

UGANDA: STATUS OF SELF-CARE

The Value of Self-Care

Embedding self-care practices into the health care continuum has the potential to improve health and quality of life while simultaneously supporting health system sustainability. Self-care practices empower individuals by providing them with the information and tools to make decisions about their own health and care. An increased ownership over their own health promotes, at a systems level, the efficient use of limited healthcare resources and relieves the burden on healthcare providers - saving 1.8 billion physician hours to attend to more severe health conditions. A related impact of this is the increased focus on improving disease prevention efforts by empowering individuals to address minor ailments at home.

At the global level, current self-care activities are generating substantial monetary savings as well as healthcare workforce savings, totalling at least \$119 billion per year. The above should be coupled with a positive impact on global productivity when over-the-counter treatment is adopted at first, granting approximately 40.8 billion productive days, corresponding to a value of \$1,879 billion in welfare effects. Looking at the future, the cost saving effect is estimated to be approximately \$178.8 billion per annum, with increased productivity gains of 71.9 billion productive days per annum. If we add other positive effects brought by other self-care practices, such as the use of preventive care, oral health care and the use of vitamins and mineral supplements, the overall gain will increase further.

There are more proven self-care products and practices available today than ever before, and it is within our collective power to unleash the benefits of truly self-care enabled health systems around the world, if only we set

up adequate policy frameworks that embed self-care seamlessly into the care continuum.

Self-care belongs to individuals, families, communities, health care professionals, and policymakers at different levels and with different responsibilities. However, it is a primary responsibility of policymakers to design the enabling environment for each of the stakeholders to fulfill these responsibilities.

A deeper international focus on self-care, brought up by a WHO Resolution on Self-Care could help foster the necessary momentum to fully integrate it into health systems for the benefit of individuals and society. This should include a definition of self-care and its enablers, and the self-care interventions countries can undertake according to the WHO Guidelines on self-care interventions for health and well-being.[1]

About \$1 billion per year are currently being saved by healthcare systems in the Sub-Saharan region as a result of people practicing self-care. 141 million hours of individuals' time are being saved and 7 million hours of physicians' time thanks to self-care. In the future, gains from self-care could be doubled (in contrast to current gains). In addition to almost \$4.0 billion in monetary savings from the cost containment, the five billion days saved in productive time may translate into welfare gains of over \$31.5 billion.

Moreover, an estimated 514 million hours will be saved for individuals as a result of not having to see a physician. These time gains can be associated with the elimination of travel and waiting times and may also lead to increased quality of life. The overall impact on quality of life is expected to increase from one million currently to almost three million. [2]

Uganda: Overview

To assess the situation in Uganda, it's useful to take into account the overall African context. The Self-Care Readiness Index, which covers South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, suggest that resources, including digital ones, that could support self-care are still rare in the Africa region. In a Digital Self-Care report published by the Self-Care Trailblazer Group, self-care is primarily associated with sexual and reproductive health in this region. [3]

The Economic and Social Value of Self-Care Report suggests that observed self-care practices typically include self-medication, self-testing, self-administration, and self-injection, and is often associated with management of malaria and chronic health conditions such as diabetes, and sexual and reproductive health. [4]

Self-care in Uganda has traditionally been associated with sexual and reproductive health – the National Policy Guidelines and Service Standards for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights mentions self-care explicitly.[5] More recently, the Minister of Health (MoH) of Uganda was among the first to pioneer national guidelines for self-care in 2020, with a focus on sexual and reproductive health.[6] [7] National self-care technical working groups (TWGs) were then established within the Ministry of Health to galvanize stakeholder buy-in and commitment across multiple health areas, collaboratively defined a package of self-care interventions, and oversaw the development of national self-care guidelines.

These interventions build on the recommendations from the WHO's Consolidated Guideline on Self-Care Interventions for Health, and expand beyond those based on local evidence and priorities.[8] The national self care guideline used the Digital Self-Care Framework developed by the Self-Care Trailblazer Group to inform the digital self-care guidance.[9] Currently, the Uganda Self-Care Expert Group is organizing a series of task teams to define discrete implementation approaches for specific parts of the guideline, such as social and behavior change, QA, procurement, measurement, and financing.[10]

In 2020, the Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD) was identified by the Self-Care Trailblazer Group (SCTG) as a key partner and put together a report on the legal and policy mapping on self-care in Uganda.[11]

Though the report found that most policies and laws do not spell out self-care explicitly, self-care concepts are widespread in health policies and frameworks in the country. For example, in the National Multisectoral Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (2018 – 2023), though self-care is not mentioned explicitly, many self-care concept such as health promotion and people empowerment are mentioned.[12]

The Ministry of Health Strategic Plan (2020/21 - 2024/25) does not explicitly refer to self-care, but puts people empowerment and health promotion very high on the health agenda – it is mentioned that following the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to empower “patients to self-manage chronic conditions, especially during such unusual times where they cannot access medical centers as often as possible, is necessary while emphasizing health literacy and telemedicine”. [13]



Recommendations

- Build on the work done on sexual health and self-care to increase awareness about all facets of self-care, and advocate for the value addition of self-care in the achievement of universal health coverage (UHC).
- Embed the concept of self-care into the highest possible policy recommendations, e.g., Uganda National e-Health Policy, National Multisectoral Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, Uganda National Adolescent Health Policy and Strategy, among others.
- Increase awareness towards responsible self-care by increasing self-care literacy and highlighting a prominent role for nurses, front-line healthcare workers and pharmacists

End Notes

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- [4] <https://www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/National-Policy-Guidelines-and-Service-Standards-for-Sexual-and-Reproductive-Health-and-Rights-2006.Uganda.pdf>
- [5] The National Policy Guidelines and Service Standards for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. https://media.psi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/30235603/DISC-Developing-National-Self-Care-Guidelines-in-Uganda-and-Nigeria-V5.pdf?_ga=2.95950046.355265071.1680273353-1916382224.1679994570
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- [10] Ibid.
- [11] National Multisectoral Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (2018-2023). Ministry of Health of the Republic of Uganda. 2018. Available at: <https://extranet.who.int/nutrition/gina/sites/default/filesstore/UGA%202018%20National%20Multisectoral%20Strategic%20Plan%20for%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Control%20of%20Noncommunicable%20Diseases%202018-2023.pdf>
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