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Human Development and Mental Health: New Approaches and Metrics Needed

By Julius Cesar Trajano

SYNOPSIS

The latest UN study reiterated the importance of mental wellbeing and psychological resilience in human development and security. A change in approach and metrics is necessary to improve tackling of mental health issues while simultaneously managing contemporary challenges such as climate change, conflict prevention, and protection of the environment.

COMMENTARY

The [Human Development Report 2021/2022](#) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) entitled "Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World" was released on 8 September this year. The key takeaway is that the world faces a troubled future arising from man-made (anthropogenic) existential threats which resulted in unprecedented uncertainties for peoples around the globe.

The report warns that "mental health is under assault" and significantly examines the impact of uncertainties on people's mental health and how such uncertainties obstruct human development. In attributing this unprecedented development to an anthropogenic cause, the report has taken a significant step forward to unequivocally acknowledge mental health as a key related component of human development. This is important and consistent with the first UNDP Human Development Report 32 years ago where it maintained that "people are the real wealth of nations."

Mental Health and Human Development

The 2021/2022 UNDP report states that in the face of unsettled lives amidst multifaceted uncertainties, mental well-being and psychological resilience are

essential for human development. It added that mental stress is being caused by threats, both traditional and anthropogenic, such as the increasing frequency of climate change-induced extreme weather events, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, new zoonotic diseases, threat of the use of nuclear weapons, war in Ukraine and other armed conflicts, polarized societies, biodiversity loss, and other human security threats such as economic and food insecurity, discrimination, and violence.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, people everywhere have felt increasing distress due to complex and stressful situations in daily life. New forms of work and modern technologies have caused disruption and displacement in societies across the world. Uncertainties emerging from traumatizing events, physical illness, and general anxiety over climate change and food insecurity tend to weaken people's mental health.

It is stunning to find out from the UNDP report that an estimated one billion people, or one in eight persons, have mental health issues. Mental distress can impede human development. Globally, it can result in mental disorders among those lacking in psychological resilience and is now the leading cause of disability. The [most common mental disorders](#) are anxiety and depression affecting 300 million and 280 million people, respectively, worldwide.

Relevant research has shown that widespread mental health problems among people exact a heavy toll on societies. Individuals affected are unable to reach their full potential. Their educational and occupational opportunities may be lost. This reduces their potential to contribute to human development and security. People with impaired mental (and physical) health have fewer job and income opportunities. In fact, people with depression earn about 34% less than the average person.

Furthermore, the [effects of climate change on mental health](#) will be distributed unequally both within and between nations; more specifically, between rich and poor nations, and hence, exacerbating inequalities. Vulnerable populations, such as socially isolated groups, indigenous and minority communities, and women and children, will be most at risk to climate-change threats.

Inequalities are also widened given that different people are exposed to distinct levels of mental distress. The increase in prevalence of depression and anxiety during the pandemic was [greater among women than men](#), most likely because women were more vulnerable to the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 lockdowns as well as the additional domestic and care work they had to undertake. In a [multi-country survey](#), conducted by another international organisation (CARE), 27% of women struggled with mental distress, compared with 10% among men.

What Must be Done

Due to a lack of resources, inaccurate assessments and the shortage of trained medical staff and healthcare providers, it is estimated that not more than 10% of the world's population can access mental health interventions/treatments. This inaccessibility to mental wellness services must be addressed through a comprehensive approach.

Universal access to mental health services should be included in social insurance

schemes. These schemes empower people to manage their mental distress in the face of their sense of uncertainty. These services could be included in social protection regimes. The 2021/2022 UNDP report advocates expanding and innovating social protection schemes to deal with today's challenges and unanticipated distress.

Human development and mental health experts strongly recommend community-based actions because that would shift the onus from the individual to the group. Community-based mental health services have greater acceptability among the population, and better accessibility and affordability than most other healthcare options. They facilitate family involvement, are less prone to stigmatization and discrimination, and promote mental health awareness.

Community-based approaches can also help overcome the prevalent stigmatization of mental health issues. For example, the [Mental Health Innovation Network's "Basic Needs Mental Health and Development Model,"](#) has reached more than 650,000 people and their family members in low and middle-income countries.

There should also be greater investments in universal public health initiatives that rectify the social determinants of mental disorders, i.e., the underlying causes of uncertainties. For instance, there should be a comprehensive approach that seeks to improve global mental health while simultaneously tackling climate change, preventing conflicts, and protecting the environment. This requires expanded investments in a whole host of areas, including education, healthcare, peacebuilding, nuclear disarmament, employment, social support, housing, social justice, poverty alleviation, community development, climate mitigation and adaptation, and environmental protection.

Human Development beyond Conventional Metrics

HDR 2021/2022 tells us that mental health is no longer about the personal circumstances of everyone, but an essential component of human development and people's mental health is affected by global crises and uncertainties.

While there is always uncertainty, there should be a radical change in the metrics with which we invest and think about human development. Merely relying on GDP growth, per-capita income, and other macro-economic fundamentals is not adequate as these in fact distort the reality about human development. Metrics of the future should include the state of our mental wellbeing. The latest UNDP report confirms that high or increasing worry or depression patterns have an impact on measures to improve people's prosperity.

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