

4 Broader Population Harms

Health protection measures should fit within a wider policy context, which recognises that, without increased efforts to improve public health and reduce inequalities, we are all left vulnerable to known, and as yet unknown, infections going forward. Protecting our population from all such threats means:

- increasing population resilience to infection through enhanced efforts to reduce obesity, smoking, alcohol and substance use, increase exercise and improve living conditions
- improving health literacy and hygiene practices, which should be embedded from the beginnings of life
- reducing inequalities to ensure that some communities are not an easy target for infections; forming a foothold for subsequent transmission to others.

The pandemic has exposed the need for the development of near real-time health and well-being statistics dashboards rather than just relying on retrospective analyses of trends often viewed in isolation. Thus, going forward, COVID-19 statistics need to be developed and routinely communicated not in isolation but along with wider infectious disease surveillance and other population measures of health and well-being, including other causes of mortality and morbidity, economic, education and social measures.

The healthcare, employment and economic challenges that COVID-19 has set in motion will, without significant mitigating action, lead to a decline in health and well-being and increase in inequalities over the coming decade. In order to inform future responses to this and potentially other pandemics, we also require a better understanding of health gains resulting from different pandemic-related interventions and policies. However, these should be complemented by better identification of the costs and continued losses those interventions impose on other health, social, economic and educational areas.

Future restrictions on individuals and communities should be informed by a much more sophisticated understanding of the benefits and harms of such actions including years of life and healthy life saved and sacrificed, longer-term impacts, and acute morbidity and mortality.

To address many of these challenges, we have proposed establishing a Health, Social and Economic Return on Investment Unit as part of our World Health Organization Collaborating Centre. This would provide intelligence, model national and population specific outcomes and outline policy options. Given the widespread impacts of COVID-19 the Unit would be able to identify and advise, system-wide, on the most effective and cost-effective mitigations to the repercussions of COVID-19 and other longer-standing communicable and non-communicable threats to health. Consistent with