

GOING INTERNATIONAL

Investing in Health Literacy and the Social Responsibility and Sustainability Agenda

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Health literacy is an emerging area of human and societal investment. Moving from the margin to the mainstream – attention has increased worldwide on how to improve the [health literacy of people, communities, organizations, systems and societies](#).

[Health literacy is linked to literacy](#) and entails the knowledge, motivation, and competencies to access, understand, appraise and apply information to form judgment and make decisions regarding healthcare, disease prevention, and health promotion to maintain and promote quality of life during the life course. However, a significant [health literacy gap](#) exists as 30-60% of people have limited health literacy facing difficulties managing their health and navigating health systems. They have higher risk of hospitalization, lack of medication adherence and adverse risk regarding socio-economic implications related to health.

According to the [Shanghai Declaration](#) on promoting health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development health literacy `empowers individual citizens and enables their engagement in collective health promotion action. A high health literacy of decision-makers and investors supports their commitment to health impact, co-benefits and effective action on the determinants of health. Health literacy is founded on inclusive and equitable access to quality education and life-long learning. It must be an integral part of the skills, and competencies developed over a lifetime`.

To achieve the sustainable development goals, the Shanghai Declaration highlights how it is important for public and private organizations worldwide to

- recognize health literacy as a critical determinant of health and invest in its development;
- develop, implement and monitor intersectoral national and local strategies for strengthening health literacy in all populations and in all educational settings;
- increase citizens' control of their own health and its determinants, through harnessing the potential of digital technology; and
- ensure that consumer environments support healthy choices.

Organizations wishing to make a difference regarding health literacy as part of their social responsibility and sustainability agenda can consider the following concrete actions:

1. Improve access to health information and communication in an easy, timely and appropriate manner.
2. Ensure that health information is understandable and written in plain language with options to seek more advanced information, if needed and wanted.
3. Provide opportunities for choice and appraisal to seek solutions that fit the actual health related needs (avoid one size fits all).
4. Ensure guidance on how to proceed when health information is accessed, understood, and appraised to facilitate further action.

Empowering people through the development of health literacy saves time, saves money and saves lives. The investment in health literacy is a [global social movement on the rise](#). Join the efforts!

‘Everybody needs to step forward and be part of the solution’.

(Dr. Howard Koh, professor of public health leadership at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston, 2016)

Interesting Websites

- [WHO: Health literacy, The Solid Facts](#): Health literacy, The solid facts (Book download)
- [The European Journal of Public Health](#): Health literacy in Europe: comparative results of the European health literacy survey (HLS-EU)
- [Global Health Promotion](#): Health literacy and social change: exploring networks and interests groups shaping the rising global health literacy movement
- [IUHPE](#): International Union for Health Promotion and Education
- [The Global Health Literacy Academy](#): Explore the disruptive power of health literacy

About the Author

Kristine Sørensen is a thought leader committed to advance the global scope of health literacy. She is the founder of the Global Health Literacy Academy and advisor for e.g. governments and international organizations such as the European Commission, the World Health Organization and McKinsey. She has co-founded a number of national and regional health literacy networks and she is currently the chair of Health Literacy Europe and president of the International Health Literacy Association. She has received the European Health Award (2012), the International Health Literacy Award (2017) and the Asian Health Literacy Award (2019) for her societal impact.

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