackle social, cultural and physical factors that limit physical activity; they can foster social support networks for establishing and enforcing laws, regulations and policies which support appropriate diet and physical activity. They can advocate for healthy sports and healthy meals in schools and mitigate economic factors such as prices for equipment and health products.

Health promotion interventions are usually sustained processes. They result in enhancement of healthy personal behaviour, cessation of unhealthy behaviour or adoption of new healthy behaviours as appropriate. They create individual awareness about health problems and how to manage or prevent them. Health promotion interventions prevent disease through development of appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values relating to health; in addition, they enhance community (group) actions for health and healthy institutional practices as well as healthy public policies, legislation and regulations.

Various conditions influence the success of health promotion actions. Actions need to be integrated and comprehensive in terms of issues addressed, approaches and methods used and players involved. There should be consensus on the benefits of interventions implemented; relevant guiding principles need to be considered. There should be agreement on the implementation process as well as the structures and modalities for coordination at various levels.

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