

Untapped Potential:

Unlocking Self-Care for Global Health Progress



GLOBAL
SELF-CARE
FEDERATION

BCIU

BUSINESS COUNCIL
for INTERNATIONAL
UNDERSTANDING

Untapped Potential:

Unlocking Self-Care for Global Health Progress

DEFINITION OF SELF-CARE

The ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health worker.

World Health Organization

FOREWORD

The world is currently facing a complex web of challenges, with many regions grappling with severe social, economic, and political crises that strain infrastructures and public services.

In its 2024 report, the World Health Organization (WHO) noted that progress toward achieving the health-related targets of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is only about one-third of what is needed.

This underscores the urgent need for continued collaboration among various partners and stakeholders to achieve SDG 3, including Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by 2030. Strengthening health systems worldwide will be key to addressing these crises and ensuring equitable access to healthcare for all.

Bayer, the Global Self-Care Federation (GSCF), and the Business Council for International Understanding (BCIU) partnered on research to raise awareness among international financial institutions about the critical role of self-care and its integration into health systems to support global health goals.

The pandemic has boosted the use of self-care products and practices, demonstrating their cost-effectiveness in managing rising chronic diseases and demographic shifts.

With the increasing focus on UHC and the strain on health systems, self-care offers a valuable opportunity to improve health outcomes.

At Bayer, we are committed to helping everyone live healthier lives. Our vision is to leverage our broad portfolio of trusted personal health products to enhance the everyday health of billions of people. We aim to provide accessible, safe, and convenient health solutions that empower people to take control of their well-being.

At GSCF, we advocate for sustainable global health by promoting the benefits of self-care, ensuring it remains integral to healthcare systems worldwide.

At BCIU, we work with business and governments globally to address health and other challenges through a combination of dialogue and action, with a focus on cultivating public-private partnerships.

Our aim is for this paper to serve as a useful starting point for discussions on flexible approaches that countries can adopt to integrate self-care into their health systems, drawing on insights from interviews and research.



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Handwritten signature of Judy Stenmark in black ink.

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01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global health landscape is facing increasing challenges, including aging populations, the rise of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and overwhelmed healthcare systems. In response, self-care has emerged as a crucial strategy for improving health outcomes. It empowers individuals to manage their own health, alleviating pressure on healthcare systems while generating significant economic benefits. In the last few years, studies have been conducted to examine the relevance of self-care for health systems, producing data that support its benefits. Notable examples include the Self-Care Readiness Index and the Economic & Social Value of Self-Care report, both developed by GSCF.

The Self-Care Readiness Index evaluates the readiness of countries to implement self-care into their healthcare systems. This index highlights that integrating self-care not only strengthens health systems but also leads to cost savings and better health outcomes. The Economic & Social Value of Self-Care report further underscores the role of self-care in advancing access to healthcare.

The data reveal compelling benefits of self-care, showing that it is good for governments, healthcare professionals, and society. Self-care delivers \$119 billion in global financial savings per year, frees up 1.8 billion physician hours — allowing health care professionals to focus on more critical conditions — and preserves 40.8 billion productive days, translating to an estimated \$1.9 trillion in welfare benefits for society.

This white paper, titled [Untapped Potential: Unlocking Self-Care for Global Health Progress](#), offers a fresh perspective on the largely underutilized potential of self-care.

It brings together insights from a new set of stakeholders and emphasizes the pivotal role self-care plays in advancing global health objectives, achieving UHC, and accelerating progress toward the 2030 SDGs.

The paper concludes with six key recommendations aimed at scaling self-care initiatives worldwide.



KEY FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

Exploring the untapped potential of self-care reveals a transformation from current limitations to expansive opportunities for health systems.

From Overburdened Systems to Resilient Health

- 01** Self-care is currently a fragmented aspect of health systems. By scaling self-care initiatives, individuals are empowered to manage their health, alleviating pressure on healthcare professionals and fostering resilient, equitable systems. To achieve this, it is essential to integrate self-care into national health plans, ensuring that policies support its widespread adoption.

From High Costs to Cost-Effective Solutions

- 02** Self-care remains underutilized, yet its integration into health systems can transform it into a cost-effective strategy that advances UHC and enhances primary healthcare delivery globally. Recommendations include investing in scaling self-care approaches that prioritize sustainable practices and ensure accessible resources for all.

From Limited Benefits to Economic Empowerment

- 03** The economic advantages of self-care are not fully recognized; however, they could significantly lower healthcare costs and enhance individual and community health outcomes, improving overall quality of life. Supporting community-based self-care programs will empower individuals and contribute to broader economic benefits.

From Insufficient Knowledge to Empowered Communities

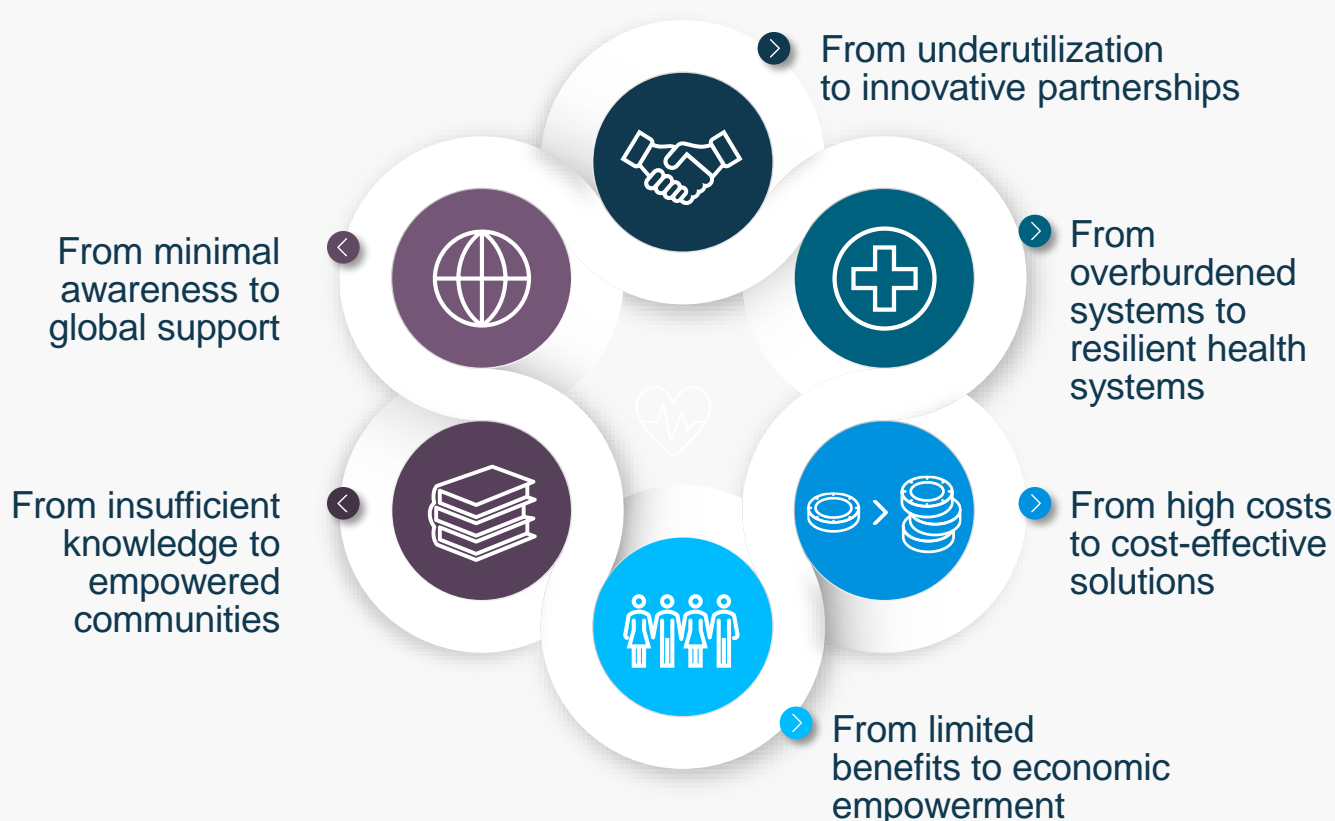
- 04** Health and digital literacy are currently lacking. By investing in workforce development and community engagement, individuals will be equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary for effective self-care management. Promoting health literacy through public campaigns and educational initiatives will also empower communities to take charge of their health.

From Minimal Awareness to Global Support

05 Development agencies and financial institutions have yet to fully engage with self-care. Recognizing its potential to strengthen health systems can turn these entities into powerful advocates, promoting its integration into national policies and mobilizing resources for effective scaling. Fostering global support for self-care initiatives will require collaboration among diverse stakeholders to raise awareness and drive policy changes.

From Underutilization to Innovative Partnerships

06 The private sector's contributions to self-care are currently constrained. Fostering innovation and partnerships can significantly advance self-care practices and solutions, unlocking its full potential. Encouraging collaboration between the private sector, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will create a robust ecosystem for self-care initiatives, driving innovation and sustainability.



Transforming Self-Care: key findings and insights for building resilient health systems

METHODOLOGY

"Untapped Potential: Unlocking Self-Care for Global Health Progress" is the culmination of qualitative research which took place between January and August 2024, to explore the value and impact of self-care in global health systems and how best to integrate self-care more strategically in global and national health plans.

First, a series of 23 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders from international development finance institutions, health ministries, global health coalitions, and the private sector. Officials from notable organizations were interviewed, including from the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the European Investment Bank, as well as senior-level representatives from NGOs and academia.

Second, representatives from an additional 20 organizations participated in two high-level roundtable events in Washington D.C. and Geneva to provide their insights on the value and potential impact of self-care.

Third, a desk review of over 30 publications, consisting of peer-reviewed articles, grey literature, and key global health reports, two-thirds of which were published between 2022-2024, was undertaken.

These provided additional background on the potential of self-care approaches within the broader goals of UHC and the SDGs. "Untapped Potential: Unlocking Self-Care for Global Health Progress" also draws on quantitative data from global health surveys and economic analyses on self-care to highlight the financial implications and benefits of self-care interventions.

The findings from the stakeholder interviews, roundtables and literature were analyzed to identify common themes, challenges, and opportunities, including in relation to self-care policies and implementation strategies.



02 INTRODUCTION

At least half of the world's population has no access to essential health services. The provider-to-client model must be complemented with a self-care model through which people are enabled to make active, informed health decisions to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health worker.

(Dr Tedros, Director General, World Health Organization)

In an era marked by growing complex global health challenges, self-care has recently emerged as a crucial tool for helping countries to achieve UHC, make progress towards the health-related SDGs, and improve primary health care (PHC).

Self-care practices have existed for centuries, with individuals treating minor ailments at home, practicing preventive health behaviors, and managing chronic conditions without the support of a trained healthcare professional.

For many individuals, self-care provides a range of options for managing their health; for others, especially in low-resource settings, self-care maybe their only option. Self-care practices therefore have a huge part to play in extending access to healthcare, especially for the most vulnerable populations.

Self-care also brings significant economic benefits. Research led by GSCF and its partners in 2022ⁱ indicated that self-care activities generate substantial savings - both in terms of monetary costs for individuals and the health sector, as well as in healthcare workforce hours.ⁱⁱ

Despite these advantages, however, many governments have yet to implement self-care in a consistent or strategic manner as part of their broader health system strengthening efforts.

Formalizing self-care within national health policies could help achieve UHC and other global health goals, but a more systematic approach, supported by development financing institutions, donor agencies and others, is needed to fully realize its potential.

Amidst the pursuit of efficiency in overburdened health systems and with the global emphasis on UHC, there is an opportunity to redefine self-care as a valuable tool to enhance overall health systems.

(Private Sector)

SELF-CARE ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Self-care supports individuals in managing their health and well-being throughout different stages of life. Across the life course - from childhood to old age-self-care plays a vital role in preventing illness, managing chronic conditions, and promoting healthy lifestyles.

The 2024 World Bank Group report, *Unlocking the Power of Healthy Longevity: Demographic Change, Non-communicable Diseases, and Human Capital*,ⁱⁱⁱ advocates for a life-course approach to health, starting with improving maternal and child health and extending to addressing risk factors for NCDs in adulthood.

Whether it's through childhood immunizations, adolescent mental health awareness, treating minor illnesses or managing NCDs, self-care is a powerful, cost-effective solution.

The recognition of the lifelong benefits of self-care, can create more inclusive and effective health strategies that meet the needs of people at every stage of their lives.



Self-care in the Healthcare Continuum

The ‘Self-Care in the Healthcare Continuum’ graphic below highlights some of the self-care approaches that can be applied at various life stages, empowering individuals with the tools and knowledge needed to take control of their health.

“ **Self-care is about a continuum of prevention and promotion policies and strategies in every area across the whole life-cycle.**
 (Non-governmental Organization) ”


HEALTHCARE CONTINUUM

Healthy	Minor ailments	Long term conditions	Serious conditions	Palliative care
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ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

 Staying healthy Eat well, take vitamins & exercise Get vaccinations Practice oral health Take preventive self-tests	 Minor illnesses Get proper information about symptoms and self-diagnosis Get advice from pharmacists/nurses Access and good use of products / solutions for minor health problems	 Sexual and reproductive health Better planning of pregnancies Access and good use of birth control products / solutions Self-tests for sexually transmitted infections	 Cardio-vascular Exercise regularly Watch salt and alcohol intake Self-check blood pressure, sugar & cholesterol levels Get help to quit smoking	 Mental health Access to tools to recognize troubles and disease Talk about the conditions without taboo to get support Train HCP to provide information & counselling
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Global policy framework on self-care benefits

- 
Enhance public awareness about self-care practices
- 
Improve access to a wide range of self-care products and solutions
- 
Empower healthcare professionals to incorporate self-care as a therapeutic component

Governments and global funding institutions have yet to fully embrace the potential of self-care in a strategic or consistent way. Yet evidence shows that when self-care is integrated into national health policies and plans, it not only strengthens health systems but also enables governments to optimize their health budgets more effectively.

"Untapped Potential: Unlocking Self-Care for Global Health Progress" highlights the need for urgent action, identifying the key policy areas where governments can leverage self-care to expand equitable healthcare access.

The white paper ends with six recommendations on how to integrate self-care into health systems, providing a clear roadmap for achieving tangible results, and a call to action that urges countries, financing institutions, donor agencies and other global health funders to realize and invest in the untapped potential of self-care to accelerate progress towards global health goals.

This white paper is aimed at governments, multilateral and bilateral organizations, and global health and financial institutions, while also addressing the interests of the private sector and NGOs.

Advancing the self-care agenda means engaging in active dialogue, from community health workers through to governments, donors and the World Bank.

(Non-governmental Organization)



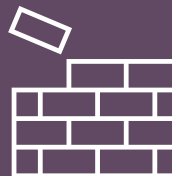


03 GLOBAL TRENDS AND THE POTENTIAL OF SELF-CARE

Complex global challenges – including the effects of climate change, and geopolitical tensions – are impacting health systems globally. The Corona-virus 19 (COVID-19) pandemic, and the economic crisis that it triggered, placed considerable pressure on both national health systems and the broader development architecture, laying bare the acute underfunding of health systems at every level. ^{iv}

By 2030, the funding gap for UHC in the 54 poorest countries is expected to reach \$176 billion annually. ^v With budgets under stress, self-care offers the potential to alleviate the financial burden on health systems, as well as bringing economic benefits for individuals and their families.

Investing in self-care is not only a response to fiscal constraints – it is also a strategic move to protect and advance better public health resilience.



“ Self-care... allows individuals and communities to reduce their dependencies on government healthcare solutions. ”

(Research Journal)

Aging Populations

The global demographic shift towards aging populations is another significant driver of healthcare demand and increasing pressure on already over-stretched health systems. By 2030, over 1 billion people will be aged 65 or older, ^{vi} leading to a greater global burden of NCDs, which currently account for 74% of global deaths. ^{vii}

The huge shortage of health workers globally makes self-care products and services more relevant than ever before.

(Financing Institution)

Rising Burden of NCDs

Self-care can help individuals manage NCDs like hypertension and diabetes, easing the pressure on healthcare facilities and improving patient outcomes. This is critically important, especially as the global shortage of health professionals is projected to reach 10 million by 2030, ^{viii} with the most severe impacts felt in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. By complementing the care provided by healthcare professionals, self-care can minimize the need for frequent visits to health facilities. Additionally, it plays a vital role in preventing NCDs, potentially leading to significant reductions in their prevalence.

By empowering individuals to manage their health independently, self-care fosters effective collaboration with healthcare professionals in managing chronic conditions, ultimately reducing reliance on healthcare services.

Self-care is a natural fit for work on NCDs.

(Financing Institution)

Digital Health Technologies

Not all global trends are impacting negatively on healthcare delivery. Advances in digital health technologies and artificial intelligence are transforming healthcare services, enabling individuals to better manage their own health, even in times of health shocks such as pandemics or natural disasters.

^{ix} The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how telemedicine, health apps, and wearable devices enabled individuals to access health information and care remotely, even in a time of crisis.

Digital health technologies make it easier for users to understand their health condition, streamline communications with health workers, reduce information asymmetry and improve their ability to make decisions and promote self-care.

(IDB Report, 2023^x)

Focus on Women's Health

There is also an increased focus on women's health, as women spend over 25% more time in poor health over the course of their lifetimes compared to men ^{xi}, and because they are often the cornerstone of their families' and communities' well-being. Women are benefitting from self-care interventions that empower them to take more control of their health, as well as reduce the heavy care-giving responsibilities that they so often bear. ^{xii}

For policymakers and the global health community, adopting self-care is no longer optional - it is essential to achieving long-term health resilience and ensuring equitable access to care in a rapidly changing world.

Self-care is emerging as a practical and strategic solution to strengthen health systems and improve health outcomes.

As economic pressures, aging populations, and workforce shortages threaten the sustainability of healthcare delivery, self-care offers a cost-effective approach to alleviate these burdens.





04 TRANSITIONING FROM GREAT POTENTIAL TO NATIONAL ACTION



Self-care is about creating an environment that supports people in making healthier choices, wherever they are in the world.



(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

Many governments and their development partners have started to recognize self-care as an essential component of the health system, with the potential to contribute to global health goals and to advance primary health care more effectively. ^{xiii, xiv} However, translating this recognition into policies, national plans and practical, scalable actions requires a nuanced understanding of the enablers of and barriers to self-care practices. ^{xv} This section explores the factors that facilitate the integration of self-care across all levels of the health system and considers what's needed to develop and implement self-care strategies effectively.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLICIES, REGULATIONS, AND GOVERNANCE



We need smart policies – globally and nationally – to help self-care products and services become more accessible for individuals and families.



(Private Sector)

The successful integration of self-care into national health strategies hinges on robust policy frameworks and governance structures. Inadequate regulatory systems can pose significant barriers to the adoption of self-care; ^{xvi} reorienting health systems to include self-care as a primary line of action is therefore crucial. ^{xvii}

Clear and consistent policies that support self-care create enabling environments in which people can more readily promote and manage their own health. ^{xviii}

Although many governments are already investing in health promotion activities that align with self-care principles, few have developed coherent strategies that fully incorporate self-care practices into national health policy.

This limits the potential for the integration of self-care into broader health systems strengthening and can lead to missed opportunities for improving health outcomes and reducing healthcare costs. ^{xix}

Governments should consider prioritizing the development of policy frameworks that integrate self-care into national health strategies as well as establishing clear regulations for self-care products and services. ^{xx}

(The Joint Statement on Self-Care Interventions for SRHR to Advance Universal Health Coverage, 2023)

We recognize the potential of self-care to reduce the burden on healthcare services, improve health outcomes, and enhance the overall quality of life for individuals and communities. For this we underscore the need to elevate and integrate self-care practices at all the levels of healthcare systems including primary care level.

(São Paulo Declaration, 2023)

FROM COMMITMENT TO ACTION

A WHO framework for action on self-care would provide direction for self-care's integration into national health systems, promote awareness and political commitment, and mobilize resources for evidence-based interventions. ^{xxi}



African governments look to WHO for technical guidance and a framework will create an enabling environment for self-care.

(Non-governmental organization)

There is evidence to suggest that, for many countries, one of the key influences on national policy decisions are WHO political declarations and resolutions as they represent formal support at the highest levels of global health governance.

A WHO framework for action on self-care could provide a unified approach for governments and global institutions to prioritize and integrate self-care into national health strategies. In addition to promoting the establishment of clear policies and regulations to support self-care, such a framework could strengthen the case for financing self-care solutions and foster stronger partnerships with the private sector.

A WHO framework would mean governments start to take action ... it would provide more awareness.

(Non-Governmental Organization)

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AT ALL LEVELS TO SCALE SELF-CARE

You need to engage with Ministers of Finance and Heads of State as well as with Ministers of Health.

(Academic Institution)

Stakeholder engagement should begin at the policy-making level and extend through to communities and individuals to ensure the continuity of reforms beyond political cycles. ^{xxii}

Creating and nurturing collaboration between governments, healthcare providers, civil society, the private sector and others is essential for the successful development and implementation of self-care strategies. ^{xxiii}

Foundational to that collaboration is a common understanding of the range of self-care practices and the economic value - for both individuals and the health system as a whole - of including self-care as part of the transformation agenda for health. ^{xxiv}

There are encouraging examples in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia where national coordination networks, often led or co-chaired by senior officials from Ministries of Health, are effective in driving self-care initiatives forward. Supporting these groups can help to ensure that self-care strategies are effectively implemented and sustained, ^{xxv} alongside engagement of Ministries of Finance and Heads of State.



Self-care has to be a part of the whole health system, connected with the different layers of the health system.

(Government Official)

Scale what we know works and build motivation to drive the agenda forwards.

(Foundation)

COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SELF-CARE SOLUTIONS

Community engagement is crucial for effective self-care strategies. Tailoring initiatives to local needs enhances acceptance and sustainability, requiring active participation from community members and leaders.

Self-care programs should create local support networks, like peer groups, to foster ownership and ongoing engagement. Involving community health workers is essential, as they can educate individuals, distribute resources, and promote preventive care, easing the burden on healthcare systems.

For sustainability, these programs need strong policies and integration into national health systems with adequate funding.

Building self-care from the ground up helps create resilient health systems responsive to local needs.

The following case studies highlight successful partnerships among governments, funders, and civil society.

There is a fantastic growing movement of self-care in the UK – we see it as an essential part of sustainability [of the health system].

(Government Official)

CASE STUDY: SELF-CARE FOR HYPERTENSION MANAGEMENT IN KENYA



BACKGROUND

Hypertension is a significant NCD in Kenya, particularly in rural areas where access to healthcare is limited. To address this challenge, a community-based health promotion program was launched in 2018, focusing on self-care practices for individuals with hypertension. ^{xxvi}

The program included training workshops conducted by local health workers, emphasizing lifestyle modifications such as dietary changes (reducing salt intake and increasing fruits and vegetables), regular physical activity, and stress management. Community health volunteers played a crucial role by providing ongoing support and follow-up on medication adherence and lifestyle changes.

Additionally, mobile health tools were introduced to encourage participants to monitor their blood pressure and access educational resources.

Outcomes were promising: 60% of participants achieved significant blood pressure control after six months, knowledge regarding hypertension management and self-care increased by 75%, and participants reported improved dietary habits and physical activity levels.



This case demonstrates that community engagement and education can effectively enhance hypertension management in resource-limited settings, highlighting the vital role of self-care practices in addressing NCDs. ^{xxvii, xxviii, xxix}

CASE STUDY: MATERNAL SUPPLEMENTATION WITH MULTIPLE MICRONUTRIENT SUPPLEMENTATION IN INDONESIA



BACKGROUND

Indonesia faces high rates of anemia and micronutrient deficiencies among pregnant women. To tackle these issues, the government has piloted a Multiple Micronutrient Supplementation (MMS) program to improve maternal and fetal health.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PILOT MMS PROGRAM

Target Population: Focuses on pregnant women, especially in rural areas with prevalent nutritional deficiencies.

Supplement Composition: MMS includes 15 essential vitamins and minerals like iron, folic acid, vitamin A, and zinc.

Distribution Channels: Supplements were distributed through healthcare facilities and community health workers.

Education and Counselling: Health education sessions inform women about the importance of micronutrients and nutrition during pregnancy.

BENEFITS OBSERVED

Reduction in Anemia Rates: A study found that the prevalence of anemia among pregnant women decreased by approximately 25% within one year of MMS implementation.

Improved Birth Outcomes: Women receiving MMS experienced a 30% reduction in low birth weight and a 20% decrease in preterm births compared to those on standard iron and folic acid supplements. ^{xxx}

Increased Maternal Health Knowledge: Surveys indicated that 70% of participants reported improved understanding of nutritional needs during pregnancy.

Increased Healthcare Utilization: The program led to a 40% increase in prenatal care visits among pregnant women.

Community Engagement: Local health workers reported a 50% increase in community participation in maternal health programs due to the initiative's outreach efforts.

The MMS program in Indonesia has significantly improved maternal health outcomes.^{xxx} By addressing nutritional deficiencies, the program played a crucial role in ensuring healthier pregnancies and reducing maternal and infant mortality rates. ^{xxxii,xxxiii}

CASE STUDY: THE BENEFITS OF SELF-CARE IN SPAIN'S HEALTHCARE



BACKGROUND

Spain is prioritizing self-care in its healthcare strategy to tackle challenges from an aging population and rising costs, focusing on empowering individuals to manage their health.

SPAIN HAS IMPLEMENTED SEVERAL KEY INITIATIVES

Chronic Disease Management: The Ministry of Health provides educational programs for patients with chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension. The Chronic Patient Care Strategy aims to improve care coordination and enhance the role of patients in managing their health. ^{xxxiv}

Digital Health Platforms: Spain has invested significantly in telemedicine and digital health applications, including Salud Responde and MyHealth, which facilitate access to health information, appointment management, and teleconsultations.

Community Health Initiatives: Local authorities are promoting healthy lifestyles through initiatives such as "Salud en la Comunidad," which offers workshops on nutrition, physical activity, and stress management.

BENEFITS

Reduced Healthcare Utilization: Self-care programs have been associated with a notable decrease in emergency visits and hospitalizations. A study by the Spanish Society of Family and Community Medicine (semFYC) reported a 20% reduction in hospital admissions for chronic conditions among program participants. ^{xxxv} The European Commission estimates potential savings of up to €2 billion annually across Europe. ^{xxxvi}

Improved Individuals Outcomes: Participants reported better management of their conditions, particularly diabetic patients with improved blood sugar control.

Increased Individuals' Satisfaction: Surveys conducted by the Spanish Agency for Health Quality and Assessment found that patients felt more empowered and satisfied with their healthcare experiences, leading to better adherence to treatment plans. ^{xxxvii}

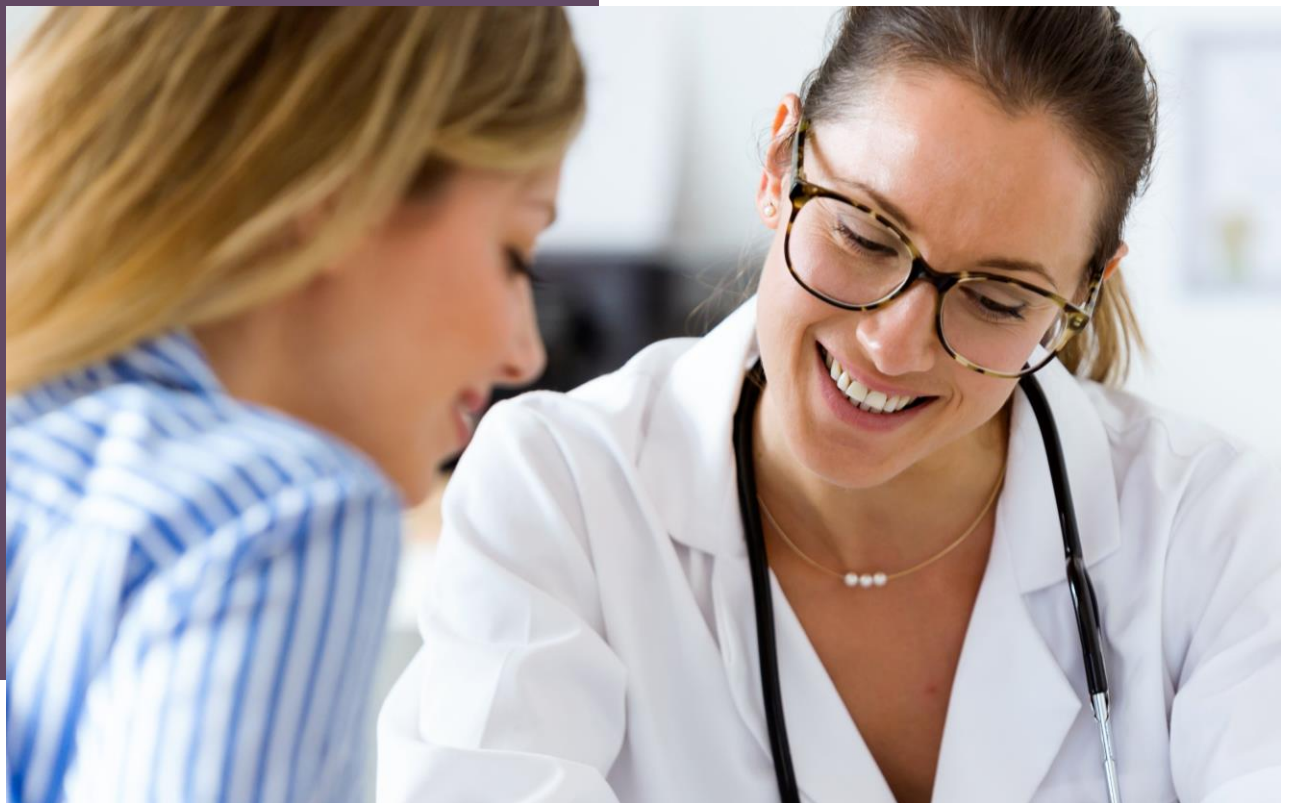
CASE STUDY: THE BENEFITS OF SELF-CARE IN SPAIN'S HEALTHCARE



BENEFITS

Cost Savings: Significant cost savings have been achieved through reduced unnecessary visits. An analysis by the Ministry of Health indicated a €500 million reduction in healthcare costs attributed to improved chronic disease management and preventive care initiatives.

Enhanced Health Literacy: Self-care programs have significantly improved health literacy, enabling individuals to make informed health decisions. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation found that health literacy initiatives increased patients' understanding of their conditions and treatment options. ^{xxxviii}



Spain's experience demonstrates the benefits of self-care in enhancing patient outcomes and alleviating healthcare system burdens, making it a promising strategy for improving healthcare delivery in developed countries.

Self-care can be achieved through engaging people and communities to take an active role; supporting integrated services that meet the needs of individuals and communities.

(Research Paper, 2024)

PROMOTING HEALTH LITERACY

A significant barrier to the implementation of self-care is the general lack of health literacy and awareness among populations. ^{xxxix} Without a clear understanding of what self-care entails and how it can benefit them, individuals are less likely to adopt self-care practices. This is further complicated by misconceptions about self-care, which can lead to resistance from both healthcare professionals and the public in untapping the potential of self-care. Increasing health literacy will help to foster a culture of self-care and ensure that the population understands the value and benefits of self-care practices. ^{xi}

National campaigns are one way in which health literacy and health education are promoted and these have been shown to be effective. ^{xli}

In some countries, self-care education begins in primary school and continues through secondary school. A notable example is the UK, where initiatives like the "Healthy Schools" program aim to instill healthy habits from an early age. ^{xlii} These programs emphasize physical activity, balanced nutrition, and mental well-being, fostering lifelong self-care practices. The "Healthy Schools London" initiative, for instance, awards schools for their efforts to promote holistic student health, involving both physical and emotional well-being.

Another example is the use of QR codes on Over-The-Counter products, which significantly enhances consumer health literacy by providing immediate access to detailed information, such as dosage and side effects. Studies show that about 70% of consumers feel more informed after using these codes.

Implemented in countries like Germany, Australia, Canada, and the US, QR codes offer interactive resources that empower consumers to manage their health proactively.

Health literacy can reduce the burden on the health system – it helps with earlier diagnosis, better engagement following medication, good for managing long-term conditions, and it helps to relieve pressure on health workers and the health system.

(Government Official)

LEVERAGING DIGITAL HEALTH AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO INCREASE ACCESS TO SELF-CARE

Advances in digital health technologies provide a powerful enabler for self-care implementation. ^{xiii} These technologies are particularly valuable in low-resource settings where access to healthcare facilities may be limited.

That said, the digital divide (which impacts women in particular ^{xliv}) means that access to mobile internet can vary considerably; digital solutions therefore need to be designed to both reflect local capacity and promote greater access over the longer term.

Digital health platforms, where they are available, can support the widespread adoption of self-care by improving the accessibility and quality of health services. There are already more than 100,000 mobile apps oriented around self-care. ^{xlv}

The integration of these and other digital health technologies into self-care strategies offers significant potential for improving health outcomes. ^{xlvi}

Governments should work to create an enabling regulatory framework to ensure the quality and safety of these technologies, as well as investing in digital literacy and electronic health records which can be used effectively for health professionals to communicate with individuals. ^{xlvii}

Digital health technologies make it easier for users to understand their health condition, streamline communications with health workers, reduce information asymmetry and improve their ability to make decisions and promotes self-care.

(IDB 2022 ^{xlviii})

THE ROLE OF THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IN PROMOTING USE OF SELF-CARE PRACTICES

Self-care is not “alone-care.” Healthcare professionals have an important role to play in promoting self-care as a valid approach to individuals achieving better health, making decisions about their health care, and managing chronic conditions more effectively. Evidence suggests that fostering a collaborative relationship between healthcare professionals and patients is key to reinforcing the value of self-care.^{xlix} By providing guidance, support, and regular follow-up, healthcare professionals can help people navigate their self-care journey, address any challenges, and ensure that self-care practices are aligned with broader treatment plans. Governments, health professional bodies, and training institutions should collaborate to develop curricula for both pre- and in-service training for healthcare professionals, including pharmacists, at all levels within the health system.

We need to think about how we can use pharmacists more appropriately to help patients make better informed decisions about healthcare.

(Healthcare Professional)



AVAILABILITY OF SELF-CARE PRODUCTS AND SOLUTIONS

Increasing the number of self-care products and solutions and ensuring they are available to everyone is the basis for uptake and utilization of selfcare in everyday life. To achieve this there are important factors to consider.

Self-care products need to evolve with people's new needs, or existing unmet needs. Innovation and science therefore play a crucial role in enhancing the availability of self-care products; they can lead to the development of new solutions that address unmet medical needs, improve product effectiveness, and enhance people's experiences in managing their own health.

Regulations need to be harmonized and streamlined across countries to reduce barriers of entry for self-care products and support the reclassification of some medicines from prescription to being freely available to patients and consumers.

Effective product distribution systems help to support the widespread adoption of self-care practices.¹ However, the availability of self-care products and services can be compromised by supply chain challenges, especially in low- and middle-income countries, hindering individuals' ability to maintain effective self-care practices. Collaboration between governments and international organizations is therefore important to ensure reliable availability of self-care products.

Self-care is the first line of action for health – it has not just suddenly developed; however we frame it, whatever we call it, self-care is what people do. It's about products and services – we need an enabling environment – donors and governments working together, with people at the center of the response. We cannot meet UHC or SDGs without self-care.

(WHO Official)



05 INVESTING IN SELF-CARE: A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

This is a moment to increase investments in a broad range of social programs that protect and advance health.

(The Lancet)

Investing in self-care is not just an option, but a strategic necessity for achieving global health goals and essential for enhancing the efficiency and strengthening of health systems. Yet despite evidence that self-care offers effective solutions to reduce healthcare costs and improve health outcomes for individuals and communities, it currently remains under-funded and underutilized within global health frameworks.

ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT FINANCE INSTITUTIONS

Development finance institutions (DFIs) are uniquely positioned to advocate for transformative national health policies and to provide technical assistance to governments to support them in these endeavors.

When these institutions actively participate in the design and implementation of health policies,^{lii} they can help ensure that self-care approaches are framed as essential components of health system strengthening.^{liii} Meeting with both the Ministers of Health and Finance is particularly important for DFIs and donor agencies in contexts where governments are facing fiscal challenges such as limited tax revenue, high debt levels, and economic shocks. Supporting governments by financing self-care (for example as part of UHC, health equity and addressing NCDs) has the potential to mitigate against these barriers and optimize the impact of health budget spending.

Increasing awareness of the economic and health benefits of self-care with these stakeholders is therefore crucial and the involvement of DFIs and other global health funders should be prioritized at the earliest stages of self-care policy development. By providing the technical assistance needed to help governments maximize the value of their healthcare spending, DFIs can help to ensure that resources are allocated effectively and equitably.

If we want serious commitment, we need the Minister of Finance on board – this is about politics and the economy, and we need to market [self-care] to the Minister of Finance.

(The Lancet^{li})

ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector plays a vital role in scaling up self-care by developing innovative and affordable health products and technologies that address unmet medical needs. Additionally, the private sector can support this effort by distributing these services efficiently through established supply chains, leveraging economies of scale, and ensuring broader access to self-care solutions across diverse populations.

Public private partnerships have demonstrated their value in public health and can enhance the availability of affordable self-care products and digital health tools, ensuring broader access, especially in underserved communities.

By collaborating with governments, NGOs, and global health organizations, relevant industry actors can help to standardize self-care approaches, support integration of self-care into national health strategies and contribute to the development of regulatory frameworks that support safe and effective self-care interventions.

Ultimately, the private sector's innovation, scale, and reach can support and drive sustainable improvements in self-care approaches and options that will impact global health outcomes. Directing resources to this critical area can drive long-term health improvements, reduce healthcare costs, and empower individuals to take control of their own health.

Harnessing the advocacy, technical assistance, and resources of DFIs, donor agencies, foundations and the private sector will help to ensure that self-care is fully integrated into national and global health strategies.





06 SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCALING SELF-CARE

01 INTEGRATE SELF-CARE INTO NATIONAL HEALTH PLANS

Self-care should be incorporated into national health plans to support UHC, SDGs, and other health objectives.

Practical actions for governments



Develop self-care policies, establish committees to oversee their implementation, and collaborate with NGOs, civil society, and community leaders to ensure effective access and use of self-care solutions.

Practical actions for global funding partners (DFIs, donor agencies and foundations)



Integrate self-care into organizational health priorities and budgets and provide technical assistance to governments to support national self-care policies and strengthen health systems.

Practical actions for the private sector



Partner with governments and local stakeholders, including NGOs and civil society, to co-design and implement cost-effective self-care solutions that address country-specific health challenges.

02 PROMOTE HEALTH LITERACY TO IMPROVE UNDERSTANDING OF THE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF SELF-CARE

Improving health literacy empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their health, from treating minor ailments at home to managing chronic illnesses effectively.

Practical actions for governments



Launch public health campaigns with user-friendly resources, integrate self-care education into school and professional training, and collaborate with partners to incorporate digital health technologies into self-care strategies.

Practical actions for global funding partners (DFIs, donor agencies and foundations)



Support governments in creating public health campaigns focused on improving health and digital literacy, especially for underserved populations.

Practical actions for the private sector



Apply marketing expertise in public health campaigns to deliver impact health messaging and education, particularly in rural and underserved areas. As employers, build awareness and support community-based programs. Leverage ability to reach a broad audience including employees, their families and communities to amplify self-care initiatives and promote health literacy at scale.

03 SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED SELF-CARE PROGRAMS

Community-designed self-care programs empower individuals to manage their health more effectively, supported by appropriate policies and strategies for sustainability.

Practical actions for governments



Establish local support networks, partner with NGOs and community organizations for coordinated implementation, and involve community leaders in promoting preventive care and sharing best practices.

Practical actions for global funding partners (DFIs, donor agencies and foundations)



Support community-driven self-care programs that train local healthcare professionals and develop health centers for peer learning and advocacy.

Practical actions for the private sector



Partner with NGOs and local governments to create community-based self-care centers and support training programs for community leaders to ensure long-term sustainability.

04 LEVERAGE DIGITAL HEALTH TECHNOLOGIES AND AI TO INCREASE ACCESS TO SELF-CARE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Digital health tools and AI have the capacity to expand the reach of self-care to millions of people, including those who may only have limited access to a healthcare provider.

Practical actions for governments



Collaborate with global partners and tech companies to ensure the affordability, safety, and integration of digital health technologies and AI, while promoting digital health literacy to enhance access and outcomes.

Practical actions for global funding partners (DFIs, donor agencies and foundations)



Foster the development of affordable digital health technologies and AI in low- and middle-income countries, promote investment in digital infrastructure, and provide technical assistance to governments for integration into self-care practices.

Practical actions for the private sector



Support the advancement of digital health technologies such as telemedicine, health apps for remote access, and digital product labelling that provides essential information like dosage and side effects via QR codes. Collaborate with global health organizations to develop localized, tech-enabled solutions tailored to meet the specific needs of diverse communities.

05 INVEST IN SCALING SELF-CARE APPROACHES

Scaling self-care requires convergence of minds and collective will, sustained investment – both financing and expertise - and coordinated planning and implementation at all levels of the health system.

Practical actions for governments



Collaborate with development finance institutions and the private sector to integrate self-care approaches into their priorities, ensuring accessible products and training programs through public-private partnerships.

Practical actions for global funding partners (DFIs, donor agencies and foundations)



Establish mechanisms for governments to prioritize sustainable self-care strategies and conduct research to assess the scalability and cost-effectiveness of interventions in low- and middle-income countries.

Practical actions for the private sector



Collaborate with governments to understand the adoption of self-care products through behavioral research, focusing on social, cultural, and economic factors in resource-limited communities, and conduct joint research to tailor solutions for local health challenges.

06 MONITOR AND EVALUATE SELF-CARE IMPACT

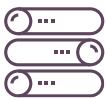
Monitoring and evaluation frameworks are vital to measure the impact of self-care. This involves creating metrics to track health outcomes, cost savings, and patient satisfaction.

Practical actions for governments



Integrate self-care metrics into national plans, establish data collection systems to monitor usage, and regularly review program effectiveness to adjust policies based on feedback from users and healthcare professionals.

Practical actions for global funding partners (DFIs, donor agencies and foundations)



Assist governments in developing monitoring and evaluation systems to track the impact of self-care initiatives and support longitudinal studies to assess the long-term benefits and inform future policies.

Practical actions for the private sector



Collaborate with governments and academic institutions to collect data on the usage of self-care products, enabling a data-driven approach to product improvements and policy support.

CONCLUSION

Self-care is an underutilized but highly impactful approach for strengthening health systems, reducing healthcare costs, and improving global health outcomes. In a world grappling with rising healthcare demands, aging populations, and limited resources, the integration of self-care into national health strategies offers a cost-effective, sustainable approach to achieving UHC and the SDGs.

FOR GOVERNMENTS,

self-care provides an opportunity to extend healthcare access and alleviate pressure on overburdened systems, while ensuring better health outcomes across populations.

FOR DFIs,

investing in self-care delivers significant economic returns by improving health outcomes and optimizing resource allocation.

FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR,

self-care presents a space for innovation, with opportunities to collaborate on scalable solutions that meet the evolving health needs of populations globally.

The way forward requires coordinated efforts between governments, financing institutions, and the private sector.

By adopting the actionable recommendations outlined in this report, stakeholders can unlock the full potential of self-care, driving progress towards more resilient, equitable, and sustainable health systems that are equipped to meet current and future needs of populations around the world.



07 APPENDICES

Organizations who contributed to the research for the “Untapped Potential: Unlocking Self-Care for Global Health Progress”

Insights were gathered from a diverse range of stakeholders, in particular drawing on the perspectives of policymakers, global health funding organizations and the private sector. We would like to thank the individuals that we interviewed from the following organizations for their time and insights that contributed to the development of this White Paper.

01. Interviews

- › Accenture Development Partners
- › Center for Health, Human Rights and Development, Uganda
- › Chatham House
- › Development Finance Corporation
- › Ethiopian Society of Gynecologists and Pediatricians
- › European Investment Bank
- › Global Health Partnerships, NHS England
- › Health Financing Institute
- › Inter-American Development Bank
- › International Finance Corporation
- › Kenya-UK Health Alliance
- › Nigeria Midwives Association
- › Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, NHS London
- › PSI – Uganda
- › PSI Trailblazer Group - Kenya
- › Reproductive Health Network, Kenya
- › Self-Care Trailblazers Group
- › Uganda Ministry of Health
- › University of Waterloo School of Pharmacy, Canada
- › Victoria University, Australia
- › White Ribbon Alliance, Nigeria
- › World Bank

02. Self-Care Roundtables in Washington, DC and Geneva

- › Amref
- › Coalition to Transform Advanced Care
- › Consumer Healthcare Products Association
- › FP2030
- › George Washington University
- › Global Health Alliance for Women’s Health
- › Huma Therapeutics
- › ILAR (Latin American Association of Responsible Self-Care)
- › Imperial College London
- › Institute for Advancement of Health
- › Kenvue
- › Medtronic
- › PATH
- › Peterson Institute
- › PSI
- › Reach52
- › Reckitt
- › UNICEF
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- › United States Department of Health and Human Services
- › World Health Organization

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- iiii. Development Financing Institute interview



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