

POLICY PAPER

Policy Brief by the German Youth Delegate to the 77th World Health Assembly

A Policy Paper of the Youth Delegate of the Federal Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Global Health Hub Germany

About the author

This policy brief showcases youth perspectives to be taken into account in the work surrounding the 77th World Health Assembly (WHA). It was written by: **Eva-Lotte Seibold** (Bundesvertretung der Medizinstudierenden in Deutschland e.V.)

Key messages

1. The youth delegate program aims to ensure **comprehensive representation of young individuals**, and their input should be integrated into policy making.
2. Youth stresses the importance of **primary preventative measures** and advocates for a **stronger promotion of healthy living**.
3. Youth advocates for **more interprofessional collaboration** during training and in practice.
4. Youth argues that the **healthcare system must be decarbonized** and better adapted to extreme heat events.
5. Youth recognizes the negative impact of the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic on **mental health** and calls for countermeasures.

Introduction

This policy brief aims to support government officials and decision-makers of the German Federal Ministry of Health to incorporate youth voices and perspectives into their work on (global) health policy issues. Young people have different health needs, disease prevalence, and higher life expectancies, making them the most affected group of today's political decisions. Their lived experiences within and perspectives on the healthcare system as well as the global health discourse are essential to ensure

inclusive, equitable, and representative policy processes. This policy brief showcases youth perspectives to be taken into account in the work surrounding the 77th World Health Assembly (WHA).

It is based on consultations with twelve youth organizations representing young people within the healthcare sector¹, two online youth consultations, and three in-person consultations with roughly 50 overall participants.

Youth Engagement

The youth delegate program aims to draw attention to the concerns and opinions of adolescents and young adults in Germany. A way to gather the insights and perspectives of young individuals is through youth consultations. These should include diverse backgrounds regarding gender, education, race and ethnicity as well as

choices of profession to ensure comprehensive representation, especially considering the overrepresentation of medical students in the global health field. It is crucial that the findings of these consultations are effectively integrated into policymaking to avoid tokenism.

Primary Prevention

The World Health Organization (WHO) views health promotion as a central tool to achieve the health-related sustainable development goals and emphasizes a health in all policies approach, a whole-government approach as well as a whole-society approach (1).

During the youth consultations, primary prevention has emerged as a central topic. The importance of vaccinations, the promotion of a healthy way of living, and stricter regulations on legal substances with adverse health effects were especially highlighted.

¹ Namely: Bundeslernendenvertretung im Deutschen Verband Ergotherapie e.V., Bundesvertretung der Medizinstudierenden in Deutschland e.V., Bundesvertretung der Pharmaziestudierenden in Deutschland e.V., Bundesverband der Veterinärmedizinierenden in Deutschland e.V., Bundesverband der Zahnmedizinstudenten in Deutschland e.V., Globalisation and Health Initiative, Junge

Pflege im Deutschen Verband für Pflegeberufe e.V., Junges Physio Deutschland, Junge und werdende Hebammen im Deutschen Hebammenverband e.V., Studierende im Berufsverband Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen, and Studierende in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Public Health.

Vaccinations

Youth underlines the critical role of vaccinations in preventing infectious diseases, neglected tropical diseases, and combating antimicrobial resistance. According to German youth, it is imperative to increase funding for vaccine research and development (R & D), particularly for diseases prevalent in low- and middle-income countries. It was emphasized that the establishment of vaccine production facilities in the Global South will enhance self-sufficiency and ensure timely and cost-effective access to vaccines. In general, the decentralization and local production of vaccines and other essential drugs were identified as an important priority by German youth to reduce dependency on international supply chains and strengthen adherence to quality and environmental standards during production.

Promotion of healthy living

Youth deems the education of the public on healthy living as fundamental to primary prevention. Knowledge about health-promoting behaviors can signi-

ficantly reduce the incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes, and many types of cancer. The implementation of comprehensive health education curricula in kindergartens and schools covering physical activity, nutrition, mental health, and sexual and reproductive health was seen as a way to instill lifelong healthy habits in young people. Further, the participants identified a need for stricter regulations on alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis products, with advertisement bans, especially on social media, higher taxation, and an increase in the legal age of purchase. German youth advocated for more awareness-raising work on the adverse health effects of highly processed foods and easier access to affordable healthy food options, in particular for marginalized communities. Lastly, youth stressed that urban planning should encourage daily exercise through pedestrian-friendly infrastructure and safer bike pathways.

Interprofessional collaboration

The WHO acknowledges interprofessional collaboration as an important tool in mitigating the global health workforce crisis and deems training in interprofessional teams as a necessary step to becoming “practice-ready” (2). Youth positioned themselves as advocates for interdisciplinary collaboration as a fundamental tool to ensure

the highest quality of healthcare for patients as well as effective preventative programmes. Thus, youth calls for the integration of interdisciplinary work into their training as well as interdisciplinary teams that provide long-term health support outside of the traditional patient role.

Education

Participants argued that integrating interprofessional education into the training of healthcare professionals is essential to fostering collaboration and understanding of each profession's unique contribution. This could be achieved by joint classes, simulation exercises like team-based emergency response drills or clinical rotations where students from different disciplines work side by side in settings such as intensive care units or primary care facilities.

Long-term health support

Youth sees a requirement for easily accessible and needs-based health

counseling, screening exams, and long-term support by non-physician healthcare workers. These services should be made available and financially compensated. This could for example involve initiatives to increase care through community health nurses, pharmacies, physical and occupational therapists, or midwives during and after pregnancy. Such initiatives are especially beneficial for children and elderly persons. Programs which have proved successful in practice are the promotion of breastfeeding through the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative or gerontological physical therapy to maintain independent living.

Climate change & health

The WHO recognizes climate change as one of the major threats to global public health through the disruptions of all determinants of health while also acknowledging the contribution of healthcare systems to global carbon emissions (3). German youth identified climate change as one of the greatest challenges to health for all. It has focused hereby on two areas: the carbon emissions from the healthcare sector and the adaptation of healthcare systems to climate change.

Decarbonization of the healthcare system

Decarbonizing the healthcare system is of special importance to youth. While climate change significantly impacts health, the healthcare sector contributes approximately 5% of global carbon emissions. One approach to address this is to consider carbon emissions when making treatment decisions. If the therapies are equivalent, the emission-neutral option, such as physical or occupational therapy, or the emission-reduced option, like using isoflurane instead of

desflurane as an inhalational anesthetic, should be preferred. Additionally, prioritizing research for environmentally friendly synthesis and production of medication was deemed crucial. Further, hospitals should adopt the planetary health diet in patient meals and cafeteria offerings. Youth also emphasized the interconnection between human and animal health. Research on climate change's impact on veterinary health is essential, as it affects broader ecological and public health systems.

Adaptation of healthcare systems to climate change

Participants urged for the adaptation of the healthcare system to climate change, particularly in response to extreme heat events. These events lead to various adverse health effects, for example, higher incidences of stroke and cardiovascular events, and disproportionately impact marginalized groups such as women, pregnant persons, children, elderly persons, persons with disability or chronic medical conditions, persons with low

socioeconomic status, and migrants. Therefore, young people demand the development and implementation of heat adaptation plans in Germany and globally with a strong intersectional focus. Youth also argues for enhanced climate-specific health literacy, or “climate literacy”, to mitigate the effects

Mental Health

The unique vulnerability of adolescents to mental health issues is recognized by the WHO and the importance of mental well-being during this period was identified as critical for health throughout adulthood (4). Youth sees the mental health of young people in Germany and globally endangered by the negative impacts of climate change, and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, young people see the need for preventative mental health measures for healthcare professionals during practice and training.

Climate change & mental health

The negative impact of climate change on mental health was of great concern for participants. The impact arises from both the traumatizing effects of extreme weather events and anxiety about climate change. Young people are particularly vulnerable because they will bear the main burden of climate change with limited resources to mitigate the effects of these stressors. Further, youth feels powerless because their voiced concerns are not being translated into political action. Strategies to protect the mental well-being of young people amidst this crisis are therefore needed. Youth calls for the integration of mental health needs as an additional dimension into climate adaptation plans and

of climate change on health. This could for example include the effect of heat on medication efficacy. Improved climate literacy can empower the public to take proactive measures in adapting to the health impacts of climate change.

increased research efforts to better understand the effects at play.

Repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic

Youth noted the severe repercussions the COVID-19 pandemic has had on them and their peers. Prolonged social isolation and disruptions of daily routines through school and university closures as well as limited access to recreational activities aggravated the situation for adolescents in comparison to the general population. Therefore, youth demands that in the pandemic treaty (negotiations) measures that prevent similar situations in future are being taken.

Preventative measures for healthcare professionals

The need to implement mental health prevention measures for healthcare professionals and students emerged as another central aspect during youth consultations. Healthcare professionals are vulnerable to mental health issues due to a high-stress environment, long working hours, and emotional exhaustion. Youth therefore calls for the implementation of crew resource management measures, such as low-threshold access to mental health resources, regular debriefing groups, and mental health screenings.

About the Global Health Hub Germany

The Global Health Hub Germany offers all individuals and institutions active in the field of global health the opportunity to connect in an independent network across eight different stakeholder groups: International organisations, youth, politics, foundations, think tanks, business, academia, and civil society. The members of the Hub work together on current issues of global health. The interdisciplinary exchange generates themes, issues and solutions that the Hub brings to policymakers to support informed policy-making and advance global health. Founded in 2019, the Hub now has around 2000 members. For more information: www.globalhealthhub.de

About the Youth Delegate Programme

The [Youth Delegate Programme](#) was launched as part of the Federal Government's Strategy for Global Health and piloted in 2021. The programme for youths and young adults intends to provide insight into international organisations and processes, boost the interest in working in the public health or international field and promote networking with international parties.

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c/o Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
Köthener Str. 2-3, 10963 Berlin, Deutschland
Phone: +49 30 59 00 20 210
info@globalhealthhub.de
www.globalhealthhub.de

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