

# Fair Play:

## Building a strong physical activity system for more active people



World Health  
Organization

# An urgent call to action

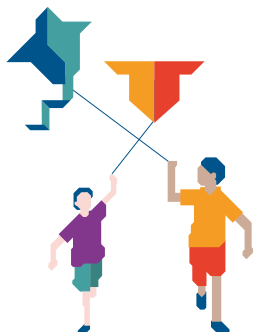
The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an increasingly connected world that is recognising the vital importance of physical activity (PA) for mental and physical health. It has exposed vulnerabilities and inequities in opportunities for communities and people to be active. The current PA system is fragmented, uneven and unfair. This must change.

Change, however, will require collective action from all stakeholders at all levels to deliver sustained communication campaigns, supportive environments, and access to programmes and services for all people

to benefit from PA - no matter their age, gender, ability, socio-economic status or geography. COVID-19 recovery presents a unique catalyst for all countries to rebuild stronger, fairer and more sustainable PA systems that can reach the under-served and increase participation.

We have a global roadmap to reach the full potential of PA.<sup>1</sup> The journey starts by understanding how financing mechanisms and regulatory frameworks must align with a more integrated and interconnected PA system.

**By working together from the global to local level,  
we can achieve the full potential of physical activity.**



# Physical activity is a policy win win

This advocacy brief is a call for decision-makers to urgently implement transformative change to deliver programmes and services at scale and provide inclusive opportunities and equitable access to physical activity in all communities.

Collective action must address key barriers limiting global progress, namely inadequate and inefficient use of resources; insufficient policy, laws and regulatory frameworks; and a fragmented system of policy, partnerships and implementation.

All stakeholders, especially advocates and influencers, have a central role in increasing the visibility and importance of physical activity.

Key decision-makers must work with national, regional and community leaders to develop their

COVID-19 recovery plans, review and advance climate mitigation and development agendas, and seek to 'build-forward-better' societies. Physical activity must be part of all these agendas, driven by political leadership and secured funding to build a stronger PA system providing multiple impacts (Box 1).

Physical activity can no longer be viewed as a 'nice to have' component of public policy. It is an essential component of the World Health Organization's credo, 'Health for All' to achieve healthier populations and a healthier planet.

In short, it is time to ensure PA is a **must have**.

## BOX 1

### Physical activity impacts on multiple policy agendas:

- |                        |                         |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| > health & well being  | > sustainable transport |
| > reduced inequalities | > cleaner air           |
|                        | > safer roads           |
| > social development   |                         |
| > cultural connections | > economic growth       |
|                        | > job creation          |
| > community engagement | > employability skills  |
| > crime prevention     | > improved education    |

**It is time to ensure PA is a MUST HAVE to provide a healthier and more equitable playing field for all.**



# We need to address inequities in access and opportunities

Physical activity improves physical, mental, social health and well-being, helps prevent disease and reduces burden on health care systems.<sup>2</sup>

It contributes to social inclusion, gender equity, employability and education.<sup>3</sup> Activities such as sport, walking, cycling, active leisure and play are contributors to multiple government and global agendas including COVID-19 recovery, improving socio-economic development, reducing inequalities, addressing climate change, and contributing to the sustainable development agenda.<sup>1,4</sup>

However, one in four adults globally does not undertake sufficient physical activity to reap the benefits, and there has been too little progress in increasing global participation.

**Women, minority ethnic groups, disadvantaged communities, and people living with disability and chronic disease are more likely to be inactive in all countries.<sup>5</sup>**

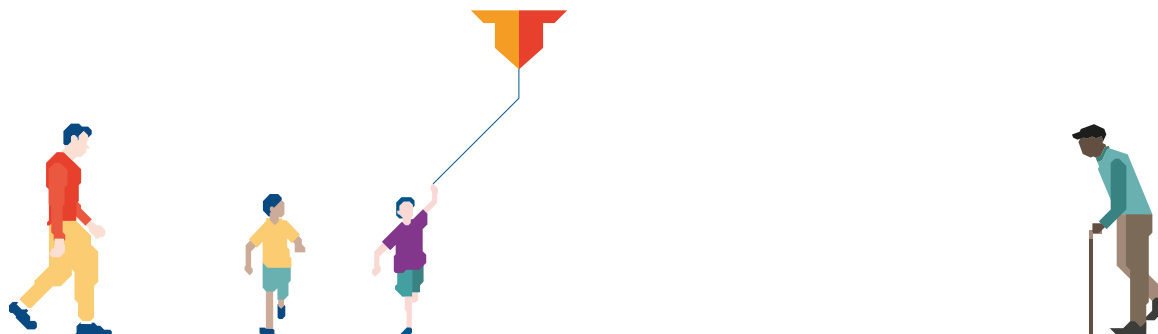
Levels of inactivity in adolescents are also alarming, at least three-quarters failing to meet guidelines, with girls more likely to be inactive than boys in most countries.<sup>6</sup>

While COVID-19 has increased awareness of the importance of PA, it has also alerted policymakers to the lack of resilience in health and social policies, programmes and settings. It has exposed existing inequities and has severely impacted vulnerable people and communities.

Too many people live in communities with unsafe streets for walking and cycling, with poor access to public open spaces, and unaffordable exercise or sport programmes and facilities.

**This is unfair and must change.**

## Collectively, we must take immediate action.



# Driving systematic change for all

Effective progress on PA requires a coordinated and strategic systems approach as outlined in *The World Health Organization's Global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030* (GAPPA).<sup>1</sup> The action plan sets out evidence and practice-based policy recommendations on how to increase PA in all countries.

GAPPA calls for all countries to deliver sustained public education, supportive environments and diverse programmes to enable people to be active in safe and enjoyable ways.

These **three strategic drivers** of physical activity behaviour (Box 2) are relevant and applicable to all countries, at the national and local level, and across multiple settings such as schools, parks and workplaces. They are most effective when implemented together.

Implementation of the strategic drivers requires tools, resources and collaboration to enable and translate policy into practical solutions to increase PA – effectively, equitably and at scale.

These **enablers** include: engaged communities to co-create solutions; people with skills and competencies to deliver PA programmes; digital technologies to support increased activity; data systems to inform policy and funding; and research and knowledge transfer to drive innovation and implementation.

However, there are **interconnected barriers** limiting progress on achieving an effective, efficient and sustainable PA system at scale:

- > **Insufficient, unequal, and ineffective investment** in the enablers is limiting implementation of the strategic drivers of PA;
- > **Inadequate and misaligned policy, laws, regulatory frameworks, and standards** fail to support, require and/or incentivise implementation of policy recommendations at national and sub-national levels; and
- > **Uneven and fragmented partnerships and programme delivery** are creating gaps in services which cause inequalities and inequities in opportunities for PA across communities.

## BOX 2

### Three strategic drivers of physical activity behaviour

People's ability and decision to be active are shaped by many factors. The following are three key strategic drivers of behaviour that are influential and effective:

- 1. Sustained PA communication campaigns**, using a wide range of media, with inclusive messages and images tailored to the diversity of communities to effectively reach and engage people;
- 2. Environments that provide safe, affordable access** to facilities, places and spaces to enable people to be more active in different ways; and,
- 3. Programmes, products and services** that offer affordable and inclusive opportunities to participate in PA across the life course, aligned to different levels of abilities, serving diverse preferences and providing enjoyable and rewarding experiences.



# Key actions to unlock impact

To accelerate progress, recover from the impact of COVID-19 and unlock the full potential of PA, we must come together in strong partnership to affect change in the following areas:

## 1. Innovative and diverse financing mechanisms

Current funding is insufficient, too often short-term, narrow in scope, and focussed less on strengthening a supportive system for PA and more on pilot and demonstration projects. New and diverse financing mechanisms and sources of investment aimed at reducing structural inequities and supporting the most vulnerable are urgently needed.

Governments, development agencies, donor organizations and businesses should review current funding and grant mechanisms to be more sustainable and long-term. Governments should explore redistribution and new approaches – such as the use of taxation, subsidies, social bonds and blended financing – to support the necessary enablers, infrastructure and community initiatives (Box 3).

## 2. Coherent policy, laws, regulatory frameworks, and standards

Strong and aligned policies, laws and standards are necessary to improve equity and inclusion, safety, access and affordability of PA. For example,

policies, regulations and standards should require adequate provision of quality walking and cycling networks, public open space access, school physical education, playgrounds, and community recreation facilities and equipment.

Governments should employ policies and laws to reduce barriers to physical activity (exclusion, safety, access and affordability) and create incentives to support people to be more active through mandated improvements to environments, services and programmes.

## 3. More integrated delivery of physical activity

An effective and impactful PA system must provide more even and fair delivery of the drivers of physical activity. It must mature to more integrated – joined up – models to deliver sustainable and measurable impact, which in turn will attract greater investment and create a positive reinforcing cycle.

Appropriate and inclusive education campaigns, environments and programmes can be made available to all communities by better identifying synergies and opportunities. For example, connecting programmes and organizations, increasing training and professional standards across the workforce so delivery is more

consistent, stronger integrated information systems and evaluation of impact, and employing innovations in digital delivery systems that are accessible. This can only be achieved by also engaging other stakeholders, especially within community services and across primary and secondary health and social care services.

### BOX 3

## Innovative financing to scale physical activity and impact

The **Laureus Sport for Good Foundation** has developed a new place-based funding approach, which moves from traditional ‘top down’ grant-making to collective, coalition-based community funding and decision-making. Its funding models also support knowledge sharing, partnership building and measuring long-term impact.

<https://www.laureus.com>

The **Thai Health Promotion Foundation** (ThaiHealth) requires tobacco and alcohol companies to pay 2% surcharge tax to fund health promotion programs including physical activity. <https://en.thaihealth.or.th>

# Working together towards a shared vision

Change is urgently needed and all stakeholders across the PA system have a key role to play. (Figure 1). COVID-19 has revealed fragility and vulnerabilities, and recovery calls for working in **stronger partnerships** with a **shared common vision** which embraces the whole PA system and not only its parts. All stakeholders must commit to view and build the system as a whole rather than in its silos.

Stronger partnerships across sectors are fundamental to identify gaps in delivery, connect stakeholders to problems and innovative solutions, and for effective advocacy and implementation. Effective advocacy will build support for better financing mechanisms, regulatory reform and joined up actions to reduce inequalities. Civil society has a vital role and their skills and capacity to advocate for PA need to be strengthened.

Importantly, stronger partnerships to deliver advocacy at all levels – international, regional, national and local – are critical to convey the multiple impacts of PA to those with the political and financial capital to make change happen.

Decision-makers will require a **strong value proposition** (Box 4) informed by stronger **data and information systems** to track and report impact and robust metrics on the

**return on investment**, as well as more effective sharing between stakeholders of **data, knowledge and insights** on best practice, community perceptions and consumer trends to strengthen and tailor implementation in communities.

With a common vision, together in partnership, we can ensure that the PA system provides better and more equitable opportunities for all people to be active and promote their health and wellbeing. Every element of the system has a critical part to play, and it has never been clearer that every move, by everyone, counts.

## BOX 4

### Value Proposition

A **strong value proposition for PA** states what benefits and value will be realized from increasing physical activity. It is a compelling narrative, supported by evidence, empirical data as well as examples of success. It is bolstered by proof of solid returns on investment (ROI), in both short and long term. It should also integrate the responsibilities and commitments endorsed in UN Conventions and universal principles such as fairness and equity.<sup>7</sup>

FIGURE 1

**A physical activity eco-system:**  
a connected network of stakeholders, at multiple levels, enabling and supporting physical activity across the lifecourse\*



\*This is a non-exhaustive list of potential stakeholders who contribute to promoting and providing physical activity opportunities.

# WHO's commitments

**To support countries to accelerate progress on enabling regular PA for the least active, underserved and most vulnerable populations, WHO will:**

**1. Leverage WHO's convening and coordination power, ensuring joined-up action at all levels by:**

- > launching a global register of commitments by non-government entities towards implementation of GAPPA recommendations;
- > strengthening PA legacy programmes associated with major sports events; and,
- > supporting regional PA networks and platforms to strengthen multisector partnerships and capacity to build stronger PA systems and accelerate opportunities for digital technologies.

**2. Develop and support countries to implement guidance and knowledge management tools by:**

- > publishing technical guidance on cost-effective approaches;
- > strengthening country capacity to undertake health and economic impact assessments (such as WHO HEAT, WHO-CHOICE, social return on investment analyses); and
- > strengthening data, information systems and research.

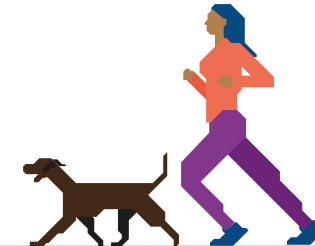
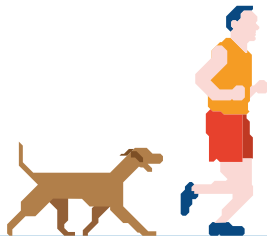
**3. Advocate and provide technical support to countries on strengthening policy, regulation and standards** that improve access to safe environments and physical activity opportunities, particularly focused on key areas of urban planning, transport, sport and education;

**4. Provide guidance on financing mechanisms**

to strengthen and scale physical activity policy implementation at national and sub-national levels; and

**5. Monitor progress and impact of country actions on PA and health through to 2030**

by, for example, supporting global efforts to harmonise and strengthen use of a common set of indicators, especially to assess progress in reducing PA inequalities; and by publishing the first WHO global status report on PA.





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## Endnotes

This advocacy brief is underpinned by evidence and the policy recommendations in the WHO Global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030 (GAPPA).<sup>1</sup>

It was inspired by the call for UN agencies to support stronger collaborations and the inclusion of physical activity and sport in global and national recovery plans,<sup>4</sup> and informed by the #reINVENT webinar series discussions held by

WHO over the spring and summer of 2021 following the global conversation held on the International Day of Sport for Peace and Development on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

Further resources, and all webinar recordings, are available from WHO to support the actions called for in this document, from <https://www.who.int/health-topics/physical-activity>

## References

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7. Universal Human Rights Instruments. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/UniversalHumanRightsInstruments.aspx>

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