

World Health Organisation

Health Literacy and Sustainable Development

Health Literacy is defined as the degree to which an individual has the capacity to find, understand, and use information and services in relation to health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.¹ Literacy is a human right and a valuable tool for personal empowerment and a means for social and human development.² At its core, literacy is essential for eradicating poverty, improving the socio-economic status of communities, reducing child and maternal mortality rates, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and promoting sustainable development at the local, regional, and national levels.³ The World Health Organisation defines health literacy as “an achievement of a level of knowledge, personal skills and confidence to take action to improve personal and community health by changing personal lifestyles and living conditions.” Health literacy projects that help to distribute information through educational programs for both youth and adult learners is vital. One example of a groundbreaking health literacy project was the collaboration between the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and other stakeholders that resulted in the launching of EDUAIDS in 2004. This was a project that helped increase the knowledge and literacy around the HIV/AIDS crisis in several countries around the world.⁴ Health literacy can be achieved by promoting solutions like making sure health professionals are aware of education levels of their patients, ensuring that cultural beliefs and customs are respected, proper training for health professionals, adult education plans, and more. With a focus on health literacy, a country and those who live there have a greater chance at sustainability and overall development.

Improving Access to Maternal Healthcare Resources

In May 2023, the World Health Organization announced it would host the first meeting for the Hemoglobinopathies Guideline Development subgroup.⁵ WHO aims to provide informative guidelines to address the implications of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) upon pregnancy, responsible for over a quarter of indirect maternity deaths in 2017. Current healthcare guidelines fail to address the unique complexities of NCDs during maternity, where those that do are often within high resource facilities. Information is often focused upon low risk communities, placing minority communities at risk, when NCD complications and other conditions such as obstetric fistula may be prevented with comprehensive health services.⁶ Bridging this gap of information will contribute to SDG 3.1, to reduce the maternal mortality ratio, and SDG 5 for gender equality.⁷

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/health-literacy-and-sustainable-development>

² <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/health-literacy-and-sustainable-development>

³ <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/health-literacy-and-sustainable-development>

⁴ <https://www.unesco.org/en>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news/item/14-05-2023-meeting-hemoglobinopathies-subgroup-for-who-recommendations-on-screening-and-management-of-ncds>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/twenty-years-progress-not-enough-we-must-act-now-end-obstetric-fistula>

⁷ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3>