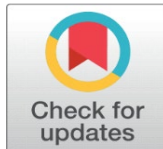


# EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The integration of mental health into the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the global narrative highlights the importance of mental health and well-being that goes beyond economic growth and physical health. Mental health is not just an isolated goal within SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), but a crucial, consistent factor that influences all aspects of sustainability that United Nations member states are striving to achieve. This paper explores the influence of mental health on key areas such as social equity, quality education, and peace and justice, as stated in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It highlights the increasing recognition of mental health as a fundamental human right and a primary factor in social change, resilience building, and overall well-being. The findings highlight the urgent need for an integrated, multi-sectoral approach, that should focus on universal health coverage, community-based interventions, stigma reduction, and the development of comprehensive data systems as core strategies to ensure a balanced approach that promotes the well-being of current and future generations.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Well-Being, Sustainable Development, Community Building

## 1. INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The global community is currently facing numerous risks, including climate change, economic uncertainty, inequality, and global health emergencies. In this complex situation, mental health is being increasingly regarded as a fundamental human right towards transforming society, fostering resilience, and safeguarding the well-being of individuals. Mental health is explicitly linked with most of the broader developmental goals (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018; Goodwin & Zaman, 2023), and thus, it is essential to comprehend its contribution toward developing a sustainable future. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in which mental health is identified as an essential component, illustrates its significance in combating social inequity (Gronholm et al., 2023), quality education (O'Farrell et al., 2022), and promoting peace and justice (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). Poor mental health can lead to poor academic performance (Schulte-Körne, 2016), disengagement, increased conflict, and social disparities (Gronholm et al., 2023), which in turn undermine efforts at sustainable development. The recognition of mental health as a fundamental human right is essential for fostering societal transformation (WHO, 2022). This perspective encourages that mental health

should not be viewed solely as an individual problem, but rather as a collective endeavour that makes society healthier and more cohesive (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). By prioritising mental health within the broader framework of sustainable development, there is a potential for creating environments that support not only individual health but also empower communities (De Silva, 2015).

## 2. GLOBAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

The inclusion of mental health in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 was a significant turning point. It recognised mental health as a global health issue and an important determinant of international development (Votruba et al., 2016). Historically, global development goals primarily focused on economic growth and physical health, neglecting the comprehensive nature of human well-being. The narrow focus on mental health overlooked its primary role in overall health and quality of life. The statement, "there can be no health or sustainable development without mental health" (Goodwin & Zaman, 2023) is not merely an observation or an argument but reflects a strategic need to rethink how progress can be achieved by understanding the importance of mental health. This re-evaluation towards development is urgent and crucial. A growing awareness of mental health can assist in the framing of policies, developing systematic approaches for integrating mental health interventions, and the recognition of its interplay with physical health, education, socio-economic status, and community well-being. (Votruba & Thornicroft, 2015).

## 3. DEFINING UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

The fundamental model for sustainable development in the United Nations is famously defined in the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition emphasises a commitment to intergenerational equity and responsible resource management. Based on this, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 specific targets that apply to all nations (International Institute for Sustainable Development, n.d.). The SDGs are broadly conceptualised through various frameworks. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) aligns its engagement with the SDGs along five key pillars: People, Prosperity, Planet, Peace, and Partnership. Alternatively, a widely recognised framework categorises sustainability into three interconnected pillars: Economic, Environmental, and social goals (Purvis et al., 2019). The achievement of true sustainability relies upon the thoughtful balance and consistent interaction among these pillars (Chauke et al., 2018). Progress in one area cannot be achieved at the expense of another. It is crucial to recognise that economic growth should not lead to environmental degradation or social inequity, as these outcomes are not sustainable. Developmental goals should not target only one aspect; a balanced approach is needed to address these interconnected areas, as they cannot work in isolation. A policy that focuses solely on economic growth without consideration for its social or environmental impacts is, by definition, unsustainable. This comprehensive framework provides a critical perspective on the role of mental health, emphasising the significant influence of various interconnected factors.

## 4. DEFINING MENTAL HEALTH: A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

The World Health Organisation (WHO) provides a comprehensive definition of mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community". This definition goes beyond the mere absence of mental disorders, recognising mental health as a dynamic state that can vary from person to person depending on diverse situations and levels of difficulty (WHO, 2022).

A complex interplay of social, structural and individual determinants shapes mental health, with factors like poverty, violence, inequality, and environmental degradation can have an adverse influence on mental health and well-being. On the other hand, protective factors, such as strong socio-emotional skills, positive social interactions, access to quality education, decent employment, safe neighbourhoods, and strong social relations, contribute significantly to strengthening resilience (WHO, 2022). Mental health is further characterised by physical and behavioural health, a sense of purpose in life, active engagement, healthy relationships, and overall contentment (Gautam et al., 2024). A broader

understanding of wellness encompasses eight interdependent factors: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental (Stowen, 2017).

The WHO's definition of mental health shifts the focus from mere absence of illness to functional capacity, resilience, and the ability to contribute to society actively. This comprehensive view, which includes eight dimensions of wellness, underscores the societal impact of mental health. By recognising the close ties between mental health and various aspects of life and development, organisations are encouraged to promote mental health as a key element for building strong communities and achieving sustainable development goals. Neglecting the social importance of mental health can impede community and global development (Mills, 2018).

## 5. SDG 3.4: THE DIRECT MANDATE FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Traditionally, mental health was viewed as a distinct issue, with its own set of goals and strategies separate from the broader global development goals. This was directly reflected in the disparity in funding and policies for mental health when compared with physical health. The integration of mental health into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations (UN), represents a significant milestone for recognising it as an integral component of global development. The UN recognised the powerful impact of mental illness and incorporated mental health into the SDG framework under Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being). Target 3.4 specifically addresses the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases and the promotion of well-being. Additionally, Target 3.5 focuses on the prevention and treatment of substances that can be direct concerns for mental health. It is crucial to understand that mental health should not only be viewed as a health concern but also as a fundamental factor for environmental, social, and economic development (Grace et al., 2018). The significant impact of mental illness on poverty and reduced economic growth, directly impacting productivity, should be addressed. Similarly, it can have a direct impact on a child's academic and holistic development (Ridley et al., 2020).

Mental health is not an isolated determinant of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being); it plays a significant role in achieving the broader goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The attainment of economic prosperity, social equity, environmental sustainability, quality education, and peace and justice is deeply influenced by the state of global mental health. The stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness (Merz, 2021) can also pose a significant challenge to achieving peace and reducing social inequalities. The United Nations advocates for strengthening mental health by recognising it as a core component of well-being, integrating it as a primary health service, and promoting mental health and well-being across diverse settings, from home to schools, workplace to communities. The SDG Targets provide clear goals and metrics to measure progress and ensure that countries work to improve mental health conditions.

## 6. MENTAL HEALTH ACROSS SDG

The inclusion of mental health is not limited to SDG 3; it is significantly relevant across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The efforts to eradicate poverty (SDG 1), reduce inequalities (SDG 10), and ensure quality education (SDG 4) (Goodwin & Zaman, 2023) and emphasise the need for well-being for a sustainable future. Poor mental health and unfulfilled human potential pose substantial risks to the changes required to achieve the entire SDG framework (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). Improving mental health can significantly contribute towards reducing the risk of dropouts among school children (Ryan et al., 2018), thereby directly impacting SDG 4 (Quality Education). Similarly, interventions addressing maternal depression have been shown to improve childhood immunisation rates and increase contraceptive use (Scorza et al., 2018), demonstrating direct benefits for SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and potentially SDG 5 (Gender Equality). This suggests that SDGs are not isolated goals but are strongly connected; neglecting mental health can significantly hinder progress on other SDGs (Ryan et al., 2018). Mental health interventions should not be viewed as isolated health expenditures, it should be implemented strategically across diverse sectors such as education, economic development, social protection and environmental initiatives (Castillo et al., 2019). This comprehensive integration maximises overall impact and optimises resource efficiency. A "whole-of-government approach" (Pirkis et al., 2023) is therefore essential to foster the necessary collaboration and coordination to integrate mental health for sustainable development. The progress of a society is often dependent on the well-being of its members, showing a strong interdependence between mental health and sustainable development (Žižek et al., 2021).

## 7. SOCIAL EQUITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is fundamental to personal, community, and socio-economic development (WHO, 2022). Engaging with mental health problems facilitates communities to prosper (Breedvelt et al., 2022); otherwise, unaddressed problems can have far-reaching adverse effects, including homelessness, poverty, and unemployment, which can cause significant family and community disruption ("Unattended Mental Health's Impact on Society," 2016). Mental illness exhibits reduced social interaction, difficulties in communication, increased interpersonal conflict, and impaired self-esteem. Social isolation and loneliness are known to contribute to existing mental health conditions. Social cohesion, characterised by community assets, trust, and a sense of belonging, is widely associated with improved well-being. Unified neighbourhoods, even in economically deprived areas, can reduce the adverse effects of poverty on mental health by fostering increased support and interaction among residents.

A critical understanding of this interplay reveals a profound feedback loop. Strong social relationships act as a protective determinant for well-being, building resilience and providing support groups (WHO, 2022). However, poor mental health can actively disintegrate social capital by leading to social withdrawal, communication difficulties, and interpersonal conflict, thereby creating a self-reinforcing cycle of isolation (Kirkbride et al., 2024). This means that social factors do not merely influence mental health but actively contribute to the formation and maintenance of social capital and community resilience (Liu et al., 2022). Individuals with mental health conditions are often among the most marginalised communities globally, frequently experiencing exclusion from normal citizenship, human rights violations, pervasive discrimination, and profound stigma (Goodwin & Zaman, 2023). The social determinants of mental health (SDOMH) include a broad range of social factors, including income levels, educational attainment, access to housing, social inclusion, and exposure to discrimination and violence (Kirkbride et al., 2024). These determinants contribute significantly to wide health disparities and inequities across populations.

Therefore, policies aimed at fostering social equity (SDG 10) and building resilient communities (SDG 11) must promote mental well-being. Interventions should focus on strengthening social connections and encouraging community participation, which actively focus on reducing stigma, as these actions represent direct investments in social capital. Addressing inequalities in areas such as housing, education, and discrimination constitutes a direct and consequential mental health intervention, as these factors are recognised as significant social determinants of mental well-being. This integrated approach is essential for achieving truly inclusive societies where the principle of "leaving no one behind" is realised. (Votruba & Thornicroft, 2015)

## 8. QUALITY EDUCATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Quality education, as mentioned in SDG 4, is strongly connected to the development of human capital and overall progress in society. It is strongly associated with higher income levels, access to health-promoting benefits, and, critically, the development of social and psychological skills that contribute directly to better mental health and enhanced resilience (Sanchez, 2022). On the other hand, poor psychosocial development in adolescents can lead to significant long-term health challenges, including adulthood illnesses, substance abuse, and increased risk of self-harm (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). Untreated mental illness among youth can severely disrupt formal education, leading to learning disabilities, delinquency, substance abuse and increased likelihood of development of criminal behaviour (Unattended Mental Health's Impact on Society, 2016). The impact extends to family dynamics, as children of mothers suffering from chronic depression are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems at school (Unattended Mental Health's Impact on Society, 2016). The interconnections between mental health education and psychological well-being are also well-established (Goodwin & Zaman, 2023). Education serves as a potent preventive mental health intervention by preparing individuals with essential coping mechanisms and life skills, reducing stress, and improving future economic stability (Sanchez, 2022). It also provides a structured, safe environment and opportunities for developing social relationships (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). Unaddressed mental health issues fundamentally undermine the very foundation of education, leading to increased absenteeism (Körne, 2016), diminished academic performance (Klassen et al., 2021), and higher dropout rates (Hjorth et al., 2016). This directly hinders human capital development and results in intergenerational cycles of vulnerable groups (Mezzina et al., 2022).

Therefore, achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education) requires systematic integration of mental health support into educational institutions, spanning from early childhood interventions to higher education (Pandey, 2018). This includes



implementation of mental health education (Wiedermann et al., 2023), early detection programs (McGorry & Mei, 2018; Agnafors et al., 2021), accessible mental health services within schools (Tornivuori et al., 2023), training the teachers to improve the classroom environment (O'Farrell et al., 2022; Schulte-Körne, 2016). Investing in youth mental health is an essential investment for the development of intellectual capacity required for innovation and sustainable solutions for the future workforce (WHO, 2013), thereby breaking cycles of vulnerability and fostering a more capable and resilient workforce.

## 9. PEACE, JUSTICE, AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Peace is a necessary prerequisite in the SDGs for upholding human rights and establishing effective governance. High levels of armed violence have a profoundly destructive impact on a country's development. Conflict and violence are known to significantly aggravate risks to overall health and well-being, with a particularly severe impact on mental health (Østergaard et al., 2023). Individuals with mental health conditions often remain vulnerable within communities due to social exclusion and are susceptible to human rights violations within institutions (Kirkbride et al., 2024). Outdated laws, pervasive discrimination, and deeply ingrained stigma contribute to their social exclusion and expose them to human rights abuses (De Silva, 2015). Furthermore, individuals with mental health disorders are unfairly represented within the criminal justice system, with studies indicating prisoners high mental disorders, due to behaviours linked to their conditions (Gómez-Figueroa & Camino-Proañó, 2022). Inadequate treatment and support within the justice system lead to increased recidivism rates, poorer mental health outcomes, and elevated costs to both the justice system and society at large (Cunha et al., 2023).

A comprehensive understanding of these determinants highlights mental health's foundational role in achieving SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Conflict-induced trauma, like PTSD, depression, and anxiety, undermines individuals and entire communities, thereby hindering efforts towards reconciliation and recovery. The overrepresentation of mentally ill individuals in the justice system (Abracen et al., 2015) points to systemic failures that support injustice and contribute to cycles of recidivism. Addressing mental health in this context is not merely about treating the symptoms; it is about restoring individual self-esteem, rebuilding trust, and fostering social responsibility—all of which are indispensable determinants for maintaining peace. The human rights imperative for mental health (De Silva, 2015) is particularly strong in this area, as equitable access to justice and freedom from discrimination are fundamental human rights.

Consequently, integrating mental health into peacebuilding initiatives, conflict resolution strategies, and justice system reforms is significant. Therefore, a shift from coercive practices to more rehabilitative treatments is necessary, ensuring the provision of mental health services within correctional facilities and developing robust community-based alternatives (Beaudry et al., 2021). It also requires mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to be included in humanitarian responses and post-conflict recovery efforts (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). Strong institutions, as envisioned by SDG, must actively protect the rights of individuals with mental health conditions and ensure that they have equitable access to justice, recognising that mental well-being is a prerequisite for a truly peaceful, just, and inclusive society (Mental Health: Promoting and Protecting Human Rights, 2022).

## 10. PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH AND PREVENTING ILLNESS: COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES

Mental health promotion and illness prevention should be community-integrated into broader efforts to achieve the SDGs (Ryan et al., 2018). Community engagement and strong social connections are critical for maintaining good mental health. The communities can successfully promote mental health services by developing community-centered programs, encouraging service user participation in community activities, providing opportunities for socialisation and peer support, and partnering with local organisations to deliver holistic care (Castillo et al., 2019). The establishment of decentralised Community Mental Health Centres (CMHCs), providing support and care from large institutional hospitals directly into communities, is more effective and can reduce relapses (Shen & Snowden, 2014).

This emphasis on community-centered models signifies a crucial shift from institutionalised care, recognising that mental health should be deeply embedded within the social structure of communities. Strong community support effectively combats loneliness, improves coping mechanisms, and plays a fundamental role in early intervention in

mental health issues (Acoba, 2024). This approach advocates a sense of belonging and mutual support, which are crucial for building individual and collective resilience. Furthermore, community-based programs are fundamental in a culturally sensitive society. They should be easily accessible to reduce barriers for rehabilitation (Hood et al., 2023). Sustainable development policies should therefore strategically invest in strengthening community infrastructure and social capital as a direct mental health promotion strategy. The strategies should include supporting local initiatives, creating safe and accessible public spaces, and fostering opportunities for social interaction and volunteering (Winston, 2021). It also implies empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making processes regarding mental health services, ensuring that these services are responsive to local needs and contexts.

## 11. ADDRESSING STIGMA, DISCRIMINATION, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Mental health is unequivocally a fundamental human right (Goodwin & Zaman, 2023). International organisations such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and various UN resolutions reaffirm mental health as an essential component of Universal Health Coverage (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). Despite this, stigma and discrimination remain pervasive and significant barriers to help-seeking behaviours, undermining the benefits of early intervention (Hans & Sharan, 2021). Globally, Individuals with mental health problems are often among the most marginalised and highly vulnerable to human rights abuses (Votruba & Thornicroft, 2015). Eliminating stigma requires a collaborative, multi-level approach involving healthcare providers, government and non-government agencies, and society as a whole (Gronholm et al., 2023). Psychologists (DeAngelis, 2022) and teachers (O'Farrell et al., 2022), in particular, can play a crucial role in challenging and addressing negative stereotypes about mental illness.

Mental health as a human right provides a robust legal and ethical mandate for ensuring universal access to care and protecting individuals from discrimination (WHO, 2023). The "breach of the fundamental right to access healthcare" (Votruba & Thornicroft, 2015) for people with mental disorders underscores the urgency of this issue. Stigma is not merely a social inconvenience; it actively "erodes the benefits of early intervention" (Goodwin & Zaman, 2023) and perpetuates marginalisation, trapping individuals in cycles of disadvantage. This necessitates that policies should not only provide initiatives but also actively work towards eliminating discriminatory laws and address societal prejudices and attitudes (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018). Organisations cannot achieve sustainable development if a significant part of the population is denied their fundamental human rights due to mental health conditions. Policies must prioritise legislative reform (Dybdahl & Lien, 2018), implement widespread public awareness campaigns (Srivastava et al., 2016), and ensure culturally sensitive care (Gopalkrishnan, 2018) to abolish stigma (Stuart, 2016) and ensure equitable access for all (Hailemariam et al., 2016) aligning directly with SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

## 12. DISCUSSION

A comprehensive, holistic and multi-level approach is required to achieve advanced mental health as part of the SDG. The study suggests identification and introduction of interventional programmes from early childhood, particularly in educational institutions (Pandey, 2018; Agnafors et al., 2021; Tornivuori et al., 2023). Addressing mental health challenges will not only support the child's academic achievements (Hjorth et al., 2016) but also promote long-term well-being. Policies must take into account the cultural (Gopalkrishnan, 2018; Reverte, 2022; Gronholm et al., 2023) and individual differences, ensuring that mental health care is inclusive and diverse. Intervention programs and strategies must meet the needs of children belonging to diverse social, cultural and economic backgrounds to ensure equitable access to mental health care. The education department should take initiatives to skilfully train teachers to identify, assess, and deal with mental health-related issues of the students inside and outside the classroom (O'Farrell et al., 2022).

At the community level, investment to create safe spaces (Breedvelt et al., 2022; Polcarová & Pupíková, 2022), inclusive programs (Burlacu et al., 2023), and most importantly, cross-sector collaborations (Marín-González, 2022) to strengthen social cohesion and resilience must be introduced. Evidence-based models such as health worker programs (Castillo et al., 2019; Hans & Sharan, 2021), school-based prevention initiatives (O'Farrell et al., 2022), housing regeneration programmes (Winston, 2021), and collaborative care (Kirkbride et al., 2024) demonstrate the value of sustainable funding, workforce training, and supportive policy frameworks. In correctional homes, large-scale trials on therapeutic and psychological interventions like behaviour cognitive therapy, pharmacological treatment when

necessary (Gómez-Figueroa & Camino-Proañó, 2022) are needed to reduce recidivism and secure continuity for care even after release (Beaudry et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 2023).

Globally, integrating mental health into Sustainable Development Goals is crucial to bridge the treatment gap and demonstrate its role in justice, social equity, human capital development (Mills, 2018), and peace. Key priorities include expanding community-based services (Hans & Sharan, 2021), embedding a culturally sensitive approach (Gopalkrishnan, 2018; Reverte, 2022; Gronholm et al., 2023), addressing stigmas (Stuart, 2016), discrimination (Gronholm et al., 2023; Østergaard et al., 2023), and human rights violations (WHO, 2023). It is crucial to implement tailored interventions and stronger legal protections to address these issues. Enhancing community-based services and integrating mental health into primary care are crucial steps to reduce the treatment gap in developing and underdeveloped countries (Srivastava et al., 2016; Stuart, 2016).

To address the interconnected challenges and achieve the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the following recommendations for policy and practice are suggested:

- Advocate for a holistic and multi-level approach to create a supportive mental well-being across society. A comprehensive integrated approach like "Mental Health in All Policies" (Wahlbeck et al., 2017), "Whole-of-Government Approach" (Pirkis et al., 2023) can be implemented by governmental agencies through proper collaboration and efforts between government and non-government agencies by emphasising the need to prioritise mental health in areas such as education, housing and health care.
- Prioritise substantial investment in comprehensive, integrated, and community-based mental health services as a fundamental component of Universal Health Coverage (United Nations, 2019). This includes ensuring easy and affordable access to essential medicines and shifting towards substantial funding to create stable mental health systems.
- Implement targeted interventions to address the social determinants of mental health, such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, and housing insecurity and recognise these as direct mental health interventions.
- Promoting and protecting environmental responsibility and climate action as an integral public mental health initiative, accessibility to green spaces and encouraging pro-environmental behaviours that can enhance a sense of purpose and community engagement among the population. It can also have a positive impact on individual and community well-being.
- Institutions should implement a systematic approach for improving mental health through informed decision-making and accountability. Investing in a strong research system for data collection and assessment of the intervention programmes. These initiatives can be crucial for framing evidence-based policies and effective progress monitoring to demonstrate the tangible returns on mental health investments.
- Launch extensive campaigns to address and reduce mental health stigma, protect human rights, ensure equitable access to care and full participation in society for individuals with mental health conditions. The ultimate goal is to foster a supportive environment that respects and upholds the rights of everyone, regardless of their mental health status.

Together, these strategies affirm mental health as a foundation for sustainable development, requiring sustained investment, inclusive policies, and collaborative action at different levels.

In conclusion, recognising the importance of mental health for achieving a sustainable and equitable future should not be seen just as progress of the society, but a fundamental factor that determines sustainable development. This comprehensive approach is not simply a matter of public health; it is essential for preserving human dignity, social resilience, and ensuring collective capacity to fulfil the current needs while safeguarding the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987).

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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