

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

A GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION



United Nations
Youth Office



UNU
Global
Health

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FOREWORD

UN YOUTH OFFICE

Today's generation of young people is coming of age in an era marked by uncertainty, yet also by unprecedented opportunities. Their struggles and aspirations reflect the state of our shared humanity.

When one in seven young people experiences a mental health condition, when suicide remains among the leading causes of youth death, and when stigma continues to silence too many voices, we must acknowledge that youth mental health is far from a peripheral concern. It is central to peace, justice, and sustainable development.

Mental health is about dignity, belonging, and human connection. It is about ensuring that every young person, regardless of where they are born or who they are, can thrive in environments that nurture their full potential. Achieving this requires a shift from reactive crisis response to proactive ecosystems of care, reimagining schools, workplaces, digital spaces, and communities as places that foster purpose, creativity, and resilience.

The Youth Mental Health & Well-being Flagship Initiative of the United Nations Youth Office embodies this vision. It reminds us that empowering young people is not only about delivering services, but about listening to them, trusting them, and co-creating solutions with them. From sports fields to art studios, from classrooms to online platforms, we must meet youth where they are, ensuring that mental health is embedded in the fabric of their daily lives.

Across continents, I have witnessed young leaders transform their pain into purpose, their vulnerability into strength, and their local realities into global movements. They are building communities of care that transcend borders and disciplines.

Our responsibility is to amplify their voices and invest in their ideas.

Let us stand together in one conviction: ***there is no sustainable future without prioritizing youth mental health and well-being.***

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Felipe Paullier', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr. Felipe Paullier

Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs

FOREWORD

UN UNIVERSITY

In every generation, young people re-imagine what is possible. Today, they are doing so in a world of profound uncertainty, facing climate anxiety, digital saturation, inequality, and economic instability. Yet, as the proposed Youth Mental Health & Well-being Flagship reminds us, uncertainty is also a place of becoming. It is where imagination meets resilience, and where collective action can transform despair into hope.

Youth mental health and well-being are not marginal concerns; they must be at the center of societal flourishing for all nations¹. Around the world, young people are calling for systems that listen, respond, and include them – not as mere beneficiaries but as partners and co-creators of a just and sustainable future. Their voices make clear that mental health is not simply the absence of illness. It is a dynamic state of dignity, purpose, connection, and possibility that thrives in communities where rights are protected, and youth participation is meaningful and equitable.

Recognizing mental health as a fundamental human right, as affirmed by global human rights frameworks and by the United Nations, compels us to look beyond biomedical responses. It urges us to design societies where young people can grow and lead. Such an approach demands investment not only in services but in the very ecosystems that shape life: education, work, climate, technology, arts, spirituality, and peace. Each of these spaces can nurture or hinder physical and mental well-being. Together, they form an environment in which youth either merely survive or truly thrive.

The Youth Mental Health and Well-being Ecosystem Model proposed in this report is a timely contribution. It invites us to think systemically and act collaboratively, to align evidence with empathy, and to connect global

policy with the lived realities of young people everywhere. It reminds us that well-being is relational and regenerative, that each young person's flourishing is bound to that of their communities and planet.

The technical framework presented reflects this integrated vision: linking research, policy, and practice across areas such as community-based prevention, digital well-being, education and skills for inclusion, sustainable livelihoods, and the intersections of climate, housing, and peace. These themes, anchored in equity and human rights, offer concrete pathways for building resilient systems that protect and promote youth mental health.

As we look toward the future, let us hold fast to an ambition of investing in youth mental health. It is essential groundwork for peace, for equitable development, for re-imagining our shared future, and for the transformational changes necessary for operationalizing joint ambitions. The flagship gives us both the evidence and the inspiration to act, and to do so with young people up front and at the center. United Nations University International Institute for Global Health remains committed to the principles and ambitions of the Youth Mental Health & Well-being Flagship.



Dr. Revati Phalkey

Director, United Nations University International Institute for Global Health (UNU Global Health)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of *Youth Mental Health & Well-being in an Uncertain World: A Global Call to Action* was led from conception to publication by **Maria Martha Barreneche, PhD, United Nations Youth Office**, in close collaboration with **Luis D'Souza, DPhil, United Nations University International Institute for Global Health**.

This publication is the result of a genuinely collaborative and participatory process. It was shaped through continuous consultation with young people across regions, including the youth advocates and youth-led initiatives in mental health and well-being whose lived experiences, insights, and recommendations informed the structure, thematic areas, and call to action presented in this report. Their contributions reflect the central principle that youth mental health and well-being must be co-created with young people.

A dedicated Academic Committee of Reviewers provided expert guidance throughout the drafting process. Their scholarly and multidisciplinary insights strengthened the conceptual foundation, ensured scientific rigor, and grounded the publication within global evidence and practice.

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- **Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia.** Babcock University. Nigeria
- **Alexandra Romero Vidal.** MSc in Global Mental Health at King's College London and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. UK
- **Inês Costa Louro.** European Commission - Blue Book Trainee at DG SANTE C4. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHOEurope) – EVID ACTION Youth Network
- **Michael A. Lindsey.** NYU Silver School of Social Work
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Following the academic review, the report benefited from a Final Commission of Reviewers representing WHO, UNICEF, and UNESCO. Their technical feedback ensured alignment with UN system priorities, global frameworks, and emerging evidence on mental health policy, prevention, and youth well-being.

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- **Yongfeng Liu**. Programme Specialist, UNESCO Section of Health and Education

The United Nations Youth Office and UNU Global Health also gratefully acknowledge the collaboration and support of **young leaders around the world** who contributed testimonials, community insights, and localized solutions—demonstrating the depth, diversity, and innovation of youth mental health leadership globally.

- **Amani Joel Mafigi**, UN Youth Reference group. Kampala, Uganda;
- **Saumya Aggarwal**, UN Youth Reference group. New Delhi, India;
- **Ishaan Shah**, UN Youth Reference Group. United Kingdom;
- **Andrea Granata**, Youth Delegate Italy;
- **Chriara Gistini**, Youth Delegate Italy;
- **Ivette Feliz Padilla**, Youth Delegate Germany;
- **Alex D. Masanja**, Youth Delegate Tanzania;
- **Jana Berchtold**, Youth Delegate Austria;
- **Markus Mamadou Wane**, Youth Delegate Austria;
- **Lauren Jones Brennan**, Youth Delegate Ireland;
- **Oscar Lopez**, Youth Delegate USA;
- **Abdulkarim Harakow**, Youth Delegate Denmark;
- **Veronika Novotná**, Youth Delegate Czechia;
- **Linda Akitela Longole**, Youth Delegate Kenya;
- **Tjaž Črnčec**, Youth Delegate Slovenia;
- **Ufot Faith Nkiruka**, Young leader Nigeria;
- **Sidi Cheikh Khairou**, Young leader Mauritania;
- **Tahir Bashir**. Pakistan, MEAL Officer;
- **Baba Allanana Kwogo**, Young leader Nigeria;
- **Nomin Gerelbat**, Mongolia. Y-peer Mongolia NGO;
- **Sara Joy**, Young leader India;
- **Ibrahim Abdullahi**, Young leader Nigeria;
- **Fábio Borges dos Santos**, Brazil. Youngpeacebuilder;
- **Marco Tano**, from Tanzania, Youth engagement lead Tanzania;
- **Mr. David Ohene-Amoako**, Young leader Canada;
- **Suki Wenyan Sung**, Young leader China;
- **Dr Radhika Batra**, India. Founder and President - Every Infant Matters;
- **Lana Koubaitary**, Syria. Collaborations Coordinator at Catalyst Now;
- **Collince Dund**, Young leader Kenya;
- **Puneet Singh Singhal**, India. Founder, "Green Disability";
- **Enouce Ndeche**. Kenya, Young Social Entrepreneur;
- **Samuel Niyomuremyi**, Young leader Rwanda;
- **Fauziya Abubakar Kure**, Young leader Nigeria;
- **Linda Agyei**, Ghana - Adinkra Spark CRO;
- **Sadabieu Sulaiman Quraishi**, Young Leader Sierra Leone;
- **Susmita Adhikari**, Young leader Nepal;
- **Hafeezah Abdulraheem**, Young leader Nigeria;
- **Gianluca Hernandez**, United States - Social Entrepreneur;
- **Amálie Salajková**, Czech Psychology Student;
- **Mostafa Abdelhay**, Egypt. Vice President of Creativity Lab for Empowerment and Innovation;
- **Nwokocha Chineye Smith**, Nigeria. Quest for growth and Development Foundation.
- **Francesca Raelison**, Madagascar. Founder, CEO at Omena
- **Liyara Cooray**, Young leader Sri Lanka
- **Ganga Bahadur Gautam**, Nepal. Youth Mental health in Nepal;
- **Yusuf Valentine Oduor**, Kenya. Kind Heart Organization;
- **Hadiza Idris Suleiman**, Young leader Nigeria;
- **Amani Joel Mafigi**, UN Youth Reference Group. Kampala, Uganda;
- **Saumya Aggarwa**, UN Youth Reference Group. New Delhi, India
- **Ishaan Shah**, UN Youth Reference Group. London, United Kingdom;
- **Ines Costa Louro**, UN Youth Reference Group. Lisbon, Portugal;
- **Jacob Blasius**. UN Youth Reference Group. Copenhagen, Denmark.

Finally, the publication recognizes the contributions of **youth-led initiatives on mental health and well-being**, whose models reflect the transformative potential of community-rooted, culturally grounded, and youth-driven approaches. Their work illustrates what ecosystems of care can look like in practice and they provided essential case insights that informed the ecosystem model presented in this publication.

- **Michael Kakande & Damalie Muwonge** – Resilient 40 – Uganda;
- **Stephanie Whiteman** – Young Caribbean Minds – Barbados;
- **Jin Dawod** – Peace Therapist – Turkey/Syria;
- **Wendy Wang** – Nora Therapy – China;
- **Susmita Adhikari** – Youth Initiative – Nepal;
- **Francesca Raelison** – Omena – Madagascar;
- **Puspita** – Sehat Jiwa Bahagia – Indonesia;
- **Robert Rugamba** – HFG Heritage Rwanda – Rwanda;
- **Iyad Attayat** – Puppets 4 Kids – Palestine;
- **Dr. Mohammad Issa** – Climental – Palestine;
- **Kanu** – “Iafrika SL” – Sierra Leone;
- **The Pan-African Summit on Gender-Based Violence and Mental Health** – Kenya;
- **Samuel Niyomuremyi** – Ubuzima Innovation Hub – Rwanda;
- **Puneet Singh** – Green Disability – India;
- **Young Offenders Legal Aid and Reform Advocacy (YOLARA)** – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Collince Alan Dundo** – Youth Initiative Development Programme (YIDP) – Kenya;
- **Angwere Claude Che Azah** – Collective Arts Development Association (CADA) – Cameroon;
- **Jesca Beatus** – We Thrive Africa Initiative – Tanzania;
- **Opeyemi Oshilagun** – Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative (MANI) – Nigeria
- **Enebong Blessing** – Brace Up Integrated Consult – Nigeria;
- **Lynnet Njeru** – The Umundu Artivism – Kenya;
- **Elizabeth Ita** – Mental Health Initiative (Stilt NG) – Nigeria;
- **Wafula Silas Shoki** – Peace Champions Uganda – Uganda;
- **Mitchel Mboya** – Young Offenders Legal Aid and Reform Advocacy (YOLARA) – Kenya;
- **Deborah Omage** – Mental Health Transformation (MHT) – Nigeria;
- **Saumya Aggarwal** – India; **Esther Eruchie** – FriendnPal – Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa;
- **Maryam Surveh** – Wellness Within Hub – Tanzania
- **Takunda Clement Chanetsa** – HIV and Mental Health Care – Zimbabwe;
- **Glory Livingstone** – Mental Health Africa – Tanzania;
- **Olorunfemi Solomon Olorunsaiye** – Dr Olorunfemi Life Foundation (DOLF) – Nigeria;
- **Jecinta Egbim** – Friends Advocacy for Mental Health Initiative – Nigeria
- **Deborah Oyedijo** – MentalPadi – Nigeria;
- **Shuaib Ibrahim Hanif** – Drug Free Club – Nigeria;
- **Adekunle Ajisafe** – Sasaenian Concept – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Ahmed Mohamed Shadid** – No initiative listed – Egypt;
- **Patricia Ayandokun** – Kids & Youth Academy – Côte d’Ivoire;
- **Rest Essence** – Campus Cares – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Daniel Yovanni Gordillo** – Emkubar – Bogotá, Colombia;
- **Siwar AlKhawaldeh** – PSYAI – Amman, Jordan;
- **Aishatu Adam** – Eclectic Love – Accra, Ghana;
- **Adil Mukhi** – Dr. Interested – Mississauga, Canada;
- **Omar Saad** – Max Level of Positivity – Chouf, Lebanon;
- **Anderson Taborda Valencia** – Integración Generacional y Salud Mental en los Jóvenes;
- **Cafeteros** – Obando, Valle del Cauca, Colombia;
- **Kihome Evans Kimathi** – Creative Nexus Organization – Laikipia, Kenya;
- **Amina Shale** – More Than A Smile Foundation Inc. / Fun and Play Community Engagement Program – Louisville, United States;
- **Cesar Gonzalez Rincon** – Entornos Seguros para una Movilidad Más Humana – Bogotá, Colombia;
- **Ashraf Gamal Atiya** – Youth Mental Health & Well-Being – Egypt;
- **Aishatu Adam** – Eclectic Love / Travel Deeper Inc. – Accra, Ghana;
- **Chinenyenwa Anioke** – Helen Pad the Girl Child Initiative – Enugu, Nigeria;
- **Abdul Rauf Mahama** – Tamale Offline Hangout – Tamale, Ghana;
- **Ecy King** – Tech for Togetherness: Pan-African Paradigms for Digital Thriving in Community – Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA;
- **Abubakar Usman** – Voices of Tomorrow Initiative – Katsina, Nigeria;
- **Omer** – Darfur Youth Center for Peace and Development – El-Fashir, Sudan;
- **Roland Ndyukumwami Michael** – KwezaUp – Kyegegwa, Uganda;
- **Charlotte Grace Yu** – No initiative listed – Toronto, Canada;
- **Hakim Martha Henry** – INTA MOHIM Women Organization – Juba, South Sudan;
- **Aashna Parsa** – Youth for Neurodiversity Inc. – San Jose, California, USA;
- **Elizabeth Ameke** – GleeChild Initiative – New York, USA;
- **Ally Zlatar** – The Starving Artist – Glasgow, Scotland;
- **Ana Gigashvili** – Sidekick – Belgium;

- **Aurelia Baez** – Pretty People Protest – Staten Island, United States;
- **Barsin Yassine** – Bahdan Nafissatou Sara – U-Report by UNICEF Congo / YEEPE ONG – Brazzaville, Congo / Bangui, CAR;
- **Dhanvinkumar Ganeshkumar** – Swype AI & Youth Accessibility Network – Chantilly, United States;
- **Aydan Comba** – IDD ORG – Samsun, Türkiye
- **Gershon Asajile** – Tanzania Mental Health Professional Network – Morogoro, Tanzania;
- **Boluwatife Daramola** – The Mental Health Summit – Osun State, Nigeria;
- **Awinpang Josiah Apuwen** – Winpang Youth Initiative – Zebilla, Ghana;
- **Duillean O’Sullivan** – No initiative listed – Clare, Ireland;
- **Harris Bongam** – Solid Minds – Douala, Cameroon;
- **Christopher O. Fallah** – Annita – Monrovia, Liberia;
- **Olakunbi Oyedele** – Living Vines Mental Health Foundation – Lagos State, Nigeria;
- **Abubakar Saidu Midala** – Youth Ambassador Democracy – Nigeria;
- **Emmanuel Gweamee** – Nyamee Creative Arts Studios – Monrovia, Liberia;
- **Ana Michelle Téllez Ferrer** – AlmaFuerteLab – Barranquilla, Colombia;
- **Alexandra María Téllez Ferrer** – Alma Fuerte® – Barranquilla, Colombia;
- **Borja Rubio Martin** – No initiative listed – Valencia, Spain;
- **Fegens Louis Jeune** – ERITYE WOZO AYITI (EWAYITI) – Dame Marie, Haiti;
- **Daniel Ochieng** – Kibera Youth Organization – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Aurelia Baez** – Tunnel to Towers – Staten Island, United States;
- **Gbadoe Rudel** – Mental Health Promotion (MHP) – Lomé, Togo;
- **Freeman Haruna** – Warji Youth Network for Change – Bauchi, Nigeria;
- **Abdi Mpongwe** – Red Ribbon Initiative – Kilimanjaro, Tanzania;
- **Esha Warrior** – StressSOS – Los Angeles, United States;
- **Ayaan Moledina** – Students Engaged in Advancing Texas (SEAT) – Austin, USA;
- **Alberto Pérez Portela** – C.D. Da Rúa / University of Vigo – Pontevedra, Spain;
- **Fernando Carrera Vega** – Bak’omondo – Acapulco, México;
- **Alex Aguirre** – Institute for Peace & Development (IPADES) – San José, Costa Rica;
- **Adam Rose** – No initiative listed – Washington, DC, USA;
- **Blessed Mollet Nyika** – Molletbie Educational Funding – Harare, Zimbabwe;
- **Festus Hallie Jimmy** – Network Empowerment for Young Generations – Sierra Leone;
- **Trisha Rao** – Global Leadership Outreach and Well-Being – San Diego, CA;
- **Eglah Dauda Gah** – No initiative listed – Adamawa State, Nigeria;
- **Dominique Chloe Gwyneth Djamal** – Tuntunlangkahku & Sejah Doa – Jakarta, Indonesia;
- **Andrew Mugambi** – Toto Centre Initiative – Lamu, Kenya;
- **Chisom Udoeye** – Voices of Wellbeing – Ontario, Canada;
- **Aisha Mohammed** – Koowa Initiative – Accra, Ghana;
- **Abubakar Alhassan Mohammed** – Education Support to the Poor – Damaturu, Yobe State, Nigeria;
- **Cat Pham** – EMBRACE Vietnam – Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
- **Bianca Nyamuparadza** – Beyond the Cycle – Johannesburg, South Africa;
- **A.A. Ayu Ratna Wulandari** – Kisara PKBI Bali – Denpasar, Indonesia;
- **Chibuzo Ogbonnaya** – Mental Health Matters (#DontBullyMeCampaign) – Abuja, Nigeria;
- **Claytos Chimoto** – Kudakwashe Care Centre – Harare, Zimbabwe;
- **Fiyinfoluwa On ajoko** – No Shame Campaign – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Hannah Rotimi-Williams** – AgriWellness Support Network – Ibadan, Nigeria;
- **Cathrine Mashonganyika** – Youth Health Network Africa (YoHeNA) – Harare, Zimbabwe;
- **Tafadzwa Muzira** – Youth Health Network Africa (YoHeNA) – Harare, Zimbabwe;
- **Fiyinfoluwa Onajoko** – ASIDO Foundation – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Aliyu Abubakar** – No initiative listed – Yola, Nigeria;
- **Bileng Ajesembom Estella** – Major Group for Children and Youth International / MUN Young Leaders Parliament (GAICAM) – Yaoundé, Cameroon;
- **Jamilah Nantale** – Munnange Counselling Centre – Entebbe, Uganda;
- **Abdul Ghaffar** – Bugti Progressive Students Society – Dera Bugti, Pakistan;
- **Aita Senegal** – Hope – New York, USA;
- **Daffa Rafiudin & Chibin** – No initiative listed – Surabaya, Indonesia;
- **Kiplangat Ngetich** – Awakening Souls Institute – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Ajit Udhan** – No initiative listed – Aurangabad, India;
- **Kamilla Beknazarova** – MediaSafe – Tashkent, Uzbekistan;
- **Samson Echefu** – Dato Sam’s Recipe Foundation – Abuja, Nigeria;
- **Emmanuel Benjamin** – NextGen Lab Scholars – Kaduna, Nigeria;
- **Emmanuel Joseph Edu** – Kingdom Leadership Academy – Calabar, Nigeria;
- **Abdulai Dauda Kamara** – No initiative listed – Freetown, Sierra Leone;
- **Freely Tanatswa Moyo** – Global Youth Talkshow – Gweru, Zimbabwe;
- **Flora Ngina Mwale** – Empower Mind – Zomba, Malawi;
- **Esther Edward Semba** – Afyana Movement Organisation – Dar es Salaam, Tanzania;
- **Samuel Ramyil** – D’Care for Humanity Center – Nigeria;
- **Jackson Muchemi Mumbi** – Nanyuki Teaching and Referral Hospital – Nanyuki, Kenya;
- **Florence Lungu** – EmpowerHer – Zambia;
- **Anne Nguthuku** – Psych-Rescue – Nairobi, Kenya;

- **Janepher Kadondi** – Maternal Mental Health Advocacy – Kampala, Uganda;
- **Benito Joshua** – MindMatters Malawi – Lilongwe, Malawi;
- **Moses Ndegwa** – YouthNow Global – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Shayni Geffen** – Youth Advocacy Forum (South African Federation for Mental Health) – Cape Town, South Africa;
- **Amath Ndiaye** – United Diplomats of Africa – Dakar, Senegal;
- **Samuel Junior Ainemabazi** – Freeman Charity & Youth Development Foundation – Kamwenge, Uganda;
- **Antash Saleem** – Antash Saleem – Sukkur, Pakistan;
- **Emily Bhatnagar** – For Love & Buttercup – Washington, DC, USA;
- **Claudius Mbuya** – Cloudton Hamp Ventures Sustainability Group – Kisumu, Kenya;
- **David Wanjiku** – Hope for Life – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Abiel Teshome Kefale** – Ecohealth Nexus Alliance – Addis Ababa, Ethiopia;
- **Derek Cheung** – Togetheristic – Singapore;
- **Aryatweta Hudson** – No initiative listed – Kampala, Uganda;
- **Danya Sharma** – Independent Youth Contributor (UNYO) – New Delhi, India;
- **Motunrayo Balogun** – Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Bandgar Rishikesh** – Wayfield Agricultural Technology – New Delhi, India;
- **Amoun Ismail** – UBAH Inspire Initiative Organization – Hargeisa, Somalia;
- **Doris M. Benas** – Everyday Justice Club – Dar es Salaam, Tanzania;
- **Ahsan Naeem** – Outdoor Leadership Club – Peshawar, Pakistan;
- **Ahmed Alsadig Haroon Ahmed** – Artista Association – Aldmzain;
- **Eric Musiwa Banda** – African Youth Employment Initiatives (AYEI) – Nkhata Bay, Malawi;
- **Bénédicte Idingaka** – Génération Ruth Youth Initiative – Kinshasa, DR Congo;
- **Amadrio Albright** – No initiative listed – Kampala, Uganda;
- **Carla Valeria Arceo Arceo** – eduGO – Mexico;
- **Bukasa Kabwe** – BEPE (Bureau d'Étude pour la Paix et Protection de l'Environnement) – Goma, DR Congo;
- **Elvis Mburu** – Kenya Model United Nations – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Francois Semana** – Eco Climate Vision – Kigali, Rwanda;
- **Fayyaz Ahmad** – No initiative listed – Islamabad, Pakistan;
- **Adedeji Aderounmu** – Minds Without Borders Nigeria – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Erick Mahatara** – Mental Health Africa – Kilimanjaro, Tanzania;
- **Jackson Shawa** – Here to Love (Youth-led NGO) – Lusaka, Zambia;
- **Catherine Ndungu** – Art Beyond – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Eliud Edward** – Leveraging Football Coaching for Mental Health Education – Tanzania;
- **Muhammad Abdulhamid** – Skillora Academy Limited – Nigeria;
- **Fatimah Zannah** – Future Prowess Foundation – Borno State, Nigeria;
- **Mojisola Ajayi** – MentalSpace Foundation Africa – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Joyce Liu** – Celeste VR – New York, United States;
- **Leocadia Gaudencia** – Ustawi Kenya – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Adideme Axelrod-Christian Dègla** – Benin Malaria Youth Corps – Parakou, Benin;
- **Dohou Fifame Prosperous** – The Sane Place Community – Lagos, Nigeria;
- **Ezinne Osuamadi** – Ladies Crushing IT – Lagos, Nigeria
- **Nguty Stella Etoh-Nombo** – DIBA Holistic Wellness Care – Buea, Cameroon;
- **Agnes Etuah** – Buoyant Future Foundation – Apam, Ghana;
- **Wunmi Hassan-Bello** – War Against Rape and Sexual Abuse (WARS) – Kaduna, Nigeria;
- **Bilkisu Gambo Dauda** – Self Help Africa – Kano, Nigeria;
- **Chofor Shurri Vera** – She Can Excel – Bamenda, Cameroon;
- **Ivan Fredrick Kasonko** – Key Populations Uganda – Kampala, Uganda;
- **Enock Rutto** – Rise Up for Change – Nairobi, Kenya;
- **Daniel Kabii** – HEYDJ LTD – Kenya;
- **Elizabeth Kasujja** – Clear Yo Mind – Kampala, Uganda;
- **Fadhlullah Abiodun Kehinde** – University of Ilorin TIMHC – Kwara, Nigeria;
- **Agnes Angule** – Kakamega Women Telecenter – Edinburgh, United Kingdom;
- **Dennis Taban Okeny** – Turkana Resilience Circle – Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya;
- **Brian Wamukota** – Vijana in KilimoBiz – Eldoret, Kenya;
- **Habib Taiwo Adebisi** – Adebisi Habib Foundation – Lagos, Nigeria.

The United Nations Youth Office and UNU Global Health extend heartfelt gratitude to every individual and institution whose time, expertise, and lived experience made this publication possible. Their collective commitment reaffirms that promoting and protecting youth mental health and well-being is a shared responsibility — and a shared hope for a more just, peaceful, and flourishing future.

Design and layout by Kate Hogan, NYU Silver School of Social Work

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD: A GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Holistic, Youth-Centred Approach

In today's disorienting and complex global landscape, young people are navigating unprecedented challenges—shaped by economic instability, climate emergencies, social injustices, and the pervasive influence of digital culture—that profoundly impact young people's mental health and well-being. This flagship calls for a holistic, community-centered approach that affirms youth agency and supports their well-being as they navigate present challenges and shape a more just, sustainable future.

Understanding Youth Mental Health & Well-being

Youth mental health and well-being is a dynamic state shaped by personal, social, and structural factors, particularly in the first years of identity building. Promoting youth mental health and well-being requires inclusive, equity-based strategies that respond to the diverse and inequitable realities young people face across the globe.

Mental Health as a Fundamental Human Right

Recognizing mental health and well-being as a fundamental human right represents a transformative shift in global policy, affirmed by multiple Human Rights Council and UN Member States resolutions. These call for rights-based, inclusive, and community-centered care systems, emphasizing that mental health depends on environments that uphold dignity, promote social and political connection, and foster equitable opportunities through policies, and practices that promote and protect mental health and well-being.

Mental Health & Well-Being for Sustainable Development

Mental health and well-being are essential yet underrecognized pillars of sustainable development and are closely linked to achieving SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4.2 (access to quality early childhood development), SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16.2 (ending all forms of violence against children). However, promoting good mental health should also be seen as a catalyst to achieving all SDGs. With mental conditions costing the global economy trillions annually and projected to rise sharply, current investments fall far short of need. Evidence shows that every dollar invested in mental health yields significant economic and social returns, particularly through early intervention for youth, which enhances education, employment, and social inclusion outcomes.

A Global Mental Health & Well-being Crisis

Mental health challenges represent a fast-rising global emergency, impacting nearly one in eight people worldwide, with conditions like anxiety and depression rising sharply, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people bear a disproportionate burden, as most mental health conditions emerge by age 24, with suicide remaining a leading cause of death among youth globally—particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Despite growing awareness, promotion and access to mental health care is severely limited, hindered by service shortages, cost, and stigma. In response, UN entities advocate for community-based, rights-respecting mental health models that integrate social determinants and promote inclusive, accessible care, reflecting a generational shift toward openness and collective action to address this urgent global challenge.

Youth Mental Health & Well-being Ecosystem Approach

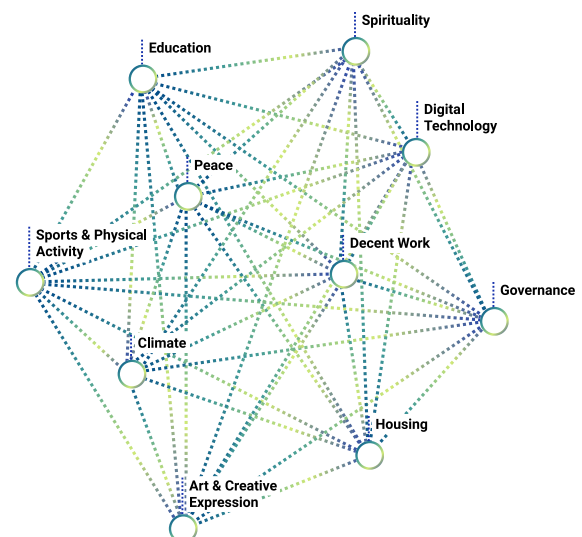
Youth mental health and well-being is deeply influenced by the complex social, political, cultural, economic, spiritual, and ecological environments in which young people live. Promoting and improving their mental health requires more than addressing individual symptoms; it demands tackling the broader conditions that cause distress and building environments that foster resilience. True well-being extends beyond the absence of psychological illness and depends heavily on meaningful social connections and supportive communities. Each young person reflects the cultural and environmental contexts surrounding them, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches. Although many efforts have focused on policy, capacity building, and systemic care, there remains an urgent need to adopt a protective, ecosystem-wide model that promotes and protects youth well-being through interconnected, regenerative systems—offering a promising path forward.

Building the Youth Mental Health & Well-being Ecosystem Model

In today's complex, ever-changing, and often uncertain world, young people need to be embedded within ecosystems that can help them not only withstand but grow through adversity. Thriving does not imply the absence of hardship or struggle; rather, it involves having the skills, support and resources at the individual and community level to navigate mental health challenges and states of distress. These challenges are not fixed endpoints but experiences that can be faced within networks of care and connection spanning all areas of young people's lives.

This proposal outlines key thematic areas rooted in the lived experiences of youth from diverse backgrounds, which also serve as strategic entry points for partnerships and policymaking aimed at proactively supporting youth mental health and well-being and promoting youth agency worldwide.

The Youth Mental Health & Well-being Ecosystem Model is a flexible model designed to be culturally adaptable while recognizing global diversity. It highlights often overlooked key areas in youth mental health and well-being, helping governments and institutions take a more holistic, multisectoral approach on the promotion and protection of youth mental health and well-being.



Youth Mental Health & Well-Being Ecosystem Model

Governance

Governance shapes well-being by establishing inclusive policies, structures, and participation mechanisms that empower youth to engage meaningfully in their communities, fostering purpose, trust, and resilience essential for their mental health and societal flourishing.

Peace

Encompassing physical safety, social harmony, trust, and justice and recognizing that youth are affected by armed conflict, forced displacement, political silencing and repression, gang violence, and structural discrimination carry the burden of instability and fear. Environments grounded in social inclusion, restorative justice, intercultural dialogue, and community peacebuilding create protective contexts for emotional healing, hope, and belonging.

Spirituality

Spirituality is a vital dimension of youth well-being, offering a sense of meaning, connection, and purpose that supports emotional resilience, self-awareness, and healthy coping; by nurturing inner life and transcendent experiences, spirituality fosters compassionate thinking and belonging, making it an essential—yet often overlooked—element in promoting holistic mental health and human development.

Housing

Housing is not just a physical space but a source of dignity, privacy, identity, and belonging. For youth, especially those experiencing poverty, migration, family breakdown, or institutional care, housing instability can lead to isolation, trauma, and exclusion. Safe, inclusive, and affordable housing environments foster emotional regulation, relational stability, and a sense of home.

Climate

The climate and environmental crisis profoundly impacts youth mental health, as young people not only face direct physical risks from environmental degradation but also experience intense emotions like anxiety and helplessness about the future.

Education

Education is a crucial pillar of youth mental health and well-being, with schools and universities serving as not only places of learning but also vital environments that foster social and emotional development, resilience, and connection. Through evidence-based whole-school approaches, education systems can strengthen protective factors and address rising mental health challenges—including bullying, discrimination, peer pressure and academic stress—while promoting safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Decent Work

Work is a vital component of youth well-being, providing structure, purpose, social connection, and financial security that protect mental health, yet it can also be a source of significant stress—especially for young workers facing job insecurity, discrimination, and poor working conditions; addressing these challenges requires integrated, multisectoral approaches that promote decent work, support mental health in the workplace, and tackle youth unemployment and precarious employment to empower young people and foster their mental well-being.

Digital Technology

Technology profoundly shapes youth mental health and well-being, offering opportunities for connection and innovation while posing risks such as digital exclusion, cyberbullying, harmful content, and identity distortion—making ethical governance, inclusive access, and youth-centered digital ecosystems essential to safeguarding their rights, dignity, and thriving in the digital age.

Art & Creative Expression

Arts are powerful drivers of youth well-being, enabling emotional expression, cultural identity, social connection, and inner transformation through creative practices that foster resilience, self-worth, and community belonging.

Sports & Physical Activity

Sports foster youth well-being by promoting physical health, emotional regulation, resilience, and a strong sense of belonging, offering inclusive spaces where young people can connect, grow, and thrive through shared play and purpose.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Inés Yabar

CALL TO ACTION: Promoting and Protecting Youth Mental Health and Well-Being

To prevent youth mental health challenges from becoming a global crisis, societies/ countries must adopt a proactive, multisectoral approach that fosters environments where young people can flourish. Youth mental health and well-being are inseparable from the ecosystems in which they live, learn, work, and connect—each influencing their development and resilience. This flagship calls for the intentional identification and design of integrated, locally led and grounded systems that promote youth well-being through coordinated policies, programs, and resources across all areas of life.

National and local governments can use this ecosystem model to **map, identify, and coordinate existing and new initiatives that support youth mental health and well-being across key areas of young people’s lives—governance, education, climate, work, technology, arts, sports, and spirituality—engaging diverse stakeholders including ministries, nonprofits, educational institutions and the private sector.** Special attention should be given to youth-led initiatives, which offer context-relevant, innovative solutions rooted in lived experience. By activating and designing ecosystem-based strategies tailored to local needs and realities, and ensuring meaningful youth participation, governments can promote integrated, multisectoral responses that address both immediate challenges and long-term well-being.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

In today's rapidly changing and often disorienting global landscape, young people face mounting challenges that profoundly concern their mental health and overall well-being. *The Pact for the Future – Action 34* underscores a global commitment to devote investment to the social and economic development of children and youth, ensuring equitable access to essential services and conversion factors in human development such as health, education, and social protection. This commitment becomes even more urgent in light of contemporary pressures—economic and work uncertainty, climate crisis, digital immersion, and ongoing social injustices—that affect and shape how young people understand themselves and their futures.

UNICEF's *Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health* reports that six in ten youth personally experienced systemic challenges in the past year, with economic instability (53%) and climate change (51%) topping the list². More than half report a lack of hope for the future. The environmental emergency threatens planetary and human health alike—demanding not only scientific and political responses, but also ethical reflection and choices. Young people, inheritors of a damaged planet, are increasingly aware of the urgent need for action, yet often feel powerless or alienated from possible solutions.

Compounding these challenges is the impact of digital technologies. The rise of social media, virtual interaction, artificial intelligence, digital culture, and the metaverse introduces new forms of engagement that, under the myth of perceived connectivity and connection, may exacerbate isolation, addiction, and detachment from embodied social life. While these technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for digital mental health innovation, connection, and access to information and support, they also reshape the nature of human communities and identity formation, influencing well-being in ways that have not yet been fully mapped or understood.

Moreover, UNESCO³ has identified a troubling erosion of belief among youth in their own futures, rooted in historical injustices and compounded by current inequities. In response, emerging educational frameworks such as *Repairing Futures*⁴ emphasize listening, dialogue, and reflective practices to help young people make sense of their present and envision futures beyond inherited limitations. The symbolic worlds constructed through everyday interactions and discourses—in families, schools, communities and countries—are vital in helping youth process the legacies of the past and imagine a more just, peaceful and hopeful paths forward.

This document explores the interconnected social, environmental, digital, and historical dimensions shaping youth mental health and well-being today, and argues for a holistic, community-centered approach that honours young people's agency, voice, and vision for contributing in the present to their well-becoming in desirable futures.

6 IN 10

Youth personally experienced systemic challenges in the past year.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH & WELL BEING

Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, work well, and contribute to their communities⁵. This definition highlights the importance of environments that support emotional, cognitive, and social development—particularly in youth that are at a critical moment of human life. Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing is not a fixed state⁶; it should be conceived as a dynamic and situated flow influenced by a complex interplay of personal capabilities, interpersonal relationships and external circumstances.

The mental health and well-being of young people are influenced by interrelated factors that impact self-perception and their capacity to thrive⁷. In a particular moment of life of identity encounter various challenges like exposure to life's adversities, peer pressure, loneliness, experiences of violence, media influence, prevailing gender norms, societal expectations and idealized standards of beauty or behaviour. These pressures may have a profound psychological impact, leading to anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and a deep sense of isolation⁸.

It is essential to recognize that not all young people experience mental health challenges equally. Youth mental health is especially vulnerable to structural and social inequalities. Some groups of young people face greater risks due to systemic exclusion, discrimination, or lack of access to quality support services and external capabilities. These include those living in humanitarian or conflict-affected settings^{9–10}, migrants and displaced populations¹¹, refugees¹², youth with chronic illnesses, intellectual or neurological conditions¹³, youth with disabilities¹⁴ and young parents or those in early or forced marriages¹⁵. Marginalized youth—whether due to ethnicity, gender¹⁶, or sexual orientation—often experience compounded challenges resulting from stigma, social isolation, and limited mental health resources.

On the other hand, well-being has been described through multiple frameworks and perspectives, with two dominant conceptual approaches in contemporary discussions: subjective and objective well-being. Subjective approaches emphasize individual experience and personal fulfilment, encompassing both eudaemonic

well-being, rooted in finding meaning in life, achieving personal growth, and realizing one's potential and hedonic well-being, which centres on happiness and life satisfaction, alongside related constructs such as optimism and self-acceptance¹⁷. Objective approaches, in contrast, define well-being through measurable quality-of-life indicators such as access to material resources (income, food, housing) and social attributes (education, health, political voice, social networks, and community engagement). These dimensions often reflect what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum¹⁸ termed "capabilities", understood as both an individual's actual functioning and the real opportunities available within their environment. Sen highlighted that "*no individual can think, choose, or act without being influenced [...] by the nature and working of the society around him or her*" (Sen, 2002, pp. 80–84), emphasizing that well-being is inseparable from its social context¹⁹.

This conceptualisation is also reflected in the WHO–UNICEF Global Framework for Adolescent Well-being (Ross et al., 2020)²⁰, which integrates both subjective and objective dimensions of well-being into a single, holistic model. The framework identifies five interconnected domains—health and nutrition; learning, competence and education; agency and resilience; connectedness; and safety and a supportive environment—and highlights that youth well-being is shaped not only by individual experiences, emotions, and capacities, but also by structural, social, and environmental conditions. Referencing this framework situates the discussion within a widely endorsed global model and reinforces the need to consider both personal and societal determinants when examining youth mental health and well-being.

Addressing the mental health needs of all young people requires inclusive, equity-driven strategies that recognize and respond to the diverse realities of youth across different contexts and life situations, and that are co-designed with young people to ensure their meaningful participation in shaping solutions that affect their lives. Around the world, youth are already demonstrating what such meaningful participation looks like in practice. Their initiatives—rooted in community knowledge, cultural context, and lived experience—show how young people are driving new models of care that bridge service gaps, reduce stigma, and strengthen collective well-being. *For example:*

- **Youth-Led Innovations in Mental Health from South Asia and Africa**

Across South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, young people are creating community-based, culturally grounded models of mental health support that respond to the inequities, stigma, and service gaps that many adolescents face. These examples reflect the principles of the WHO–UNICEF Global Framework for Adolescent Well-being and illustrate how youth leadership can strengthen agency, connectedness, and supportive environments.

- **Nepal – Youth Initiative (Susmita Adhikari)**

In rural districts of Nepal, the Youth Initiative trains adolescent volunteers to deliver mental health literacy sessions, run peer-support circles, and collaborate with schools and caregivers to reduce stigma. The model has expanded access for young people who rarely engage with formal services, demonstrating the effectiveness of community-based, youth-led approaches.

- **Kenya – Youth Offenders Legal Aid and Reform Advocacy (YOLARA)**

YOLARA supports young people affected by violence, discrimination, or conflict with the law through a combination of restorative justice, legal empowerment, and psychosocial support. By creating safe spaces and peer networks, the initiative strengthens belonging, reduces isolation, and supports healing in contexts marked by social and economic adversity.

- **Rwanda – Ubuzima Innovation Hub**

The Ubuzima Innovation Hub enables youth to co-design solutions—such as arts-based healing circles, mentorship groups, and community

dialogues—that respond to trauma, poverty, and intergenerational loss. By centering connection and collective resilience, the initiative reflects a strengths-based approach to youth mental health.

- **India – Green Disability**

Green Disability provides accessible psychosocial support and peer-connection programmes for young people with disabilities who face exclusion, discrimination, and systemic barriers to care. The initiative's youth leadership model reduces stigma, promotes inclusion, and connects young people to educational and social opportunities.

- **Nigeria – Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative (MANI)**

MANI operates one of Africa's largest youth-led digital mental health networks, offering suicide-prevention helplines, online peer-support groups, and awareness campaigns that reach thousands each month. Its digital-first approach expands access in contexts where specialist services remain limited and stigma prevents help-seeking.

These youth-led models highlight the creativity, courage, and leadership emerging across diverse regional contexts. They demonstrate that meaningful youth participation—rooted in cultural context and lived experience—is essential for building equitable, community-based ecosystems that protect and promote youth mental health and well-being. Taken together, these examples also reveal a deeper insight: that mental health cannot be understood solely through individual symptoms or clinical indicators. Rather, youth well-being is shaped through relationships, environments, and social structures—pointing toward a broader, more interconnected understanding of what it means to thrive.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of subjective and objective measures, the concept of relational well-being expands the understanding of how individual and collective flourishing are interconnected. It suggests that well-being arises from the dynamic interplay between personal, societal, and environmental structures and processes²¹. From this perspective, youth mental health is not merely an individual issue but a relational and systemic phenomenon—one that depends on belonging, participation, and the broader social ecosystems in which young people live and grow.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING AS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT

Recognizing mental health and well-being as a fundamental human right marks a significant shift in the global health and development narrative. This perspective emphasizes that mental well-being is not merely a personal concern or a medical issue, but a matter of justice, dignity, and universal rights.

The Sixty-sixth World Health Assembly, consisting of Ministers of Health from 194 Member States, adopted the WHO's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020²² in May 2013. In 2019, the action plan was extended until 2030 by the Seventy-second World Health Assembly. Then in 2021, the Seventy-fourth World Health Assembly endorsed updates to the action plan, including updates to the plan's options for implementation and indicators that included mental health.

Advancing Mental Health as a human right has been strongly affirmed by global leaders and human rights bodies. On World Mental Health Day, October 10, 2023, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres declared that “mental health is not a privilege but a fundamental human right—and must be part of universal health coverage.”²³ He emphasized that mental well-being enables individuals to lead fulfilling lives and contribute meaningfully to their communities, and called on governments to ensure care systems that are rights-based, community-centred, and integrated within broader health and social services.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Human Rights Council have issued multiple resolutions and reports that formalize the link between mental health and human rights²⁴. In 2016, 73 States released a joint statement recognizing the centrality of mental health to the recognition of the right to health, emphasizing the need for non-discriminatory, rights-based approaches. Human Rights Council Resolutions A/HRC/RES/32/18 (2016), A/HRC/RES/36/13 (2017), A/HRC/39/36 (2018) and A/HRC/RES/43/13 (2020), A/HRC/RES/52/12 (2023), and A/HRC/RES/58/38 (2025) have further reinforced this commitment, affirming that the promotion of mental health and the protection of human rights are mutually reinforcing obligations of States²⁵.

The United Nations General Assembly has also recognized the importance of community-based mental health services through resolution A/RES/77/300 (2023) on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support. This resolution affirms that mental health and well-being “cannot be defined by the absence of a mental health condition but rather by an environment that enables persons to live a life



Photo: UN Youth Office/Inés Yabar

in which their inherent dignity is respected, with full enjoyment of their human rights, and in the equitable pursuit of their potential, and that values both social connection and respect through non-violent and healthy relationships, and recognizing that discriminatory laws, policies, practices and attitudes undermine well-being and inclusion”.

Further momentum is reflected in resolution A/79/62 (2025), which presents the progress report on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and the promotion of mental health and well-being, in preparation for the 4th High-Level Meeting on NCDs and Mental Health, which took place during the UN General Assembly in September 2025.

Beyond recognizing mental health as a fundamental right, it is essential to affirm that mental health and well-being cannot be fully realized without the protection and fulfilment of all human rights. Around the world, young people face systemic violations of their rights that severely impact their mental well-being — including youth living in conflict zones, displaced or stateless youth, young women and girls subjected to gender-based violence and discrimination, LGBTIQ+ youth facing stigma and exclusion, young people deprived of access to education, healthcare, or safe environments. Situating mental health within a rights-based framework is not merely symbolic; it requires a comprehensive commitment to upholding all human rights as essential conditions for the flourishing of young people globally. This framing also implies participation, accountability, and non-discrimination as guiding principles for implementation, ensuring that policies and systems are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the lived realities of youth.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Mental health and well-being are a foundational pillar of sustainable development²⁶, yet it remains one of the most overlooked components of global health strategies undermining the realization of Universal Health Coverage²⁷ through the insufficient inclusion of mental health services for young people²⁸. Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) calls on all nations to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” underscoring the intrinsic link between mental well-being and broader development outcomes. True well-being encompasses emotional, social, and functional dimensions—ranging from feeling calm and hopeful, to having a sense of belonging and the capacity to navigate life’s challenges being able to deal with uncertainty as a generative opportunity. As mental health conditions continue to rise across all income levels, the need for comprehensive, equitable mental health care has become both a public health imperative and a critical driver of economic and social progress.

Research shows that mental health is not a concern limited to high-income countries—it is a pressing global issue with far-reaching implications for health and well-being. According to the World Health Organization²⁹ and the World Economic Forum³⁰ mental conditions currently cost the global economy between \$1 and \$5 trillion annually, a figure projected to soar to \$16 trillion by 2030. In 2021 alone, mental health conditions and neurological conditions accounted for over 15% of global health-related loss³¹. This burden is expected to increase, placing growing pressure on health systems, employers, families, and communities.

Despite the severity of the challenge, investment in mental health remains grossly inadequate. The global annual financing gap for mental health is estimated at a minimum of \$200 billion, with most countries allocating less than 2% of their total health budgets to mental health services³². As a result, millions of individuals lack access to timely and effective care.

Compelling evidence demonstrates that investing in mental health generates substantial economic and social returns³³. According to the WHO’s 2023 Mental Health Report, every \$1 invested in treatment for common mental conditions yields a \$5 return in improved health outcomes and increased productivity. Additionally, the McKinsey Health Institute estimates that closing the global mental health treatment gap

could recover up to 150 million years of higher-quality life—each year carrying an estimated economic value of \$200.000³⁴. Investing in youth mental health, in particular, has been shown to enhance educational attainment, employability, and long-term productivity, strengthening both individual well-being and societal development.

Moreover, the benefits of investment extend far beyond healthcare. Preventive mental health policies —especially those targeting young people — are associated with higher educational attainment³⁵, increased labour force participation, greater lifetime earnings, and improved physical health outcomes. Research shows a direct relationship between adolescent psychological distress and adverse outcomes in adulthood³⁶. By mitigating distress through early intervention, societies can significantly reduce long-term costs while promoting social inclusion, resilience, and equity.

In the face of mounting poli-crisis climate threats, psychological resilience building across the lifespan supports emotional regulation and integration, collective efficacy, and sustained engagement in transformative action. Integrating this lens into mental health strategies ensures that well-being is not simply an outcome, but also a pathway to sustainable development, intergenerational justice and high impact ecosystems.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

A GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING CRISIS

Mental health challenges represent a growing public health concern worldwide. As of 2019 WHO Mental Health Atlas³⁷, approximately 1 in 8 people globally—an estimated 970 million individuals—were living with a mental disorder. The most common conditions were anxiety and depressive disorders. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this crisis, with mental health conditions increasing sharply. In the first year alone, the prevalence of anxiety disorders rose by 26% and major depressive disorders by 28%³⁸. Adding to the urgency, a 2023 global study conducted by Harvard Medical School and the University of Queensland found that 1 in 2 people will develop a mental health disorder at some point in their lifetime³⁹.

The newly released WHO Mental Health Atlas 2024⁴⁰ reinforces this alarming trajectory while providing new insights into the readiness of national systems to respond. Drawing on data from 144 countries, the Atlas evaluates mental health policies, legislation, information systems, financing, workforce, and services. While the data reflect a growing governmental commitment to child and adolescent mental health (CAMH)—with nearly 80% of existing CAMH policies updated or released in the last five years—the overall global coverage remains insufficient. Only 56% of countries currently have a CAMH-specific policy, far lower than the 81% that have mental health policies for adults. The next essential step is ensuring that these policies translate into community-based services and programmes that are adequately funded, staffed, and accessible, especially for the youngest populations who are disproportionately affected and underserved.

The burden on children and young people is particularly alarming. According to a joint WHO and UNICEF 2024 report⁴¹, 1 in 7 individuals aged 10–19 lives with a mental health condition. One-third of these conditions emerge before the age of 14, and half by the age of 18. Some studies even demonstrate that 75% of lifetime mental health conditions manifest by age 24⁴².

The UNICEF State of the World's Children Report of 2021⁴³ estimated that over 13% of adolescents lived with a diagnosed mental disorder, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, conduct disorder, eating disorders, bipolar disorder, and others. According to the McKinsey Health Institute, for those aged 10–19, the leading mental health concerns are anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders, with this age group facing one of the highest burdens due to the early onset of these conditions. The situation intensifies between the ages of 20–29, a peak period for mental health-related issues, with depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and substance use—particularly alcohol and drug dependence—being major contributors⁴⁴. While the burden slightly decreases in the 30–39 age group, it remains significant due to the compounded effects of untreated conditions from earlier life stages. At this point, mental health issues often co-occur with chronic physical illnesses and lead to considerable economic consequences through reduced productivity, underscoring the long-term personal and societal impacts of unaddressed mental health needs⁴⁵.

The gravity of the situation cannot be overstated. Alarming, according to the WHO, suicide remains one of the leading causes of death among young people, with more than 45,000 adolescents dying by suicide each year⁴⁶. Globally in the year 2021 youth suicide was the third leading cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds globally in

2021⁴⁷. Demonstrated not to just occur in high-income countries but is a global phenomenon in all regions of the world. In fact, close to three quarters (73%) of global suicides occurred in low- and middle-income countries in that year.

Despite growing awareness, access to mental health services remains deeply inadequate, particularly for youth⁴⁸. Many young people do not receive the care they need due to barriers such as lack of services, high costs, and perceived stigma⁴⁹. In low- and middle-income countries, child- and youth-focused mental health services are almost non-existent, and where services do exist, they are often difficult for young people to access. In response, WHO and UNICEF have issued several programs and guidance promoting community-based, rights-respecting models⁵⁰ for social and care facilities⁵¹ and for children and young people⁵²; ensuring services and resources aligned with human rights standards and emphasizing particularly community-based inclusive care.

Building on this, the WHO Mental Health Atlas notes that more countries are shifting toward community- based care models. The 2023 WHO report further highlights the significance of social determinants in shaping mental health outcomes and potentials, particularly among young people⁵³. These findings point to the need for an integrated ecosystem that addresses mental distress and enhancement at the community level. The growing recognition of mental health as a social issue is also reflected in young people's perception. According to Gallup's *Changing Childhood* report⁵⁴, 83% of youth aged 15–24 across 21 countries believe it is important to speak openly about mental health. This data signals a generational shift not only toward greater openness and advocacy, but also toward the expectation that mental health be addressed collectively through accessible, inclusive, and community-driven support systems.

83%

**of youth aged 15–24
across**

21 COUNTRIES

**believe it is important
to speak openly about
mental health.**



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

THE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING ECOSYSTEM

The mental health of young people is inseparable from the environments in which they live. Their well-being is shaped by interconnected social, cultural, economic, spiritual, and ecological contexts. As such, improving youth mental health requires more than treating individual symptoms—it calls for addressing the broader environment that generate distress and either hinder or support their capacity to thrive.

Like mental illness, mental health must be understood as more than the presence and absence of emotional states⁵⁵. The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.” Similarly, the World Happiness Report defines well-being as the quality of one’s subjective experience across physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions⁵⁶.

Building on this holistic understanding, VanderWeele et al. (2023) define complete well-being as “flourishing” for individuals and their contexts, encompassing key domains like happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships⁵⁷. A sixth domain, financial and material stability, enables the pursuit of the other domains over time. Flourishing, in this sense, means that both the person and their environment—the tree and the forest—are doing well. Human well-being is thus intrinsically connected to the well-being of the broader ecosystem (Lomas, Pawelski & VanderWeele, 2024)⁵⁸.

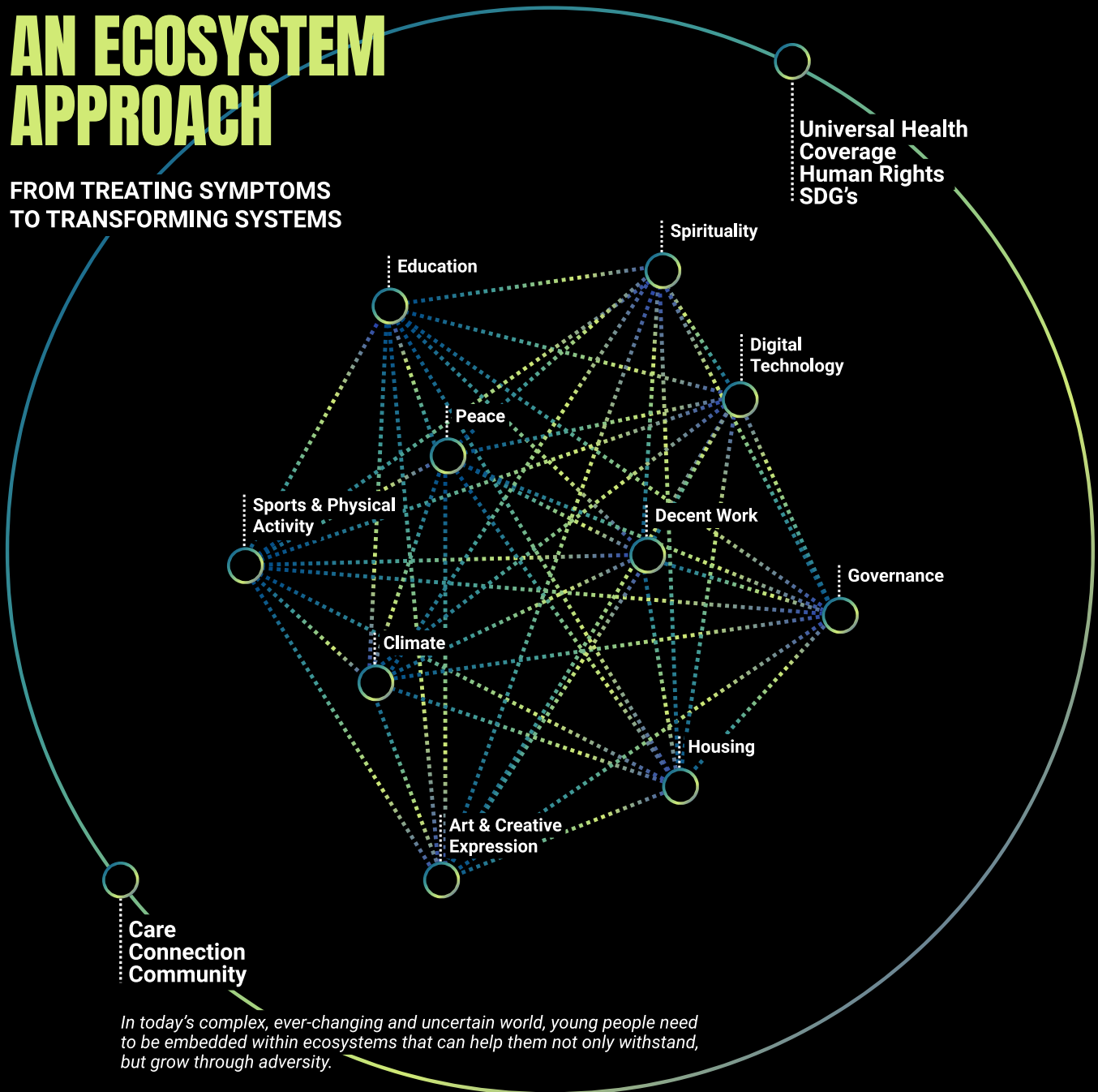
Merely satisfactory psychological mental health does not necessarily mean well-being has been attained⁵⁹, and youth cannot realize well-being in isolation. Their health and potential are profoundly shaped by the communities they belong to⁶⁰. There is in fact a robust evidence base linking social connection and meaningful relationships to mental health outcomes⁶¹. Therefore, the community’s well-being is a vital part of young people’s own well-being. This view

departs from a narrow, biomedical model of health—which traditionally defines health as the absence of disease—and instead embraces a dynamic, relational model. Health is seen as a state of balance or dynamic equilibrium, rooted in the individual’s social, ecological, and spiritual interconnectedness⁶². In this framework, well-being involves not only subjective experience but also objective, systemic, and inter-systemic conditions⁶³.

Every young person is, to some extent, the embodiment of their cultural, environmental, and social surroundings. Individual health, therefore, is deeply dependent on the health of the collective. This broader understanding points toward the need for what some scholars have called regenerative health—the capacity for individuals and communities to heal, adapt, and thrive together. Recent research⁶⁴ has highlighted organizations and systems that create regenerative impacts across ecosystems⁶⁵. While many initiatives have focused on individual or institutional change, few have yet framed these efforts in terms of ecosystem-wide mental health and well-being of young people—an urgent and promising direction for the future. At its core, this vision is grounded in the simple yet transformative triad of **care⁶⁶, connection, and community**—the essential foundations of collective and sustainable well-being.

AN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

FROM TREATING SYMPTOMS
TO TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS



Building the Youth Mental Health and Well-being Ecosystem Model

As previously mentioned, the World Health Organization has emphasized a shift in public policy toward mental health services rooted in the community—an approach shaped by the unique norms, cultures, organizational structures, and political realities that surround young people’s development. In today’s complex, ever-changing, and often uncertain world, young people need to be embedded within ecosystems that can help them not only withstand but grow through adversity.

Thriving does not imply the absence of hardship or struggle; rather, it involves having the skills, support and resources at the individual and community level to navigate mental health conditions and states of distress. These states are dynamic and evolving, not fixed endpoints. As such, there is no “cure” for being human, it is impossible to not have moments of struggle and difficulties in our human life. But there is an opportunity to face them within networks of care and connection offered by different areas that encompass young people’s life.

In this proposal, we outline key thematic areas grounded in the lived experiences of young people across diverse contexts—areas that also serve as strategic entry points for partnerships and policymaking to protect mental health and promote well-being and youth agency globally. The ecosystem model does not reflect a fragmented or individualistic view of youth mental health, in which each area is treated as pertaining to a single, isolated young person. Rather, it conveys a dynamic, relational, and interconnected system that both shapes and is shaped by the multiple dimensions of a young person’s life journey. This ecosystem includes both the environments in which young people grow and interact, and the structural spaces—such as educational, social, and policy frameworks—needed to ensure their holistic well-being and to mitigate mental health distress.

Governance

Governance refers to the processes, structures, and mechanisms through which decisions are made, and authority is exercised in managing resources, institutions, or organizations. It encompasses the establishing and implementation of policies, rules, regulations, as well as systems for monitoring, accountability, and enforcement. Governance is vital for human well-being. In fact, when given the choice between pursuing wealth or happiness, a survey found that 81% of the youth aged 15 and over believed that directing policy towards promoting greater happiness should be the government’s primary purpose⁶⁷. This reflects the understanding that governance shapes not only economic prosperity but also the quality of life and well-being of citizens.

Structures, policies, laws, and incentives—both financial and otherwise—that support family, work, education, and spiritual or religious communities, play a crucial role in fostering societal well-being⁶⁸. And developing key dimensions such as belonging, purpose, justice, relational growth, effective leadership, and trust are integral to youth development⁶⁹. Participation and civic engagement, as highlighted in the OECD’s PISA studies on youth well-being, are essential in reinforcing these dimensions⁷⁰. They not only strengthen young people’s sense of empowerment and purpose but also deepen their connection to their communities, evolving their capacity towards flourishing futures.

However, diminished civic engagement poses a challenge. Exclusion from civic and political processes, disillusionment and distrust are exacerbated by systems that are not accountable to young people— even when they express views on the issues that matter to them⁷¹. Young people express being often skeptical, which leads to disengagement from governance structures and a sense of isolation. This disconnection can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and a lack of purpose⁷². Research indicates that encouraging youth to adopt a more community-centred mindset can help counteract these challenges. By shifting from an individualistic perspective to one focused on collective responsibility, young people cultivate a deeper sense of empathy,

belonging, and social connectedness⁷³ as a condition for meaningful relationships. This transition not only enhances their mental health but also empowers them to drive meaningful change, fostering resilience and a sense of purpose that is crucial for their overall well-being.

Governance structures can play a pivotal role in developing young leaders who genuinely care for the broader community. Creating systems that promote youth inclusion, active participation and youth-led accountability⁷⁴ can empower young people to become agents of change. The “Pact for the Future”, established during the UN Summit of the Future, commits governments to implement youth engagement mechanisms at the national level, ensuring that young voices are not only heard but also integrated into policymaking. Similarly, the UN’s “Youth2030” strategy emphasizes the critical importance of meaningful youth participation across all levels of governance, positioning young people as catalysts for change and innovation. The Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development frameworks of UNESCO⁷⁵ further recognize young people as active agents who can drive society toward more desirable, sustainable futures. Furthermore, there are extensive opportunities to innovate in youth engagement and partnerships to progress the SDGs⁷⁶.

Setting and pursuing goals that impact their communities—no matter how small—helps young people cultivate a sense of direction and purpose that shape their lives. Encouraging young leaders to take action fosters a sense of empowerment, making them more likely to believe in their ability to create and to drive change. Through this process, youth discover innovative ways to address complex challenges, gaining valuable life skills. Moreover, as young people see the tangible impact of their contributions, they are more likely to perceive their sense of self-efficacy and mental well-being as related to the otherness.

Peace

While global frameworks such as United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2250, 2419, and 2535, the Youth2030 Strategy (Phase II), the Pact for the Future (Action 20), and Sustainable Development Goals 16, 5, and 10 have established a robust normative foundation for the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda; most countries continue to lack the political leadership, institutional capacity, and systematic mechanisms required to translate these commitments into practice at the national level.

Despite growing recognition of YPS frameworks, a critical implementation gap persists. At the political level, government endorsement of YPS remains limited, often confined to traditional champions, while security-first paradigms continue to overshadow youth inclusion. Many governments still perceive youth engagement as secondary to core security concerns, overlooking its strategic value for conflict prevention and sustainable peace. At the institutional level, public administrations, missions, and civil services have yet to systematically integrate YPS principles, and the training curricula of diplomatic and civil service institutions have not evolved to reflect emerging security and well-being risks for young populations. At the legislative level, few countries



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

possess legal frameworks that formally recognize youth roles in peace and security, resulting in uncertainty around mandates, resources, and institutional responsibilities. Moreover, protection risks—such as reprisals against youth human rights defenders, digital harms, and barriers related to visas, language, disability, or cost—continue to undermine safe and meaningful participation.

Peace, however, must be understood as more than the absence of conflict; it is the presence of justice, safety, and trust that enables young people to live with dignity and hope. For many, peace means freedom from violence, discrimination, and fear, but it also reflects an inner sense of calm and belonging that sustains mental well-being. Around the world, countless young people are growing up in settings marked by instability, displacement, and inequality. The psychological burden of living with uncertainty or threat can leave lasting scars, limiting opportunities for learning, connection, and growth.

Promoting peace as part of the youth mental health and well-being ecosystem means creating conditions where young people can heal, participate, and lead. Research has shown that social inclusion, restorative justice, intercultural dialogue, and community peacebuilding all help to protect emotional health. When young people are engaged in these processes, they gain a renewed sense of agency and purpose, both of which are essential for resilience. The United Nations Development Programme has underscored that without integrated mental health and psychosocial support, communities affected by conflict and crisis struggle to secure lasting peace⁷⁷.

Peace and mental well-being are deeply connected. When societies are peaceful, young people are more likely to flourish, and when young people thrive, they help sustain peace in their communities. Integrating peacebuilding into mental health strategies—through education, civic participation, and intergenerational dialogue—can strengthen trust and empathy, laying the foundations for societies that are both mentally healthy and socially cohesive.

Spirituality

Spirituality is an integral component of human development and is deeply linked to an individual's sense of purpose, inner peace, and connection to self, others and to something greater than oneself⁷⁸. While spirituality and religion share some common characteristics, spirituality relates to the human experience and relationship with the unseen, with meaning of life and with something greater than the self⁷⁹. Joseph et al. (2017, p.506)⁸⁰ state spirituality is “a more general, unstructured, personalized, and naturally occurring phenomenon, where a person seeks closeness and or/connectedness between him/herself and a higher power or purpose”. All religious and philosophical traditions identify the highest stage of human development as one that transcends the individual self, recognizing its interconnection with a broader, more complex reality⁸¹. Spirituality provides a framework for understanding the world, offering young people a sense of connectedness, meaning and purpose.

In the context of youth, spirituality is closely intertwined with their mental health and well-being. Hay & Nye (2006) define spirituality as “awareness that there is something Other, something greater than the course of everyday events”⁸², emphasizing its role in fostering a broader perspective on life. Regardless of whether spirituality is formally institutionalized or not, it plays a crucial role in shaping young people's lives and imbues their experiences with meaning and purpose. These aspects are essential to human well-being, as they provide a foundation for coping with life's challenges and navigating complex emotional landscapes.

Spirituality is positively correlated to mental and physical health and can function as a character strength that promotes positive development⁸³. It aids in the promotion of coping mechanisms, resilience, and ethical decision-making. As part of human life, it serves as a guide to transpersonal and transcendent experiences, enriching awareness of the self and others⁸⁴. By increasing this self-awareness, spirituality fosters emotional regulation and integration, stress reduction, and social connection, all of which are critical for youth in developing healthy emotional responses to the challenges they face. Spirituality enables youth to

develop healthy internal mechanism to deal with adversity, provides a source of strength and resiliency that may lead to positive healthy outcomes⁸⁵.

Young people—and all people—have an innate spiritual need to find purpose in life, and to connect with the meaning of life. When this need goes unmet, it can lead to feelings of emptiness and/or despair, which, if not addressed, may result in unhealthy coping mechanisms that harm their mental health and well-being⁸⁶. Including spirituality as a dimension of the youth environment not only acknowledges its deep roots across cultures and communities but also affirms it as an essential aspect of human experience and development—one that nurtures compassionate thinking, a sense of purpose, resilience, and belonging—all of which are fundamental to mental health and holistic well-being.

Housing

Housing is one of the most visible expressions of dignity and security in a young person's life. A home provides more than shelter; it offers identity, privacy, and a sense of belonging. Yet across the world, young people face growing housing insecurity. Rising living costs, migration, economic hardship, and conflict have pushed many into unstable or unsafe living conditions. According to UN-Habitat, by 2030 around 3 billion people—nearly 40 per cent of the world's population—will need access to adequate housing. This translates into a demand for about 96,000 new affordable and accessible housing units every day. At present, an estimated 100 million people are homeless, and one in four live in conditions that threaten their health, safety, and prosperity.

These realities have far-reaching consequences for youth mental health and well-being. Without safe and stable housing, young people are more likely to experience isolation, stress, and a loss of hope about the future. Conversely, secure housing provides the emotional foundation for self-confidence, stability, and growth. It fosters belonging, strengthens social relationships, and supports healthy emotional development. Marginalised youth, including those affected by poverty, displacement, or family breakdown, are especially vulnerable and often fall through the gaps in support systems.

By 2030, nearly

**40% OF THE
WORLD'S POPULATION**

will need access to
adequate housing.

Recognising housing as part of the mental health and well-being ecosystem means treating it not only as an economic or social issue but as a determinant of psychological and community health. Policies that ensure safe, inclusive, and affordable housing provide young people with stability, opportunity, and a sense of home. Housing, at its core, is not only a physical space but a foundation for belonging, safety, and the possibility of flourishing.

Climate

Young people are not only aware of the climate crisis—they are experiencing it in ways that deeply affect their emotions, identities, and sense of the future. According to a global study by the UNDP and the University of Oxford, youth under 18 are among the most likely to believe that climate change is a global emergency⁸⁷. Furthermore, a global study of 10,000 youth found that over 50% of young people felt sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, or guilty about climate change, while 45% said these feelings negatively affected their daily life and functioning⁸⁸.

The climate crisis is deeply interwoven with youth mental health, development, and survival. The Children's Climate Risk Index⁸⁹ (UNICEF, 2021) and the 2024 UNICEF Children Report⁹⁰ highlight the "triple planetary crisis" of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. The world remains off track to meet the Paris Agreement's⁹¹

goal of net-zero emissions by 2050—jeopardizing the possibility of a liveable planet⁹². Current inaction risks breaching ecological limits and intensifying effects such as sea-level rise, heatwaves, extreme weather, malnutrition, and disease. Air pollution alone contributes to adverse birth outcomes, damaged lungs, asthma, cancer, neurological disorders, and beyond⁹³—threats that disproportionately affect young people and have long-term consequences on their health and well-being.

Climate change not only affects the body, but also the mind. The mental health consequences of climate change on the well-being of youth are under-researched but growing in recognition⁹⁴. Evidence shows that young people exposed to climate disasters like floods, wildfires, droughts and other factors that lead to displacement face increased risk of anxiety, depression, PTSD⁹⁵, and even suicide⁹⁶. Environmental stressors have given rise to states like “climate loneliness”⁹⁷, particularly among people who feel powerless in the face of the global crisis⁹⁸ with studies indicating that many experience Climate Anxiety and Ecofobia^{99 100 101 102}.

The well-being of young people is inseparable from the natural ecosystems in which they live, impacting not only their material conditions but increasingly their mental health. To fully understand the emotional toll that climate change awareness has on the younger generation, it is crucial to involve youth in these discussions, ensuring that their emotional burden is acknowledged and addressed.

The UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change has underscored the importance of intergenerational equity, climate justice, and the inclusion of youth in global climate policy. Young people are demanding a liveable planet, and their mental and emotional well-being is dependent on it.

Education

Policymakers are increasingly focusing on the vital role education plays in promoting and supporting young people’s mental health and well-being, with evidence-based models of good practice in high demand¹⁰³. UNESCO’s 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development¹⁰⁴ underscores the interconnectedness between education,

health, equity and inclusion, and calls for whole-institution, rights-based approaches that promote learners’ safety, dignity and well-being. This reflects the growing recognition that education systems must address mental health through coordinated action across sectors, including through integrating well-being into education policies, developing school health plans, and strengthening supportive learning environments that advance social and emotional learning (SEL) and self-care strategies for both learners and teachers.

Educational settings are uniquely positioned to cultivate environments that promote youth well-being and protect from mental health challenges. As education prepares younger generations for both current and future realities, SEL becomes a vital tool for fostering positive human interactions. Integrating SEL from early childhood serves as a proactive measure to prevent mental health issues, while simultaneously educating young people in the interconnectedness capacity of managing their emotions¹⁰⁵. Research consistently demonstrates the powerful impact of SEL programs in enhancing students’ mental health and development¹⁰⁶. These programs have been shown to strengthen cognitive control, lower stress levels, and foster overall well-being and prosocial behaviour. Learners engaged in SEL are likely to exhibit greater empathy, improved emotional regulation, peer acceptance, increased optimism, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Equipping young people with emotional integration, empathy, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills not only strengthens their mental well-being but also builds foundational competencies for the 21st century from the World Economic Forum¹⁰⁷, and contributes to the broader competencies and dispositions identified in the 2023 Recommendation, including critical inquiry, cooperation, solidarity, and peaceful conflict resolution. Research shows that SEL interventions in schools can significantly benefit¹⁰⁸, fostering resilience, cultivating prosocial behaviour, and empowering young people with the tools to face adversity and build meaningful relationships—skills that are vital both in and beyond the classroom.

¹⁰⁹ Could be considered as a positive perspective to face the challenges of the current time, especially for young people. Recent international crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, racialized violence, and

ecological disasters spurred by climate change—have demonstrated the role of spontaneity as a mode of resistance and improvisation as a vital tool of collective response. In the current moment, individuals and communities must adapt to unprecedented situations, build new ways of communicating with and relating to one another. Present-based education, involving¹¹⁰. Equally important to primary and secondary education is the promotion of mental health and well-being in higher education. UNESCO indicators¹¹¹ reveal that in some countries, up to 50% of higher education (HE) students suffer from mental health conditions, with approximately 20% experiencing clinical depression and nearly half showing symptoms of it. Alarming, figures indicate that around 15% report suicidal thoughts, and 2–3% have attempted suicide. These data risen globally and spiked significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the urgent need for structural, institution-wide responses within academic institutions.

A multi-country survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹¹² found that over one-third of higher education students reported experiencing mental health disorders, with anxiety emerging as the most prevalent condition across countries including Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Spain, and the United States. In South Africa, research shows that between 21% and 24.5% of students suffer from various mental health conditions such as social anxiety,



PTSD, eating disorders, and ADHD¹¹³. In Bangladesh, 18% of students report severe anxiety, while 15% experience severe depression¹¹⁴. In Chile, 45% of students exhibit symptoms of anxiety, 46% suffer from depression, and 53% report high stress levels¹¹⁵. Similar trends appear in Pakistan, where 23% of students experience severe anxiety and 16% suffer from depression¹¹⁶. In the United States, more than 60% of college students report experiencing at least one mental health condition, with anxiety and depression being the most commonly reported disorders¹¹⁷.

There is a critical need for education systems at all levels to become foundational components of the global mental health and well-being ecosystem for young people. From secondary to higher education, schools and universities are not just places of academic instruction for young people—they are key social environments that shape identity, relationships, resilience, and emotional development that can help prevent emotional dysregulation and mitigate risk factors such as violence, peer pressure, academic stress, discrimination, and social isolation.

Decent Work

According to Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every person has the fundamental right to work under just and favourable conditions, to be protected against unemployment, and to receive fair and equal compensation. The International Labour Organization (ILO) builds on this through Recommendation 204, which emphasizes supporting the transition from informal to formal economies. While these provisions may not directly apply to the broader youth population—particularly adolescents in high-income countries—employment remains a critical component of the youth ecosystem. It is closely linked to overall well-being and, by extension, to mental health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes the ability to “work well” as a key indicator of mental well-being. As of 2022, according to WHO and ILO¹¹⁸, estimates nearly 60% of the global population participates in the workforce. Employment can act as a protective factor for mental health by providing structure,

purpose, social connection, and financial security. Meaningful work, in particular, fosters a sense of accomplishment and inclusion, playing a crucial role in the empowerment and general well-being of individuals. However, work can also be a significant source of stress and psychological strain. Whether mental health conditions originate in the workplace or are intensified by it, their effects ripple through individuals, families, employers, and entire economies. Aligning efforts with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Youth2030 Priority 3 (Economic Empowerment through Decent Work) reinforces UN-system coherence and underscores the importance of integrating mental health into policies that promote safe, fair, and inclusive employment opportunities for young people.

The workplace often serves as a microcosm of broader societal issues, reflecting and amplifying systemic inequalities that adversely impact mental health. Discrimination based on sociodemographic factors—including age, caste, class, disability, gender identity, migrant status, race or ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation—can intersect in complex ways to compound psychological stress. There is broad consensus on the role of psychosocial risks in shaping mental health outcomes at work. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 15% of working-age adults are living with a mental disorder at any given time. Additionally, the World Economic Forum reports that 38% of workers are at risk of mental health issues, with more than 65% already experiencing symptoms of burnout¹¹⁹.

These risks are even more pronounced among the more than half of the global workforce employed in the informal economy, where workers often lack regulatory protections related to health, safety, and labour rights. Informal workers frequently operate in hazardous conditions, endure long hours, face persistent discrimination, and have limited or no access to social, legal, or financial support systems. This lack of structural safeguards significantly increases their vulnerability to both mental and physical health issues.

A growing body of research highlights the significant impact that employment conditions have on young people's mental health. Adverse psychosocial working conditions—such as job insecurity, high demands, limited autonomy, and lack of recognition—are known to

contribute to mental health challenges. These conditions can lead to temporary or prolonged absences from work, reduced productivity, and long-term psychological distress¹²⁰. Several studies point out that young workers, in particular, report feelings of occupational uncertainty, poor job design, and a lack of value and respect in the workplace as key factors negatively affecting their mental and general well-being¹²¹.

To address these challenges, the WHO and the ILO have issued evidence-based guidelines for promoting mental health and preventing mental health conditions in the workplace. These recommendations include organizational-level interventions, training for both managers and employees, and individualized strategies to foster psychological well-being. The guidelines also provide direction on supporting individuals returning to work after mental health-related absences, and on facilitating employment opportunities for people living with mental health conditions. Importantly, the WHO-ILO approach is multi sectoral—emphasizing the need for collaboration between health, labor, and other relevant sectors. This integrated framework acknowledges that the workplace functions within a broader ecosystem, and that ensuring worker well-being, especially for youth, requires coordinated efforts across systems.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the mental health consequences associated with youth unemployment and precarious employment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 20.4% of young people globally are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), with rates reaching as high as 42% in low-income countries. Unemployment and job insecurity are strongly linked to poor mental health outcomes among youth¹²². For instance, a study conducted among Indian youth revealed that unemployed individuals experienced significantly higher rates of depression (54.4%), anxiety (61.8%), and stress (47.9%) compared to their employed peers¹²³. Other research suggests that such conditions can also increase the risk of substance use and other long-term health issues¹²⁴.

The Youth2030 strategy—specifically its third priority, Economic Empowerment through Decent Work—emphasizes the need to expand young people's access to decent and productive employment to develop a sustainable and inclusive future. This call to action

includes not only promoting job opportunities but also protecting the mental well-being of young people as part of the future workforce. The strategy recognizes that mental health conditions are often accompanied by stigma, discrimination, human rights violations, and barriers to education, employment, and social inclusion. The literature on decent work is increasing showing meaningful implications as regards young workers and vulnerable people¹²⁵. In particular, the accessibility to a decent work seems positively related to job satisfaction, preventing from the increasing of vulnerability. As younger generations continue to demand meaningful change, the integration of mental health support within youth employment initiatives becomes crucial.

Digital Technology

In the Pact for the Future (UN, 2024), Action 27 calls upon member states to “seize the opportunities associated with new and emerging technologies and address the potential risks posed by their misuse” including efforts to enhance international cooperation and capacity-building to bridge digital divides and ensure that all states can equitably and securely benefit from digital advancements. This vision highlights a central challenge of our era: how to govern the digital space in a way that promotes equity, safety, and well-being, especially for younger generations¹²⁶.

Various technologies interact with the environments in which young people live and grow, significantly influencing their mental health and overall well-being. While digital platforms can expose youth to risks, they also offer unprecedented opportunities to expand access to mental health information, peer support networks, and telehealth services, helping to bridge existing gaps in care¹²⁷. In this section, we highlight a few key sub-dimensions within this area that warrant individual attention when considering partnerships and policymaking to advance youth mental health and well-being.

Social Media & Cyberspaces

Social media is one of the most pervasive technologies shaping the daily lives of young people. According to



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

Amnesty International (2023), 59% of youth spend more than two hours a day on these platforms, highlighting their deep integration into everyday routines. However, this engagement is not without consequences. Many young people report experiencing mental health challenges linked to social media use, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and, in some cases, disordered eating and body image issues¹²⁸.

Youth testimonies increasingly associate their social media habits with addictive behaviours, with some expressing a desire to delete their accounts due to a lack of control over their usage. Excessive screen time and digital consumption also carry physical and psychological risks, ranging from disrupted sleep patterns to reduced attention spans and emotional distress¹²⁹.

The exposure to unregulated content and addictive design further compounds these issues. Young people are often vulnerable to a range of risks in digital spaces, including cyberbullying, privacy breaches, identity theft, scams, and misinformation¹³⁰. Despite these risks, the rapid advancement of digital technologies continues to outpace regulatory frameworks, leaving critical gaps in oversight and safety protections¹³¹.

Research indicates that young people are increasingly aware of the negative impacts of technology on their

safety and privacy in digital environments¹³². Common concerns raised by youth include exposure to harmful individuals, oversharing of personal information, identity theft, data harvesting, and the risk of being hacked¹³³.

Governments and technology companies share a responsibility to ensure that digital environments are safe and equitable. Yet public institutions often struggle to effectively govern powerful private actors who profit from vast amounts of user data and wield significant influence over global information flows¹³⁴. This lack of accountability has sparked growing concern about the unchecked power of tech companies and their impact on human rights¹³⁵, particularly among youth in vulnerable situations.

Digital technologies are a double-edged sword for adolescent mental health. While they offer unprecedented opportunities for connection, learning, and expression, they also expose youth to significant and sometimes hidden risks¹³⁶. Simply denying access to these technologies would ignore both the realities of modern youth culture and the empowering potential of digital tools. Instead, a balanced approach that emphasizes regulation, accountability, and digital inclusion is essential to support young people's mental health and rights in the digital age.

Digital Inclusion

The Global Digital Compact¹³⁷ outlines crucial objectives to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to technology for all, particularly focusing on young people and vulnerable communities. Its first objective calls for accelerating progress across the Sustainable Development Goals by promoting universal connectivity, enhancing digital literacy, and building skills and capacities. The second objective focuses on expanding inclusion in—and the benefits from—the digital economy for all, recognizing that equitable access to technology is fundamental to creating a fair and inclusive future in a world increasingly shaped by digital transformation.

Young people are central to this digital present and future. The Pact for the Future—specifically the Declaration on Future Generations—emphasizes the need to scale up collaboration to bridge digital divides between developed and developing countries, while

investing in capacity-building, technology transfer, and innovation. Youth voices are increasingly calling attention to these challenges. During the 2024 Summit of the Future, the #YouthLead event “Inclusive Digital Future for All” spotlighted the disproportionate disparities in youth access to technology and digital infrastructure, stressing the urgent need to improve digital literacy and ensure inclusion.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Facts and Figures 2024¹³⁸ connectivity continues to increase worldwide, but significant gaps remain, particularly in low-income countries. Although approximately 68% of the global population is online, one-third of people worldwide still lack internet access. The urban-rural divide remains a significant barrier, with 83% of urban residents using the internet compared to only 48% in rural areas. This discrepancy affects an estimated 1.8 billion people who live in rural areas and remain offline. The ITU reports that in 2023, 77% of people aged 15–24 used the internet, indicating gradual progress in youth digital inclusion. However, disparities emerge when only 56% own mobile in low-income countries and 5G is estimated to reach 84% of people in high-income and only 4% of people in low-income countries.

Digital inequality deepens existing human disparities¹³⁹, making equitable access and inclusion for low-income youth in the digital world essential for future generations¹⁴⁰. As technology increasingly shapes the present and future young environment, ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to participate and thrive is crucial for building a more just and inclusive society¹⁴¹.

Digital Identity

The dominance of data-sharing and consumption marks an unprecedented shift in how identity is formed and expressed, with identity becoming increasingly digitized. This transformation presents a unique and urgent challenge, particularly for young people, who are the first generation to experience and navigate the full extent of this digital reality. As we now live under an information regime, where visibility is voluntarily pursued rather than externally imposed—driven by an internalized compulsion to share and perform¹⁴². Digital media now

dictate not only behaviour and consumption patterns but also perceptions of self and social value.

Beyond protection, digital identity must be acknowledged and understood for its profound implications on youth development, both online and offline. These spaces set precedents for identity formation that were previously non-existent, deeply impacting mental health and overall well-being. As media and digital platforms increasingly shape aspirational norms and beauty standards, they play a powerful role in shaping how young people perceive themselves and others—often shaping aspirational norms and beauty standards¹⁴³.

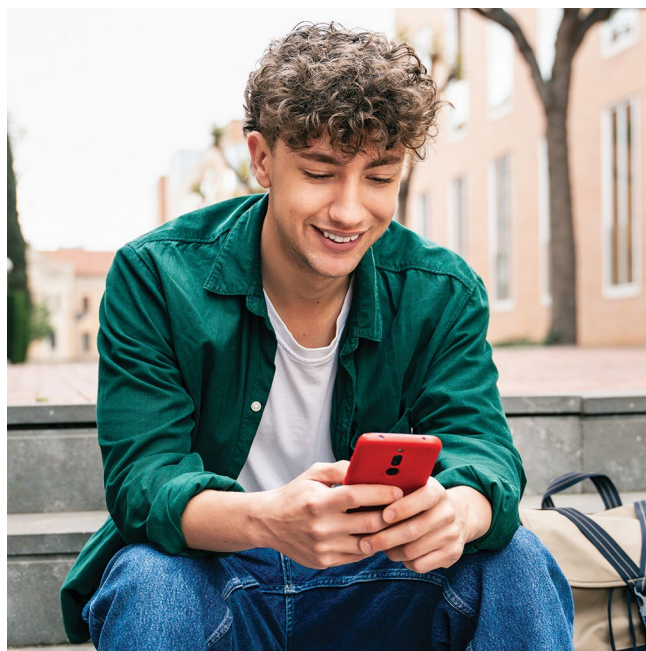
Self-esteem, defined as the overall sense of self-worth¹⁴⁴, is a critical factor in youth development. Research shows that higher levels of self-esteem contribute positively to health and adaptive functioning, while low self-esteem is associated with an increased risk of mental health challenges, substance use, aggression, depression, and others¹⁴⁵. In this context, adaptive strategies such as the development of personal competencies and supportive peer relationships are vital¹⁴⁶. However, studies also reveal growing concern among youth about the quality and safety of interpersonal relationships formed online¹⁴⁷. Young people increasingly recognize the need for healthier digital ecosystems—ones that enable supportive, safe, and meaningful exchanges rooted in genuine and empowering digital identities.

Hate Speech

The rapid proliferation of hate speech in digital spaces has created a significant threat to young people, particularly those from marginalized groups, including gender, racial, and ethnic minorities. Exposure to hate speech not only damages the neurocognitive mechanisms of empathy but also weakens social cohesion and understanding, distorting young people's perceptions of society and relationships. As the Global Digital Compact (Objective 3) emphasizes, there is an urgent commitment to respect, protect, and promote human rights in the digital space, addressing all forms of violence online. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has called for urgent action, stating, "We must confront bigotry by working to tackle the hate that spreads like wildfire across the internet."

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech¹⁴⁸ defines hate speech as any communication—be it speech, writing, or behaviour—that attacks or uses discriminatory language based on someone's religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, or other identity factors. Hate speech, especially in digital environments, poses serious psychological risks by harming not only the individuals targeted but also those who perpetrate or witness such acts, ultimately undermining general social cohesion¹⁴⁹. Among young people, hate speech often manifests as deliberate and harmful expressions—whether verbal, visual, or symbolic¹⁵⁰. Research indicates that adolescents are particularly susceptible to hate speech in both media and online platforms. Studies show how high school students report receiving hate speech at least once in the last year¹⁵¹.

Digital interactions and the construction of digital identity are increasingly shaped by a virtual logic that can foster toxic online disinhibition¹⁵² a phenomenon that lowers social restraints and promotes aggressive behaviours in online settings. This disinhibition often manifests as cyberhate and cyberbullying. The former refers to hostile interactions directed toward others, while the latter involves targeted aggression, resulting in what is termed cyberhate victimization or cybervictimization¹⁵³ the experience of being targeted with hate online. Moreover, repeated exposure to hate speech—whether online or offline—can lead to



desensitization¹⁵⁴, where individuals become increasingly indifferent or tolerant of such content, reducing their emotional responsiveness and contributing to the normalization of hate in digital discourse.

Research shows that repeated exposure to online hate contributes to a range of adverse psychological outcomes, including social withdrawal, anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. These experiences are often accompanied by negative emotions such as anger, shame, and sadness¹⁵⁵, lower interpersonal trust¹⁵⁶ and heightened outgroup prejudice resulting from desensitization to cyberhate¹⁵⁷. The impact is especially severe among youth facing online discrimination, which is linked to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem. Notably, gender plays a significant role in this dynamic, with adolescent girls disproportionately affected by online harassment and harmful content—including sexual imagery and unrealistic body ideals¹⁵⁸.

The widespread presence of hate speech in digital environments presents a profound and growing threat to the mental health, social development, and overall well-being of young people—particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. As digital interactions increasingly shape identity and socialization, the normalization of cyberhate and online harassment can erode empathy, exacerbate feelings of exclusion, entrench harmful stereotypes, and lower the sense of connectedness and belonging to society¹⁵⁹.

Artificial Intelligence

Objective 5 of the Global Digital Compact calls for enhancing international governance of artificial intelligence (AI) for the benefit of humanity, recognizing the urgent need to ensure the safe, secure, and trustworthy design, development, deployment, and decommissioning of AI systems. This objective aligns with UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence¹⁶⁰, which highlights the profound impact of AI on human relationships and well-being. The recommendation draws attention to the potential mental and physical health risks posed by AI, including

increased levels of depression, anxiety, social isolation, addiction, trafficking, radicalization, and exposure to misinformation.

As such, international cooperation and youth engagement are essential to addressing these risks and ensuring that AI development upholds human dignity and fundamental rights. While much remains to be understood, the evolving relationship between humans and artificial systems demands special and sustained attention. This must be approached intergenerationally, as today's youth are the first to grow up with AI technologies that shape their identities, relationships, and worldviews. The unprecedented nature of these tools—combined with the immediacy and pervasiveness of digital interaction—raises urgent questions about how AI and robotics influence young people's well-being, sense of agency, and capacity for human connection. Ensuring that AI serves the common good requires inclusive dialogue, ethical foresight, and a firm commitment to protecting the rights of the younger generations as the most affected.

Art & Creative Expression

Arts—including theatre, dance, music, painting, writing, design, fashion, audiovisual productions—serve as powerful tools for youth development and holistic well-being. While engagement in the arts may not be as universal as some of the mentioned areas of the ecosystem, its contribution is nonetheless profound and multifaceted. The arts cross many young people's lives worldwide, whether it is attendance, consuming, creating or performing, arts intersect the life of many young people worldwide.

Emerging research demonstrates that participation in art and cultural practices and programs can significantly enhance mental health by promoting self-expression and reinforcing cultural identity. These factors act as protective and resilience mechanisms against mental health challenges, particularly those triggered by experiences of discrimination and marginalization¹⁶¹. Creative processes—such as writing a play, composing a

song, painting, performing, writing, making a video, designing clothing, or developing a video game—activate young people’s internal assets, creativity and imagination. These activities draw from cultural traditions and personal experiences, transforming them into creations that are shared with others and offered to the world. Through this creative engagement, the arts become a powerful channel for emotional expression, self-discovery, and inner transformation—nurturing spirituality, empowerment, and a deep sense of self-worth.

Moreover, when practiced as a social activity, arts interventions foster interconnected social networks and promote social cohesion¹⁶² by offering a language of expression that often diverges from ordinary practices—one that can bridge differences. Community-based arts interventions have demonstrated^{163 164} In many cases, creative expression within group settings also enhances connectedness, joy, and mindfulness—enabling youth to cultivate focus, relaxation, and new ways of thinking.

Beyond their direct impact on well-being, the arts can facilitate¹⁶⁵, crafting culturally relevant and emotionally resonant narratives, arts-based approaches that help to reduce stigma, raise¹⁶⁶.

Sports & Physical Activity

Play is a free action that occurs within given temporal and spatial limits though freely accepted rules within a group. It is an action which has its objective in itself and is accompanied by a feeling of both tension and joy¹⁶⁷. When playing a sport, a space is provided where individuals encounter one another beyond the constraints of ordinary roles and expectations. Equally enacted, individuals from the most diverse backgrounds can meet bound by the unspoken language of the sport.

Participation in sports—whether team-based or individual—has been consistently linked to improved physical and mental health outcomes¹⁶⁸. Empirical research shows that engagement in sports correlates with increased psychological well-being, such as higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, and resiliency¹⁶⁹, while simultaneously reducing symptoms of depression,

anxiety¹⁷⁰, and stress¹⁷¹. These benefits extend beyond the individual; as a social activity, sports—whether through direct participation or simply being part of its surrounding ecosystem, it fosters interpersonal communication, emotional integration and regulation¹⁷², prosocial behaviour, and a profound sense of belonging within communities¹⁷³.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

Sport serves not only as a medium of physical activity but also as a powerful social and psychological tool—cultivating community, identity, and well-being at both local and global levels. Its inclusion in the youth well-being ecosystem acknowledges a vital space that is actively lived and shaped by many young people worldwide. Whether as players, spectators, or supporters, young people often find in sport a channel for physical expression, emotional release, and collective joy. Even for those not actively participating, the surrounding culture of sport offers meaningful opportunities for connection, cultural exchange, and a shared sense of purpose. As such, sport can be a critical entry point for promoting inclusion, peace, and development—contributing to the broader framework of human rights and social justice that underpins holistic youth well-being.



Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

CALL TO ACTION

PROMOTING AND PROTECTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

How can we protect youth mental health and promote well-being, and what role does broader society play in fostering environments where young people can thrive?

Despite facing multiple adversities, **young people have the capacity to grow and flourish if they are embedded in ecosystems designed to support their development.** Youth mental health and well-being are inseparable from the environments in which they live, learn, work, and connect. These environments form a dynamic, interconnected system that both shapes and is shaped by the **many dimensions of a young person's life journey.**

To support, promote and protect youth mental health and well-being, we must identify and design **multi-sectoral, locally grounded initiatives** that address different dimensions of a young person's lived experience.

While we cannot eliminate all the stressors that may affect young people's mental health and well-being—especially in a world marked by conflict and uncertainty—we can create and foster ecosystems that nurture youth capacity for resilience.

The flagship believes adopting proactive approaches to promote youth mental health is crucial to address the ensuing crisis. Hence, it is imperative to intentionally develop and nurture an ecosystem that integrates all aspects of young people's lives—an ecosystem that proactively builds in mechanisms, programs, services and resources to promote youth well-being.

IDENTIFY & DESIGN:

ECOSYSTEM-BASED YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING INITIATIVES

The Youth Mental Health and Well-being Ecosystem is designed to be adaptable across cultures and regions, while acknowledging its limitations in fully capturing the diversity of global youth experiences. Nonetheless, by identifying key areas that are commonly experienced by young people worldwide, the ecosystem aims to highlight dimensions that may be overlooked by national and local governments, communities, and institutions when promoting mental health and well-being.

The ecosystem highlights the holistic nature of youth mental health and well-being and aims to serve as a tool for key actors and stakeholders to map existing initiatives, identify good practices, and strengthen coordination across sectors. It can also support the design of mental health promotion and prevention initiatives by encouraging stakeholders to consider the diverse factors that shape young people's mental health and well-being and to adopt multisectoral approaches.

The Youth Mental Health and Well-being Ecosystem is designed to be dynamic and adaptable across cultures and countries. By identifying key areas and aspects of life that are commonly experienced by young people worldwide, the ecosystem aims to highlight dimensions that may be overlooked by national and local governments, communities, and institutions when addressing youth mental health and well-being.

The ecosystem acknowledges the wholistic nature of youth mental health and well-being and aims to provide a road map that brings together key actors, ministries and stakeholders to (i). identify ecosystem dimensions that already exist and (ii). in cases where they do not exist, to help develop and nurture them so young people can access them.

1. IDENTIFY and Coordinate Initiatives for Youth Mental Health and Well-being

National and local governments may use this model to map and identify what already exists within the concrete context for each area, involving diverse ministries, stakeholders, nonprofits and the private sector and act as coordinators of initiatives that may relate to diverse areas of the ecosystem that are offered to young people.

Governance

Institutionalized inclusive spaces and programs that enable meaningful youth participation and decision making at the local level.

Education

Curricula, training, and programs that promote youth well-being and mental health in formal or informal settings.

Climate

Initiatives, programs, NGOs working on environmental issues and climate action.

Decent Work

Organizations intentionally addressing young people's mental health at work and/or supporting their transition to employment.

Digital Technology

Tech-based tools like social media, AI, or digital platforms used to support youth well-being.

Art & Creative Expression

Creative initiatives using arts like music, theatre, dance, or visual arts to promote mental health.

Sports & Physical Activity

Programs using sports or physical activity to enhance mental health and well-being.

Spirituality

Faith-based or spiritual initiatives intentionally engendering youth sense of connection to self, others and the world at large and there providing a sense of meaning, purpose and hope.

1.1. Ecosystem Activation Example: Ontario Youth Wellness Hubs, Canada

Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO) is a leading provincial initiative in Canada that brings **existing services together through an Integrated Youth Services (IYS) model to deliver care and support to young people aged 12-25**. Through a network of 32 local hub networks across Ontario, YWHO provides an integrated system of care that is **low-barrier, evidence-based, and co-designed with youth for youth**. This model addresses the full spectrum of youth wellness, including mental health and substance use treatment, primary care, peer support, care coordination, outreach, education, employment, housing, skill building and wellness activities, and community and social services, all in a single accessible, youth-friendly space, either in the community or virtually.

IYS **bring together existing services to function in a new, unified way**, working collaboratively with **existing community organizations, providers, youth and families, and sectors to meet youth needs in a seamless, developmentally-appropriate and wholistic manner**. This approach facilitates a continuum of care for youth, including prevention, screening, early intervention, and treatment, making it easier for youth to access the help they need, when and where they need it.

Each hub is created with and for young people. Youth shape service design and evaluation, and ensure that aspects of the hub, such as the setting, programs, and policies **reflect the lived experiences and needs of young people**. Through an ongoing commitment to equitable, culturally-diverse and trauma-informed services, YWHO is taking a critical step towards improving Ontario's youth health system.

YWHO also functions as a Learning Health System - a dynamic network where data, practice, and lived experience continuously inform and improve care. Through measurement-based care, an integrated data platform, and evidence-based and evidence-generating practices, YWHO continuously responds and adapts to meet the needs of youth.

YWHO works collaboratively to transform youth health systems through partnerships, **centering youth voices, and aligning existing services**. This creates welcoming, easy-to-access, integrated, and youth-friendly spaces **that promote and improve youth mental health and well-being outcomes**.

1.2. Ecosystem Activation: Youth-Led initiatives

When identifying initiatives, programs, organizations, and stakeholders across each dimension of the ecosystem, special attention should be given to those led by young people. Supporting youth-led initiatives means recognizing that the strategies and solutions **young people design are often more aligned with their lived realities and current challenges**. As such, they hold greater potential for relevance, impact, and long-term transformation.

1.2. Youth-led Initiative — Labhya, India

This Flagship seeks to highlight youth-led efforts that take a holistic approach—addressing multiple areas of the ecosystem to promote well-being in an integrated and meaningful way. These initiatives reflect the capacity of young people not only to respond to mental health challenges, but also to shape the environments that support their flourishing.

Founded by youth leader Richa Gupta, Labhya is a youth-led nonprofit pioneering the well-being movement globally. Labhya partners with Indian state governments to embed in-school children's mental health and well-being programs in public schools. Currently, Labhya impacts 2.4 million children across 22,000+ schools, empowering 150,000+ teachers to deliver a daily well-being class integrated into the school day (Labhya, 2025).

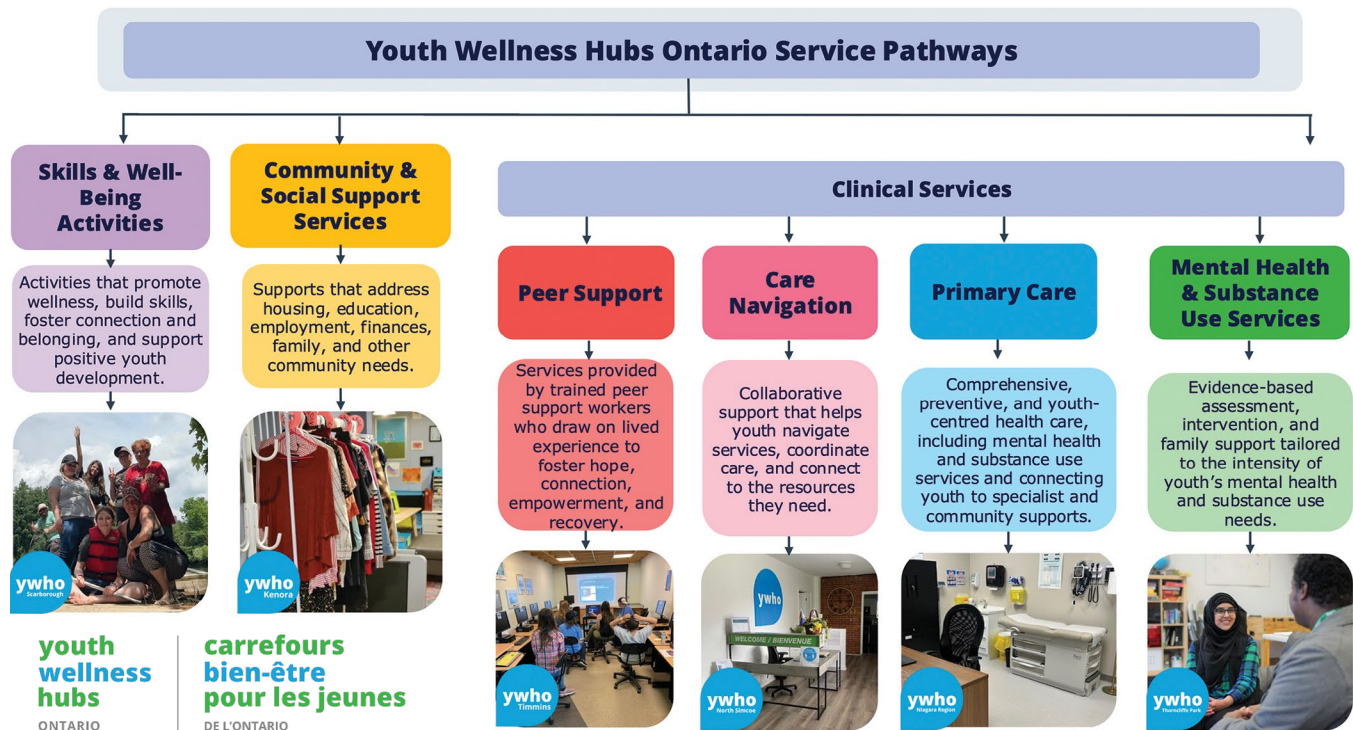
Labhya's approach demonstrates how system-level collaboration, between youth organizations, education systems, and government—can build emotionally safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Labhya embeds well-being within education policies, ensuring that well-being unlocks learning for children.

Grounded in evidence-based practice and youth leadership, Labhya illustrates the potential of scalable, localized, and government-led programs within the broader ecosystem of youth mental health and well-being. By focusing on prevention and emotional literacy from an early age, the program tackles structural inequities that affect well-being, learning, and life outcomes. Labhya's state government partners are setting an example of how education systems can become vehicles for social transformation, shaping communities of care that extend beyond the classroom and fostering a culture where well-being is seen as integral to human development and national progress.

Source: Labhya. (2025). For Children.
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2. DESIGN Ecosystem Initiatives for Youth Mental Health and Well-being

When designing youth mental health and well-being promotion and prevention initiatives at the national or local level, this model serves as a strategic tool to activate and coordinate diverse sectors. It helps ensure that young people have access to a range of actions tailored to their specific needs and realities.



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 Website: www.youthhubs.ca

By grounding strategies in local contexts and ensuring active youth participation, governments and stakeholders can adopt a multisectoral approach that reflects the interconnected dimensions of the ecosystem. While all dimensions may be relevant, those that most directly respond to the needs and experiences of the local youth population should be prioritized in the design and implementation process.

2.1. Ecosystem Design Example: Nab'il Project, Guatemala

Proyecto Nab'il ("tejiendo conocimientos/weaving knowledge" in the Mam language), funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), was created to support Mayan and mestizo youth aged 15–30 in the municipalities of San Pedro Necta (predominantly

Mam) and Cuilco (mestizo) in Huehuetenango. The project aimed to generate new models for safe youth participation, promoting their inclusion in spaces of community and municipal governance to strengthen social cohesion, democracy, and peacebuilding.

The initiative includes a community-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) component, grounded in a socio-ecological model, and is linked to actions aimed at youth empowerment and leadership development. These actions acknowledge culture and local practices, reinforce support networks, and enable safe spaces for emotional expression, learning, and active participation.

Faced with mistrust in local institutions, youth identified churches and Mayan community leaders as more trusted and accessible. These became key partners in building safe spaces for psychosocial support, emotional learning, and youth participation.

The initiative illustrates how diverse sectors can be mobilized to meet youth needs:

Education

Workshops on emotional management, culture of peace, and self-care provided tools to address personal and community challenges.

Governance

Youth were empowered to lead local initiatives and engage in decision-making processes. Mental health gained recognition from local governments, while coordination with health authorities and academic institutions supported sustainability efforts.

Climate

Activities were rooted in a socio-ecological understanding of community and environment.

Art & Creative Expression

Collective murals, festivals, music, and recreational activities enabled creative expression and collective reflection, while also capturing the concerns and aspirations of local youth.

Spirituality

Faith-based actors and indigenous spiritual leaders played a central role in restoring trust and engagement.

Sports & Physical Activity

Recreational activities contributed to social cohesion and inclusion. Youth-led sessions became hubs for social connection, emotional growth, creative expression and transformative action. Many participants replicated these activities in their own communities, generating sustained impact, greater social cohesion, and positioning youth as agents of change for peace and well-being.

Juventudes Nab'il — Promoviendo la Participación y la Paz | IOM Guatemala

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Photo: UN Youth Office/Joel Sheakoski

CONCLUSION: FROM UNCERTAINTY TO COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

This publication has set out a clear and urgent message: youth mental health and well-being can no longer be addressed through fragmented or purely clinical responses. In a world marked by accelerating uncertainty – shaped by climate disruption, social inequality, conflict, digital transformation, and economic instability – young people are navigating conditions that profoundly affect their mental health, sense of belonging, and capacity to imagine hopeful futures. Responding to these realities requires nothing less than a systemic shift in how societies understand, promote, and protect youth mental health and well-being.

By framing mental health and well-being as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, this publication affirms that young people's flourishing is inseparable from the environments in which they live, learn, work, connect, and participate. Mental health is not solely an individual concern; it is relational, social, and deeply embedded within governance systems, education structures, labour markets, housing conditions, digital ecosystems, cultural spaces, and ecological realities. As such, promoting youth mental health demands integrated, multisectoral, and community-based approaches that address both immediate distress and the broader conditions that shape well-being across the life course.

The Youth Mental Health & Well-Being Ecosystem Model proposed in this report offers a practical and adaptable framework for action. Grounded in lived experience, global evidence, and youth leadership, the model invites governments, institutions, and partners to move beyond siloed interventions and toward coordinated ecosystems of care. By intentionally linking governance, peace, spirituality, housing, climate, education, work, technology, arts, and sports, the model provides a pathway for translating global commitments into locally grounded strategies that reflect cultural context, equity, and meaningful youth participation.

Crucially, this report highlights that young people are not passive recipients of care. Across regions, youth-led initiatives are already demonstrating how community-

rooted, rights-based, and innovative approaches can reduce stigma, expand access, and strengthen collective resilience. These initiatives show that when young people are trusted as co-creators and leaders, mental health responses become more relevant, sustainable, and transformative. Investing in youth mental health is therefore not only a moral imperative but a strategic investment in social cohesion, peacebuilding, and long-term development.

As the global community advances commitments under the Pact for the Future, Youth2030, the Sustainable Development Goals, and emerging mental health and human rights frameworks, the moment calls for decisive action. This includes scaling up investment, strengthening community-based systems, embedding mental health across policy domains, and ensuring accountability through inclusive governance and youth engagement mechanisms.

The future of youth mental health and well-being will be shaped by the choices made today. Choosing to act collectively, systemically, and with young people at the center can transform uncertainty into possibility. By building ecosystems that nurture dignity, connection, and purpose, societies can create the conditions for young people not only to survive the challenges of our time, but to lead the way toward more just, peaceful, and flourishing futures for all.

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United Nations Youth Office

As the first dedicated entity for youth affairs within the United Nations Secretariat, the UN Youth Office champions the rights, perspectives, contributions and potential of young people everywhere. We lead efforts to enhance collaboration, coordination and accountability on youth affairs, ensuring that the United Nations works effectively and inclusively with young people in all their diversity. By fostering meaningful, inclusive, and impactful participation of youth in decision-making processes, our work focuses on empowering young people as agents of transformative change in addressing global challenges in the areas of sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian action.

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