PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE AFRICAN REGION
Regular physical activity is important for physical, mental, and social health and well-being across all ages. Being physically active throughout the life course helps prevent and manage noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and many types of cancer. It also helps prevent hypertension, overweight and obesity, and can improve overall mental health and quality of life. In children and adolescents, physical activity is also important for bone health, growth and development, and academic performance. Equally, across all ages, there is emerging evidence that reducing sedentary behaviour (such as sitting) lowers the risk of cardiometabolic disease and all-cause mortality.

Beyond its many health benefits, physical activity also has social, environmental, and economic co-benefits. For example, more active transport (such as walking and cycling) reduces the use of motorized vehicles and fossil fuels, producing cleaner air and less congested, safer roads. Sport and active recreation can help promote physical activity for people of all ages and abilities, and can be a key driver of tourism, employment, and infrastructure.

Increased opportunities for physical activity can help foster community development and social integration. By implementing policies aimed at increasing physical activity in multiple settings, African countries can create opportunities for addressing multiple national priorities and thus contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Despite evidence of the positive effects of physical activity for individuals and populations, about one in four adults (22%) and more than four in five in-school adolescents (85%) in the African Region are not sufficiently physically active (Graphic 1). However, levels of inactivity are increasing because of economic development and increased household wealth, rapid unplanned urbanization, and changing transport patterns without safe physical activity infrastructure. In the African Region, 44% of road traffic fatalities are pedestrians and cyclists.

On average, women (26%) are less active than men (18%), due to cultural norms and fewer opportunities to access safe, affordable, and appropriate opportunities and places in which to be active. Every year, over 200,000 deaths are attributed to physical inactivity in the African Region.

If measures are not taken to safeguard and increase physical activity opportunities, we will see a continued increase in related costs, with negative impacts on health systems, the environment, economic development, community well-being, and quality of life for all.

Let’s be active and healthy: everyone, everywhere, everyday

Physical activity links to SDGs
Actions to increase physical activity in the African Region

There are many ways to be active - through walking, cycling, sport, active recreation, dance, and play - and therefore many opportunities to increase physical activity. The Framework for the implementation of the Global action plan on physical activity (GAPPA) 2018-2030 in the African Region outlines priority interventions to help countries increase physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviour through coordinated action across multiple settings. The African Region adopted the global target of achieving a 15% relative reduction in the prevalence of physical inactivity in adults and adolescents by 2030.

Countries should implement the following actions:

1. Organize community-wide awareness campaigns and disseminate information on the health benefits and multiple co-benefits of physical activity targeting all populations;

2. Build capacity of health and non-health-care workers and integrate physical activity assessment and counselling into primary health care services and other social services;

3. Invest in public transport, public sports facilities and safe open spaces that will promote enabling environments for people to engage in an active lifestyle;

4. Build capacity of physical activity educators at all levels of the education system and equip educational institutions with quality amenities for physical activity for all;

5. Increase investments in sports and recreational services that create opportunities for physical activity in the least active populations, including girls, women, older adults, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable or marginalized populations.

Data source: WHO Global Health Observatory 2021
Effective implementation of a national physical activity response goes beyond the scope of any single agency. All countries should establish coordinating mechanisms for developing and implementing their national response. These mechanisms should provide national leadership and ensure appropriate ongoing engagement and harmonization of policy priorities and planning, implementation, resourcing and evaluation among relevant sectors.

Countries will need to develop, adapt, or revise their national action plan on physical activity. Ministries of health should prioritize and lead on the implementation of policy recommendations using a multisectoral approach. To achieve this goal, countries should:

- Foster and strengthen leadership to elevate physical activity on the national agenda. Advocacy efforts should target key audiences, such as high-level leaders, policymakers across multiple sectors, the media, the private sector, city and community leaders;
- Facilitate and promote multisectoral partnerships to ensure coordinated policy implementation across relevant key settings, such as education, transport, urban planning, sport, and health;
- Develop innovative domestic financing mechanisms to secure sustained funding and implementation of national and subnational policies;
- Invest in and enhance physical activity research, surveillance, monitoring, and evaluation systems to ensure accountability, and inform and improve policy and interventions;
- Strengthen effective governance mechanisms including regulatory, legislative, and other policy frameworks and interventions to promote physical activity.

The National Programme for Physical Activity and Health, known as Mexi Mexê, was introduced by the Cabo Verdean Government in 2017. The goal of the programme is to “Encourage the practice of physical activity in schools, workplaces, at home and in the community, regardless of background or social class. It aims at creating a healthy lifestyle and improving the quality of life of the Cabo Verdean population throughout life”.

Its objective is to reduce physical inactivity in children, adolescents, young adults and the elderly by 10% by 2025.

The programme is coordinated by the Ministry of Sports and enjoys extensive collaboration and support from partners including city councils, the national police, UN agencies, the National Olympic Committee, and the Ministry of Health.

The programme is organized around five interventions: the network of physical activity monitors, “active street”, “active elderly”, “active workplace break” and community jogging programmes.

So far, 300 physical activity monitors have been trained to motivate populations in their communities to be more active.