

PUBLIC HEALTH IN ACTION

3



# Creating supportive environments for health

*Stories from the  
Third International Conference on Health Promotion  
Sundsvall, Sweden*

Edited by  
B.J.A. Haglund, B. Pettersson, D. Finer, P. Tillgren



World Health Organization  
Geneva

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1996

WHO Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Creating supportive environments for health : stories from the Third International Conference on Health Promotion, Sundsvall, Sweden / edited by Bo J. A. Haglund et al. . .

(Public health in action ; 3)

1.Health promotion 2.Health education 3.Environment 4.Health planning, support 5.Manuals  
I.Haglund, Bo J. A. II.International Conference on Health Promotion (3rd : Sundsvall, Sweden : 1991) III.Series

ISBN 92 4 156180 7 (NLM Classification: WA 590)  
ISSN 1020-1629

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Typeset in Hong Kong  
Printed in England  
95/10395-Best-set/Clays-8000

## Foreword

The World Health Organization together with the Nordic countries, and in association with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), organized the Third International Conference on Health Promotion, with the theme of Supportive Environments for Health, at Sundsvall, Sweden, in June 1991. This handbook is one outcome of the Sundsvall Conference, and has been prepared to assist all who are concerned with promoting healthy environments.

The Sundsvall Statement, a forceful consensus among 318 participants from 81 countries, urged the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Brazil in 1992, to foster global action to protect environments that promote health. Further, a WHO Commission on Health and Environment prepared a report for UNCED highlighting health needs related to the environment, spelling out objectives and suggesting activities to achieve them.

The present handbook is intended not only to serve as a means to attain the goals set by the Sundsvall Conference but also to facilitate the activities enumerated in Agenda 21 of UNCED.

The Sundsvall Handbook Committee took advantage of the varying and rich experiences that participants brought to the conference. In a series of workshops, participants discussed practical issues involved in creating supportive environments for health, in the sectors of education, food and nutrition, homes and neighbourhoods, work, transport, and social support and care. They identified approaches and methods for creating supportive environments and provided examples of their application in practice.

Many of these examples are presented in this handbook. Also included are examples contained in the eight "briefing books" that were prepared as background documents for the conference.

The handbook outlines briefly the theory and principles on which practice is based, describing the foundations on which action must be built. Readers are encouraged to choose what is applicable, to adapt what does not fit perfectly and to innovate where necessary.

It is hoped that wide distribution of this handbook will stimulate discussion and promote effective action towards establishing supportive environments for health.

*Hiroshi Nakajima*  
*Director-General*  
*World Health Organization*

## Preface

When the objectives for the Sundsvall conference were outlined, the idea of making a handbook was born. We had no doubt about the need for a book like this, although we consciously avoided looking too hard at the difficulties it might entail and refused to acknowledge that any serious problems might arise. The handbook was, to our minds, an excellent idea.

From that day on a difficult process began, which was to last for several years. Fortunately at the beginning we knew nothing about the problems involved, many of which we had created ourselves by not always choosing the easiest way of getting things done. After all, why base a handbook on people describing their experiences when you can review articles in scientific journals and other literature instead? Why make a handbook international when it is probably simpler to base it on a single country or community? Why ask people from all over the world to travel to Sundsvall, a remote city in the northern hemisphere, to work intensively for one week? These are just a few of the questions one might ask.

Our answer is that we wanted to make something authentic and we wanted to interest committed people in contributing to the development of health promotion by sharing their experiences in a straightforward way. There already exist ways of meeting needs and solving problems. The fact is, however, that these have not been accessible to everyone. By telling other people about these true-life stories we hope we can improve the present situation.

*Bodolf Hareide*

*Chair of the Handbook Editorial Committee*

## Acknowledgements

It would not have been possible to develop this handbook on the creation of supportive environments for health without the involvement and enthusiasm of a large number of health practitioners around the world. The editors especially wish to thank the following:

- All participants of the 3rd International Conference on Health Promotion who shared their experiences and stories with us.
- The conference handbook committee: Dr Bodolf Hareide, Director General, Institute of Public Health, Oslo, Norway (*Chair*); Dr Bo J. A. Haglund, Associate Professor, Karolinska Institute, Sundbyberg, Sweden (*Co-Secretary*); Dr Greg Goldstein, WHO, Geneva, Switzerland (*Co-Secretary*); Dr Rannveig Nordhagen, Norway; Ms Margareta Nilsson-Giebel, Germany; Dr Lois Philip, WHO, Geneva; Ms Yvette Anne Holder, Trinidad; Ms Rene Loewenson, Zimbabwe.
- The German Federal Centre for Health Education for initiating and funding an international follow-up meeting in Erfurt on 3–7 December 1991 at which the basic structure of the handbook was developed, as well as the following persons who took part in the conference: Professor Christina de Possas, Brazil; Mr Helmut Hildebrandt, Mr Harald Lehmann and Dr Gerhard Christiansen, Germany; Mr John Eastwood, New Zealand; Dr Rudi Slooff, WHO, Geneva; Ms Heather Macdonald, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.
- The resource people and reporters for the handbook committee: Ms Magdalen Abrokwa, Ghana; Mr Tariq Bhatti, Canada; Professor John Catford, Wales; Dr John Davies, Scotland; Mr John Eastwood, New Zealand; Ms Peggy Edwards, Canada; Dr Anna Egnerova, Czech Republic; Mr Peter Gavelin, Sweden; Ms Nancy Hamilton, Canada; Dr Trevor Hancock, Canada; Mr Arif Hasan, Pakistan; Dr Carlos Alvarez Herrera, Argentina; Ms Lotte Kaba-Schönstein, Germany; Mr Leonard Kafunda, Zambia; Dr Clement Chan Kam, Mauritius; Ms Lenore Kohlmeier, Germany; Dr David Legge, Australia; Ms Pam Leidman, United Kingdom; Ms Karen Mills, Canada; Professor Don Nutbeam, Australia; Professor Gopal Pathak, India; Ms Elisabeth Simwanza, Zambia; Professor Robert Spasoff, Canada; Ms Mabel Chia Yarell, New Zealand; Ms Joyce Yeomanis, Australia.
- Ms Leila Abdollahnezhad for her devoted and patient secretarial assistance with all draft versions and the conference edition.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- Dr Desmond O'Byrne of WHO, Geneva, for his valuable advice in the preparation of this publication.
- Dr Mikael Johansson for assistance with the manuscript.

Special thanks are due to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Sweden, the National Institute of Public Health, Sweden, and the Institute of Public Health, Norway, for their financial contributions to the cost of producing this publication.

## **Note to readers**

The stories in this publication were submitted by delegates to the Third Conference on Health Promotion in Sundsvall, Sweden, who chose them as reflecting successful efforts towards creating supportive environments for health. The choice of these particular stories is that of the Sundsvall delegates and not of the World Health Organization. Although the stories have been edited, they are retold here essentially as they were presented by the Sundsvall delegates and may not always give an entire and complete account of the events described. Individual contributors have vouched for the accuracy of each story. Any viewpoints expressed or implied in the stories are those of the Sundsvall delegates and not necessarily of WHO.

Some of the stories are set in the former socialist countries of eastern Europe. Although major socioeconomic changes have taken place in these countries, the stories have been retained in this book as they are still considered valid models of what may be achieved.



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## Introduction

The link between health and the physical environment has long been recognized, yet it has been inadequately addressed. Now, however, our old habit of ignoring pollution and waste no longer works. There is no longer any place to throw things away. Increasingly we realize there are social, cultural, economic and political aspects of the way the environment affects our health. If the goal of health for all is to be attained, the total environment must be supportive of health development. Only an enlightened, healthy and involved community can make this happen.

The focus of the Third International Conference on Health Promotion in Sundsvall was on action — long overdue — to improve public health by creating “supportive environments”. The goal of creating supportive environments for health has far-reaching implications for both individuals and institutions. Building alliances — across sectors, disciplines, professions and organizations — is one of the key elements of health promotion and is a central political concern.

Environmental conditions may represent a threat to health, as may behaviour and lifestyle. Medical research provides a basis for identifying health problems. But in order to define strategies for health promotion and learn more about the processes involved, contributions from the social sciences are necessary.

One of the most important challenges is inequality. The contrasts between rich and poor countries, and even between regions within countries, are large. In some cases these contrasts are becoming more marked in terms of resources and health.

By and large, the prerequisites for environmental protection and sustainable development are the same as for health — namely peace, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, maintainable resources, a supportive social network, social justice and equity. To this list we should like to add participation.

At the same time, the main threats to health and the environment are war and poverty. After these comes depletion of natural resources through exploitation and misuse.

We bear a greater responsibility for the future of our planet and its people than any previous generation. We also know better than any previous generation how to fulfil that responsibility. The population issue relates directly to the link between the environment and public

health. Culturally acceptable family planning programmes and improved access to birth control methods are needed. In many societies, women are grossly disadvantaged and their skills and resources largely untapped. Education of women and girls should be urgently improved.

The world community is sometimes slow to act. People can usually influence their local situation more directly and more swiftly. Empowerment of individuals, local authorities and other groups is crucial. Health is not only — perhaps not even primarily — the concern of doctors and nurses. Health is a question of influence, power and resources.

Change will not come easily. Advocating community participation means starting a process of decentralization. Such a process is a fundamental challenge to the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of small elites. The Sundsvall conference highlighted such community efforts for health. Many are documented in the following pages as examples of how communities the world over have identified health needs and then taken action.

### **Supportive environments**

What does it take for a plant to grow, an egg to hatch, a human being or a community to thrive? Obviously, it takes different things. But whatever those things are, they make up the supportive environment. The plant needs nutrients, water, light and the right air temperature; the egg requires a nest and warmth; a baby must have food, shelter, guidance, care and love. What is being supported in all these cases is nothing less than life itself.

The concept of supportive environments emerged from the First International Conference on Health Promotion in Ottawa, Canada, in 1986, and was examined in more detail at the Sundsvall Conference in 1991. This handbook is a compilation of stories told by the 350 conference participants from 81 countries. The stories offer examples of ways to bring about change for a healthier environment. It is hoped they will enhance communication and above all inspire readers to take innovative action.

### **A toolbox for change**

To use an analogy, this handbook can be seen as a toolbox for creating supportive environments for health. The stories are the tools for bringing about change and creating advocacy for supportive environments at local, national and international levels. Some changes may be slow and come in stages, brought about peacefully through established channels. Other changes may be sudden, requiring painful confrontation and dramatic shifts in values and resources. In every community and every

life there is room for improvement. Some things must be transformed or abandoned in order to build a healthy environment.

The users of this handbook are likely to include health workers at all levels, policy-makers, decision-makers and technical staff in health agencies and in other sectors. Progress depends on improving the training of health and development workers and managers through public and private agencies. The handbook can be used in this training and as a resource for practitioners. Women's skills and knowledge are particularly important in building bridges between different sectors of society in order to solve practical problems.

### **More encyclopaedia than novel**

This three-part handbook is more of an encyclopaedia than a novel. It can be read from beginning to end, but readers will probably prefer to consult it to obtain specific information.

Part 1, "Strategies that work", outlines the basic framework of supportive environments and introduces the health promotion strategy analysis model (HELPSAM) with strategies for analysing, describing and understanding problems in the environment. This part will probably be most useful for decision-makers at various levels. Readers who work in an organization or agency may wish, for example, to use the chart to identify weak links in strategies, or areas that need to be strengthened or improved.

Part 2, "Settings, voices and experiences", contains the stories. Chapter headings reflect the topics used as focal points by the working groups at the Sundsvall conference — education, food, homes and neighbourhoods, work, transport and energy, and social support and care.

Part 3, "Steps for action", combines and develops elements from Parts 1 and 2. It indicates action to create, by stages, supportive environments for health. Health planners may wish to read this part first.

### **Three new models**

The handbook presents three complementary models that represent improvements on earlier theoretical constructs, specially designed and adapted to the issues at hand. The first model, the "health promotion strategy analysis" model (HELPSAM, page 22) is an instrumental model for analysing health problems and working out solutions.

The second model, the "Sundsvall pyramid of supportive environments", (page 31) is a conceptual aid, a guide to understanding. It provides a way of contextualizing or relating the six conference topics to each other.

The third model, the "supportive environments action" model

(SESAME, page 171), illustrates a logical universal sequence of actions that takes place in many areas of human activity. It is an action-oriented model.

### **Using the handbook**

This book may be used in a variety of settings — at work, in the home, at school, by trade unions, organizations, corporations and political bodies — locally, regionally, nationally and globally. Readers are invited to adapt the ideas in this book to their needs and to write to the authors, using the form on pages 177–182, so that the Sundsvall handbook may become a living forum for health promotion worldwide.

Policy-makers and decision-makers will find that the handbook provides a common understanding of the benefits of implementing action for supportive environments for health.

Practitioners, teachers, health educators, community workers and activists will find that the handbook gives support, supplies ideas for elaboration or adaptation according to need, and provides a structure for analysing efforts.

A major aim of this handbook is to help those involved in health and environmental work to find out what others are doing. It may be seen as a means of continuing education, a chance to update knowledge and sharpen skills.

Action to create supportive environments for health will require changes in social structures, conditions, behaviour, lifestyle and environment. For those who feel strongly about the need for change, this book is for you.



PART 1

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# Strategies that work