Annexure 2: Definitions of Health and Mental Health

Source: World Health Organization

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health in its broader sense in 1946 as, "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

The World Health Organization defines mental health as ‘a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’.

The Determinants of Health

Many factors combine together to affect the health of individuals and communities. Whether people are healthy or not, is determined by their circumstances and environment. To a large extent, factors such as where we live, the state of our environment, genetics, our income and education level, and our relationships with friends and family all have considerable impacts on health, whereas the more commonly considered factors such as access and use of healthcare services often have less of an impact.

The determinants of health include:

- Social and economic environment;
- Physical environment; and
- Person’s individual characteristics and behaviour.

The context of people’s lives determines their health, and so blaming individuals for having poor health or crediting them for good health is inappropriate. Individuals are unlikely to be able to directly control many of the determinants of health. These determinants – or things that make people healthy or not – include the above factors, and many others:

- Income and social status. Higher income and social status are linked to better health. The greater the gap between the rich and poor, the greater the differences in health.
- Education. Low education levels are linked with poor health, more stress and lower self-confidence.
- Physical environment. Safe water and clean air, healthy workplaces, safe houses, communities and roads all contribute to good health.
- Employment and working conditions. People in employment are healthier, particularly those who have more control over their working conditions.
- Social support networks. Greater support from families, friends and communities is linked to better health.
- Culture. Customs and traditions, and the beliefs of the family and community all affect health.
- Genetics. Inheritance plays a part in determining lifespan, healthiness and the likelihood of developing certain illnesses.
- Personal behaviour and coping skills. Balanced eating, keeping active, how we deal with life’s stresses and challenges all affect health. Coping skills also include smoking and drinking which may help one cope, but have a negative effect on
mental and physical health in the long run.
- Health services. Access and use of services that prevent and treat disease influences health.
- Gender. Due to gender differences individuals suffer from different types of diseases at different ages.