



Achieving Global Solidarity and Equity by Investing in Mental Health and Indigenous Knowledge

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Solidarity for the
Achievement
of the SDGs



Abstract

Mental health is a critical yet overlooked enabler of sustainable development. Its decline impedes progress across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), leading to deteriorating educational outcomes (eg, falling OECD PISA scores), reduced economic productivity, higher health costs, and exacerbated inequalities in both developed and developing countries. Delays in achieving the SDGs, together with increasing climate change impacts and biodiversity loss, have led to deterioration in mental health. Furthermore, rapid urbanisation and environmental degradation in G20 countries are eroding traditional, natural, and socially connected lifestyles, heightening psychological distress such as climate anxiety, ecological grief, and depression. Addressing mental health concerns is thus pivotal to achieving the G20's mandate of solidarity, equality, and systemic transformation.

This policy brief draws on neuroscience and psychology to highlight the critical role of emotions, like happiness and sadness, in human learning and decision-making, particularly in the face of an uncertain future. It demonstrates how emotionally shaped memories of past decisions can perpetuate behaviour and choices that may no longer be relevant or effective in addressing current challenges. Continued reliance on conditioned choices may increase the likelihood of repeating outdated decisions, impeding progress toward a different future, such as achieving the SDGs. To overcome this inertia, the brief advocates for a human-centred approach incorporating behavioural and mental health strategies to address the emotional biases embedded in decision-making processes. In addition, it calls for integrating Indigenous knowledge systems to provide alternative development pathways that inherently include solidarity, equality, and sustainability. It also proposes to incorporate mental health into SDG financing, in line with the Deccan Principles, to support vulnerable groups. Overcoming past patterns of decision-making and behaviour driven by individualism and inequality requires a fundamental shift in thought processes and emotional responses. This shift is necessary to break free from historical barriers and foster sustainable, equitable development and solidarity at a global scale.

Keywords: Mental Wellbeing, Equality, Indigenous Knowledge, SDGs

Diagnosis

Nature—human disconnect

The prioritisation of economic gain over ecological balance by governments and policymakers has led to widespread environmental degradation and deepening social inequalities. This imbalance, exacerbated by global economic structures, environmental degradation, and lack of access to technology and capital, places a disproportionate burden on developing economies, hindering their ability to pursue sustainable development. Further, an exponential increase in demand for goods, services, capital, and data heightened uncertainty and complexity in the economic system – evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused major economic disruptions and illustrated important links between biodiversity loss and ecosystem health, profoundly affecting human health.¹ This crisis also presented an opportunity for transforming sustainability pathways and accelerated conversations about “building back better”.² However, attempts to heal the planet are not unrelated to healing human anxiety and pain – the pain of the earth and that of people are interdependent.

While access to healthcare and education remains a significant challenge, mental health issues caused by negative natural environmental changes cannot be overlooked. Approximately 1 billion people worldwide are affected by mental health issues as a result of anxiety and depression, costing the global economy \$1 trillion each year.³ COVID-19, in particular, resulted in the clustering of multiple social determinants of mental health, such as fear and anxiety,

¹ Odette K. Lawler et al., ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Intricately Linked to Biodiversity Loss and Ecosystem Health’, *The Lancet Planetary Health* 5, no. 11 (1 November 2021): e840–50, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00258-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00258-8).

² OECD, ‘Building Back Better: A Sustainable, Resilient Recovery after Covid-19’, 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=133_133639-s08q2ridhf&title=Building-back-better-_A-sustainable-resilient-recovery-after-Covid-19.

³ Editorial, ‘Mental Health Matters’, *The Lancet Global Health* 8, no. 11 (1 November 2020): e1352, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30432-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30432-0).

emotional distress resulting from illness, bereavement, unemployment, income loss, and loneliness.³ Furthermore, Western frameworks of knowledge disregarding Indigenous knowledge and values, along with omitting their unique perspective on relational wellbeing as a measure of progress and human flourishing, may be contributing to rising mental health concerns.⁴ Social norms of individualism are also hindering collective action on real-world problems. Advocacy and social movements often elevate individual “heroes/heroines” without delivering lasting solutions.⁵ Addressing global challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and the SDGs requires deeper collective reflection to achieve true solidarity.

Impact of nature—human disconnect on brain functioning, decision-making, and mental health and wellbeing

Disconnection from oneself and the natural environment poses significant challenges. Social connection is fundamental to mental health, as social neuroscience pioneer John Cacioppo has shown.⁶ Throughout evolutionary history, humans protected themselves through collective action and maintained social contact to regulate stress and maintain mental wellbeing. Today, loss of shared spaces and physical proximity is contributing to anxiety and fear – key factors in mental health crises.⁷ *The Anxious Generation*⁸ links this crisis to social media but also highlights the disappearance of playgrounds and safe social spaces for children, especially in increasingly dangerous or restrictive urban environments. In contrast, Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs)

⁴ Kehinde Balogun et al., ‘Reframing the Concept of Well-Being and One Health Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge’ (T20 Policy Brief, 2024),

https://www.t20brasil.org/media/documentos/arquivos/TF06_ST_03_Reframing_the_conc66fbede76128d.pdf.

⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).

⁶ John T Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo, ‘The Growing Problem of Loneliness’, *The Lancet* 391, no. 10119 (February 2018): 426, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30142-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30142-9).

⁷ Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Theodore F. Robles, and David A. Sbarra, ‘Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States.’, *American Psychologist* 72, no. 6 (September 2017): 517–30, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000103>.

⁸ Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin, 2024).

maintain strong ties to their ancestral land and community, often leading to better mental health. However, the ongoing destruction of Indigenous lands – driven by both human and natural forces – continues to marginalise their knowledge and wisdom. This not only undervalues the deep human–nature connection but also overlooks the vital role of healthy ecosystems in achieving long-term sustainability and equity.⁹

The nature–human connection is innate and based on long-accumulated knowledge of interactions with nature. Such interactions are recognised as contributing to human intelligence.¹⁰ Recent experiments have shown that sustained exposure to nature enhances cognitive development and skills. The benefits include increased attention capacity and self-awareness.¹¹

Impact of current economic models or "structure" on mental health and global goals

Conventional economic development increasingly views humans as isolated individuals – workers and consumers driven by incentives. While early phases of development expanded individual rights, their unintended consequences gradually emerged, fuelling economic disparities and undermining the foundations of mental health and wellbeing.¹² Developed nations now face severe mental health crises, including in G20 countries once considered the happiest, like those in northern Europe.¹³

⁹ Balogun et al., 'Reframing the Concept of Well-Being and One Health Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge'.

¹⁰ Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873296>.

¹¹ Roly Russell et al., 'Humans and Nature: How Knowing and Experiencing Nature Affect Well-Being', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 38, no. Volume 38, 2013 (17 October 2013): 473–502, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-012312-110838>.

¹² Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-Being* (Penguin, 2020).

¹³ OECD, *A New Benchmark for Mental Health Systems: Tackling the Social and Economic Costs of Mental Ill-Health*, OECD Health Policy Studies (OECD, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1787/4ed890f6-en>.

Economic and human development trajectories have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, contributing further to the mental health crisis.¹⁴

Stress and anxiety levels are rising in both developed and developing nations, and the sense of agency is declining worldwide. The decline of PISA scores¹⁵ in OECD countries, which includes 17 G20 countries, is also showing alarming signs of deteriorating mental health among the respective population groups. If development models cannot sustain human wellbeing, we must rethink and revise them. It's not only the planetary boundaries we must consider, but also "human" boundaries. The current mental health crisis may signal that these limits are being reached. Although less tangible, evidence – from neuroscience to policy – suggests they exist. This could be linked to growing social disconnection, a trend reinforced by current economic models and precarity.¹⁶

If deteriorating mental health undermines educational achievements, we risk losing the human capital necessary to achieve the SDGs. Moreover, global public goods – vital for sustainable development – rely on positive human conditions, as cooperation and trust cannot thrive amid poor mental health. Mental wellbeing is therefore a critical yet overlooked enabler of sustainable development.¹⁷

¹⁴ UNDP, 'Human Development Report 2023-24: Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World' (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2024).

¹⁵ OECD, 'PISA 2022 Results' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022), <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2022-results.htm>.

¹⁶ Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 'The Growing Problem of Loneliness'.

¹⁷ Elinor Ostrom, 'Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems', *American Economic Review* 100, no. 3 (1 June 2010): 641–72, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.100.3.641>.

Recommendations

Acknowledge mental wellbeing as a foundational enabler for sustainable development

The connection between mental health and the SDGs is increasingly recognised.¹⁸ Moving beyond the concept of “social determinants of health” to “social determinants of mental health” underscores how individuals' social, economic, and natural environments profoundly shape their mental wellbeing.¹⁹ Mental wellbeing is not merely an outcome of development but a fundamental enabler of it. Therefore, mental health must be integrated as a core component across the SDGs. Progress on SDGs can improve mental health, and improved mental health facilitates SDG achievement. Negative social conditions like poverty, discrimination, inequality, violence, and lack of access to education disproportionately harm the mental health of marginalised populations.²⁰ While SDG 3 targets health and wellbeing, its interconnections with other goals must guide policy. The key linkages between SDGs 1, 4, 5, 8, 10, and 16 and social determinants of mental health are highlighted below.²¹

- Addressing poverty eases a major stressor and risk factor for mental disorders (SDG 1 No Poverty).
- Inclusive education promotes cognitive and emotional development, acting as a protective factor (SDG 4 Quality Education).
- Addressing gender-based discrimination and violence is crucial for women's mental health (SDG 5 Gender Equality).
- Secure, fair employment supports mental health by reducing stress and inequality (SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth).

¹⁸ WHO, 'World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All' (World Health Organization, 2022); Crick Lund et al., 'Social Determinants of Mental Disorders and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Systematic Review of Reviews', *The Lancet Psychiatry* 5, no. 4 (1 April 2018): 357–69, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(18\)30060-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(18)30060-9).

¹⁹ Lund et al., 'Social Determinants of Mental Disorders and the Sustainable Development Goals'.

²⁰ Lund et al.

²¹ Lund et al.

- Tackling social and economic disparities within and among countries directly addresses a core driver of poor mental health (SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities).
- Reducing violence, promoting safety, and ensuring access to justice are vital for mental health, particularly in conflict-affected or unstable regions (SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Adopt a systemic, multi-sectoral approach for equity and solidarity

Mental health exists within a complex system encompassing individual biology, social relationships, community structures, economic conditions, and the natural environment.²² Therefore, treating individual symptoms in isolation is insufficient. Policy interventions must adopt a systemic view, recognising the interdependence of human and planetary health. This calls for a transformative, multi-sectoral approach, with coordinated action not only from the health sector but also from economic policy, urban planning, education, environmental protection, and social welfare to reshape the environments that influence mental health.²³ Policies must actively dismantle barriers and eliminate discrimination in existing services and ensure new programmes are designed for universal and equitable access.

A rights-based approach to SDG implementation can help address the social and economic inequalities driving poor mental health by valuing diverse perspectives, including Indigenous knowledge systems that emphasise relational wellbeing and human-nature connections.²⁴ Power dynamics among actors involved in implementing sustainable development objectives play a crucial role in shaping outcomes, often leading to imbalances.

²² WHO, 'World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All'.

²³ WHO.

²⁴ Balogun et al., 'Reframing the Concept of Well-Being and One Health Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge'.

Power asymmetries influence interactions, with certain actors exerting greater influence than others, depending on the context and arena of engagement. Governments, for instance, hold substantial authority within formal political and institutional arenas by setting regulatory frameworks and national policies. While their leadership is crucial for ensuring policy coherence across sectors, rigid governance structures can marginalise other actors, especially IPLCs, from meaningful participation in decision-making processes.²⁵ Therefore, multi-sectoral approaches that link health, food, biodiversity, water, and climate change can make a broader contribution to sustainability. For instance, nature-based approaches have the potential to advance achievement of multiple SDGs. This requires strengthening the role of transnational networks, IPLCs, and the private sector.

Value Indigenous knowledge and perspectives to promote cross-cultural solutions

There are Indigenous cultures worldwide that still live by the wisdom of “I am because we are” – a deep-rooted belief in the interconnectedness of all beings, expressed as ubuntu in South Africa.²⁶ This profound sense of belonging and shared existence offers a path to healing, especially in a world where the loss of such interconnectedness is at the heart of our growing mental health struggles. The participation of diverse stakeholders – particularly IPLCs – is critical for ensuring the legitimacy, cultural relevance, and long-term effectiveness of sustainable development approaches.

²⁵ Himangana Gupta and Pramod Singh, ‘Integrative and Adaptive Governance of Nature-Based Solutions to Achieve Triple Wins —Paris Agreement, GBF and UN Agenda 2030’, SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 20 March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4766944>.

²⁶ Lesley Le Grange, ‘Ubuntu, Ukama and the Healing of Nature, Self and Society’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. sup2 (January 2012): 56–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00795.x>.

²⁷ Balogun et al., ‘Reframing the Concept of Well-Being and One Health Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge’.

To further promote equity, it is essential to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems into national policies and frameworks, particularly in climate action plans, biodiversity strategies, One Health initiatives, and sustainable development policies.²⁷ Indigenous people's conception of health and resilience is closely entwined with the land and the natural world. It is, therefore, essential to acknowledge Indigenous "ways of knowing". G20 countries, rich in traditional knowledge, must incorporate IPLCs' role in national action plans on climate change, biodiversity, and sustainability policies. This requires not only documenting Indigenous knowledge but also ensuring that these communities have a meaningful say in decision-making processes, fostering decentralisation and enhancing effective governance.

Way forward

Drawing linkages between equitable sustainable development, mental health, and Indigenous knowledge, this policy brief urges G20 countries to move beyond the past patterns of decision-making and behaviour shaped by individualism and inequality. Capitalism has its place, but it must not diminish the value of life embodied in Indigenous ways of being – wisdom that can guide us through an uncertain future while promoting good health, achieving the SDGs, and fostering global solidarity.

T20 South Africa convenors



The Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD)



The South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)



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