

UN Health4Life Fund





Key messages

- Overall development financing is decreasing. Pooled funding mechanisms like the Health4Life Fund (H4LF) present an innovative opportunity to expand fiscal space for NCDs and mental health.
- The H4LF is country-led, providing a much-needed space for low- and middle-income countries to collaborate, innovate, and drive change in the health and development space.
- NCD financing should encourage whole-of-government and whole-of-society responses thus improving policy coherence.

Introduction

Noncommunicable diseases and mental health conditions (NCDs) are responsible for almost three out of four deaths globally, with more than one of those deaths taking place between the ages of 30 and 70, which are typically the most productive years of a person's life. NCDs also account for over three-quarters of years lived with disability worldwide, contributing to a reduction in human capital and productivity, in addition to being key drivers of poverty and inequality through their direct impact on household finances.

Although they are largely preventable, NCDs and their related risk factors remain overwhelmingly neglected by development financing. If left unaddressed, NCDs pose a substantial threat to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals Goal 3 (Good Health). Given the significant challenges around NCD financing and demand from UN Member States, the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund to Catalyze Country Action on NCDs and Mental Health, or Health4Life Fund (hereinafter referred to as the H4LF) was established by WHO, UNICEF, and UNDP in 2021.

While there are established global policies and guidelines for NCDs and mental health, country-level implementation has been slow and uneven. For low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), this fragmentation often results from governments having to rely on limited and siloed global funding to finance their health services. With this in mind, the H4LF will pool donor funding to provide "catalytic grants" to LMICs. These grants are intended to mobilize domestic funding, stimulate increased multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral action, and improve policies and regulations around NCD prevention and control.

Expanding the fiscal space for NCDs while overall development financing is decreasing presents a challenge that requires new, innovative models and partnerships. This case study looks to provide an overview of the H4LF, including its purpose, model, and positioning for future impact.



Pooled funding mechanisms and H4LF establishment

Pooled funding mechanisms are multi-partner mechanisms where investors make contributions towards broad objectives and goals by channeling their resources through a single instrument.

Within the development sector, global health financing institutions such as the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, and the Global Financing Facility (GFF) have demonstrated the amplified impact of consolidated, coordinated, and increased financing for specific global health agendas.

Pooled funding mechanisms have also played an increasingly important role in delivering the 2030 Agenda and the shared commitment to “leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first,” and have been promoted by the UN Secretariat as a means to align UN agencies’ programs and resources. This trend around pooled funding and other innovative mechanisms encouraged Member States to take a similar approach to NCDs, committing to “explore voluntary and innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships” in the Political Declaration of the 3rd High-Level Meeting (HLM) on NCDs in 2018 to accelerate the implementation of SDG 3.4. Member States capitalized on this momentum and political will from the 3rd HLM and called for a similar pooled fund for NCDs by Member States in both New York and Geneva-based processes. This included a recommendation from the WHO Independent High-Level Commission on NCDs in their 2018 report to establish the H4LF; a request from the WHA in 2019, asking the WHO Director-General to identify voluntary funding mechanisms to support Member States in their NCD response, and calls for the Fund in ECOSOC’s resolutions on the UNIATF from 2018-2020. The idea for the Health4Life Fund is a result of these longstanding demands by the LMICs within the UN Development System. The need and use of the H4LF was further emphasized by the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how little financing existed for LMICs to address the ongoing health needs of their populations as well as the need to strengthen NCD response for pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response and health equity. The H4LF was established in 2021 and led by WHO, UNDP, and UNICEF, commonly referred to as Participating UN Organizations (PUNOs).



Model

In order to enable countries to address national priorities for NCD prevention and care throughout the life course, the H4LF's pooled funding approach is steered by five key principles: country-led, catalytic, cross-sectoral, equity-driven, and impact-oriented investments.

The H4LF is also guided by a rights-based approach to action, which is a key component of its support to governments to address obstacles in the policy-action continuum. Once optimized, the H4LF will not simply pool and distribute funds based on an application from government stakeholders alone, but instead, encourage collective ownership and action from a diverse set of stakeholders for a project to receive a catalytic grant. These grants are catalytic because of the strategic and targeted purpose of each one, which presents itself in three ways:

- 1. Unblocking bottlenecks:** Countries are supported to address sticking points in priority areas. The H4LF's model requires countries to identify and define their particular problem areas, with technical and financial support from the fund to remove bottlenecks in the selected area or areas.
- 2. Leveraging additional resources through "reversed co-financing":** In the H4LF's model, the bulk of funding for implementation will derive from countries themselves – be it through domestic budgets, bilateral and multilateral financing, or private investments. This ensures that H4LF-funded activities are embedded within broader government development strategies and financing plans to ensure sustainability.
- 3. Improving policy coherence:** Encouraging and mobilizing a multi-sectoral approach in the design and implementation of policies supports whole-of-government responses and thus improves policy coherence. The H4LF provides countries with a platform for knowledge-sharing, peer-learning, and south-to-south technical assistance to optimize use of the resources that the fund's partners contribute. This multi-sectoral approach also explicitly includes relevant academic institutions to ensure that grants contain research components, facilitating evaluation and sharing of the knowledge and impact.

Challenges

While there was significant support expressed for the H4LF across member states following the 3rd High-Level Meeting on NCDs, this initial enthusiasm has yet to translate into substantial financial commitments from governments. There is an urgent need to increase the visibility of the H4LF at both global and national levels, to socialize knowledge on its added value in the global NCDs and mental health landscape, and to translate this knowledge into financial commitments from state and relevant non-state actors.

The process of fundraising for the H4LF has essential risks, particularly as it is moving away from traditional approaches to health and development financing. Rather than being donor-driven with high-income country (HIC) and private sector actors funding programs in line with their priorities and agendas, the H4LF's work is driven by country-led inquiries and needs-based assessments. At WHA76 (May 2023) the H4LF Secretariat held an event highlighting how the fund would go about project development to provide prospective donors with an illustrative example of a developed project proposal that was also shared in briefings to Member States by the Friends of the Task Force. The proposal outlines the policy and programming initiatives requested by the government including projected costs, providing donors with a concrete idea of how and where funding will be directed and distributed throughout a project.

In September 2023, the Government of Scotland became the first donor to the H4LF, pledging £2.5 million over the next five years, citing the wish to redress the balance of global financing for NCDs and mental health conditions. In his announcement, First Minister Humza Yousef also noted the H4LF's model promoting leadership of countries in the Global South will encourage solutions that are more responsive to the needs of recipient countries.

What makes the Health4Life Fund innovative

As part of the “country-led” partnership approach, the Fund sought to prioritize outreach to countries from the Global South who have demonstrated leadership on NCDs and mental health to join as Founding Strategic Partners (FSPs). The FSPs (Kenya, Thailand, and Uruguay), in addition to sitting on the Fund’s Steering Committee, also provide political and advocacy support to the H4LF among peers. Since the H4LF is country-led, it is not only responding directly to the needs of its partners but is also providing a much-needed space for LMICs to collaborate, innovate, and drive change in the health and development space.

Across its activities, the H4LF aims to encourage and mobilize multi-sectoral responses for improving NCD prevention and care, which includes the engagement of civil society, providing those organizations with another concrete ask and opportunity for their governments to support NCDs. Their direct advocacy on engagement with the H4LF can focus on a range of asks, be it providing financial support to a global pooled financing instrument or for their government’s solicitation of the fund’s catalytic financing and technical support.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is that the H4LF is the first and only UN and global funding mechanism focusing on NCDs and mental health. In a post-COVID era, where governments and development actors are focusing on health systems strengthening and horizontal integration of health programs, the presence of technical support and funding to develop and implement policies and programs within these initiatives will be critical in responding to the growing NCD burden and in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



H4LF structure and processes

The H4LF Secretariat, which is hosted by the World Health Organization in Geneva, is charged with overseeing the strategic functioning of the fund, managing its governance and operational processes, cultivating partnerships with donors, and supporting country action. The fiduciary responsibility for the fund lies with its administrator, the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office hosted by the UN Development Programme based in New York. It fulfills a range of functions including grant disbursement, accounting, and reporting. The work of the Secretariat is guided by its Steering Committee, which is comprised of the three participating UN organizations (PUNOs), its four Strategic Partners, and two non-governmental organization observers. The Steering Committee serves as the decision-maker in regard to which proposals and thematic areas are funded.

Prospective recipients receive a call for proposals disseminated through the PUNOs, the first of which was launched in early 2024. In the application process, the recipient country is provided with technical support by the H4LF Secretariat and its PUNOs at headquarters, regional, and country offices. The relevant government ministry leading the proposal must lead and consult with a multi-stakeholder group that includes other sectors of government, UN agencies, civil society, and academia, among others, to identify the goal and objectives of the funds based on priority needs and should align with their national action plan for development.

After a proposal is approved by the Fund's Steering Committee, the Secretariat will work with the multistakeholder group led by the government and UN country teams to develop an implementation plan based on the needs and strategic pathways identified in the proposal, and provide ongoing technical support throughout the lifetime of the grant.



Potential impact

The Health4Life Fund aims to raise US\$ 250 million over five years to provide catalytic support to countries to implement and scale up multisectoral solutions and key measures for NCD prevention and care in LMICs.

The base funding will support investment in a package of cost-effective NCD interventions that are aligned with the WHO “Best Buys” and other global guidelines that have been proven to have high levels of return on investment for health and the economy. Implementation, monitoring, and evaluation support will be provided through the **WHO Delivery for Impact model**, which embeds continuous impact measurement into implementation tools that ensure that data-driven prioritization of objectives and indicators; in this case, estimates on areas such as return on investment and projected revenue are established with clear delivery plans and accountability frameworks.

The Health4Life Fund is looking to raise 250 million USD over the next five years. Preliminary projections indicate that this ‘seed’ capital would be an important contribution to catalyzing the domestic action and resource mobilization needed to save over 39 million lives and generate an economic benefit of around \$2.7 trillion between 2023-2030, while ensuring that every region achieves SDG 3. H4LF’s success will be measured in terms of the impact at both policy and programming levels, for example, development of strategies and action plans, and geographic expansion of delivering basic care packages for people living with and at risk of NCDs, including reaching disadvantaged and underserved populations.

NCDs and health more broadly are deeply interlinked across the SDGs, and the catalytic investments enabled by the H4LF will have rippling effects that ensure wider progress on the 2030 Agenda including Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), and Goal 10 (reduced inequalities).

Conclusion

The Health4Life Fund is an opportunity to ensure that the resource gap for NCDs and mental health can be bridged as governments begin to undertake other health system reforms and strengthening initiatives. The catalytic grants, which utilize a “reverse co-financing” model, ensure national ownership through the project development process by collectively working to identify and reduce bottlenecks, leverage existing domestic resources, and improve policy coherence. As more and more governments take a horizontal approach to health, focusing on UHC and health systems strengthening, the H4LF is uniquely positioned to ensure that NCD prevention and treatment are adequately resourced and addressed.

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