



**World  
Physiotherapy**  
Europe region

# **Harmonisation of Sustainable Development Goals Within the Profession**

**Professional Practice Working Group (PPWG)**

**APPROVED**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

The agenda includes 17 SDGs, defined in 169 targets. These goals are integrated and co-dependant and include all 3 domains of sustainability, which are; economic, social, and environmental. Hence a holistic approach in addressing these goals is highly recommended.



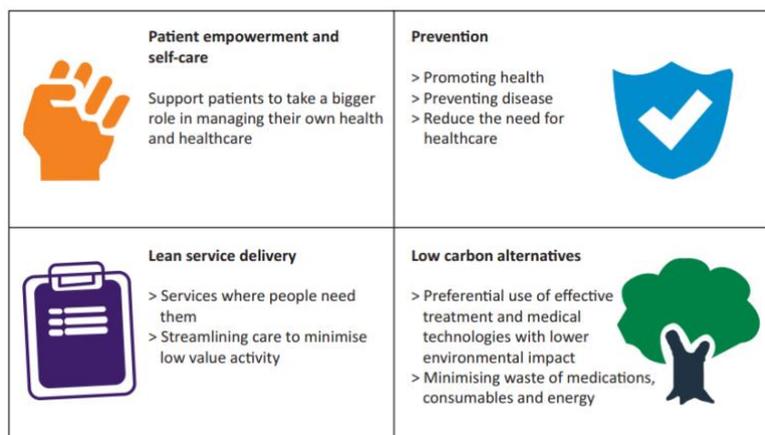
Figure 1: The United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Watts et al., 2015)

## 2. BACKGROUND

Climate change has been stated to constitute the greatest global threat to human health during this century (Pichler, et al., 2019). The healthcare system plays a vital role since it is a major contributor of global emissions, largely due to healthcare supply chains and hospital care, with preventative measures having the lowest emissions on the list of contributors. The healthcare system plays a major role in responding to and mitigating the effects of climate change one of which measures is to shift and/or extend the use of non-pharmacological interventions such as, physiotherapy practices and multidisciplinary treatments, that can create an opportunity to lead towards a more sustainable healthcare.

According to Atwoli et al, (2021), the combination of health impact of climate change and the health sector itself being a contributor to climate change led the Centre for sustainable Healthcare in the U.K. to develop four principles of sustainable healthcare (Mortimer et al., 2018):

- i. Prevention
- ii. Patient self-care,
- iii. Lean service delivery
- iv. Low carbon alternatives.



**Figure 2: Four principles of sustainable healthcare practice (Mortimer et al., 2018)**

In this context, physiotherapy could be a vital contributor to sustainable development. For example, physiotherapy practices support lifestyle change and patient empowerment which upholds and enhance one’s own health and are often favourable from a resource perspective as well (Palstam et al., 2021). Furthermore, since physiotherapy practices are non-pharmacological and known to be resource-efficient, it is evident that its practices carry the potential to significantly reduce the environmental burden of healthcare.

The Europe region in 2019 identified the need to promote the role of physiotherapy practices in the implementation of SDGs so that physiotherapists could harmonise their practices to be able to support these Global Goals. The Europe region proposes to undertake a process to imbed the concept of sustainable development so that it aligns the work physiotherapists do in the region, with an aim to advocate for better health in current and future generations, acknowledging the important role of physiotherapy in the implementation of SDGs.

### 3. PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is twofold; firstly, to outline the need for physiotherapists to adhere to the SDGs in their daily practice which includes the clinical, educational, research, management and policy practices and secondly to promote physiotherapy practice as a more sustainable health service since is it a lower contributor to greenhouse gases when compared to other health services. Given the strong contributions to and further potential impact of our profession on sustainable development; we have an impact on our patients as well as on our working environments, with the ultimate goals to create sustainable measures that affect not only us and our patients/clients, but also the future of the physiotherapy profession and the environments we operate in, in healthcare and society as a whole.

This proposal is in line with the strategic priority of World Physiotherapy which states “**A community that has global influence and brings about changes to health policy and practice**” and it is also addressing the objectives from the strategic plan of the Europe region of World Physiotherapy which are: “**Promote excellence on Physiotherapy education practice and research**” and “**Engage in relevant policy development at EU and national level**”. This SDG agenda has become a top global and European priority with these targets to be reached by 2030 and physiotherapists are strongly encouraged to contribute to this global agenda.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Europe region endorses sustainable and environmental responsibility in the face of the climate crisis and its relevance to health.

This paper provides a rationale for the change process that the Europe region is proposing to support the Global Goals and their implementation.

The proposal will develop actions that will contribute to the shift towards a sustainable path. It will involve the development of guidelines, partnerships as well as collaboration with a range of various stakeholders, which are essential to reach the Global Goals, including all sectors of physiotherapy practices within the clinical, educational, research, managerial and policy sectors of the profession.

In the initial stage, this proposal is also enhancing awareness of the SDGs within physiotherapy practices, it is promoting the co-dependency of these Global Goals, which ultimately enhance the quality of life of patients/clients and also improve the quality of their health systems by building a more sustainable society (Jha et al., 2016).

In the recommendations listed below, the Europe region is envisaging that these actions would assist physiotherapists and patients/clients through a pivotal role in developing and defining the role of physiotherapists and their practices in making a significant contribution in the transition to a sustainable society, together with other health professions as well as patient/clients groups, when raising awareness of the strong connections between health and environmental issues e.g. to reduce air pollution to prevent and reduce respiratory, and cardiovascular conditions, for reduced opioid prescription providing non-pharmacological treatment options, greater increased physical activities, green spaces, cycle lanes and other facilities that improve air quality/cleaner air and encourage increased uptake physical activity across the lifespan.

#### 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

**The Europe region is proposing the development of Guidelines on the following topics:**

- SDGs and Physiotherapy Practices
- Europe region Environmental Guidelines
- Physiotherapy and the European Green Deal

**The Europe region is proposing to implement the following initiatives:**

- Include the SDGs in the discussion session of the organisation.
- Promote the inclusion of the SDGs in Entry-Level Physiotherapy Programmes.
- Promote the consideration of the SDGs whilst addressing global crisis such as pandemics.
- Include the SDGs in the webinar series of Europe region.
- Promote the active participation of physiotherapists onto committees addressing SDGs within the health sector.
- Support environmental initiatives in Europe region such as promoting remote/hybrid congresses, remote working, public transport usage and promote reductions in travel,

printing, single use plastics, water and light usage. Set reduction targets such as reduce in-person Executive Committee meetings by 10% and reduce in-person Working Groups meetings by 25% per term.

**The Europe region is proposing to assist the current physiotherapy practices by:**

- Raising awareness on sustainable development among physiotherapists and empower physiotherapists to increase their positive contribution to and reduce their negative impact on SDGs in their daily work.
- Promote the profession as one of the lowest contributors to emission of Green House Gases within the health sector.
- Encourage and support the Member Organisations to be environmentally aware about SDGs in physiotherapy practices.
- Encourage and support the Member Organisations to develop their own organisational environmental policy.



*“You can’t have healthy people on a sick planet”  
Gary Cohen, President, Healthcare Without Harm (2019)*

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