

Glossary

of key health policy terms

Definitions guiding our work

Policy terms are commonly used in health policy discussions, analysis, and decisionmaking. They are also used by initiatives and organisations that support evidence translation into policy and practice. This includes infrastructures facilitating this process, such as platforms that compile health policy documents. Despite their wide and regular use, key policy terms often lack clear definitions. Surprisingly, stakeholders rarely outline their understanding, while the interchangeable use of alternative terms adds to the confusion.

The Global Health Policy Lab (GHPL) aims to equip policymakers worldwide with the knowledge, tools, and competencies to accelerate evidence-based policymaking. To support this, guide our own work, and intended to serve as useful and concise reference document, we compiled a glossary of key health policy terms.

GHPL conducted a rapid review, consulting glossaries, policy documents, international guidelines, academic sources, and grey literature. While definitions largely aligned, they were not fully consistent. We adopted definitions widely recognised by the international public health community, including the World Health Organization (WHO), making minor adaptations for relevance.

Our glossary covers policy, law, national health strategy, national control plan, (health) action plan, (health) guideline, and their alternative terms. Note that to be included in GHPL's definitions glossary (and our digital repository for health policy documents), a policy, national health strategy, national control plan, action plan or guideline must be adopted or otherwise officially and publicly endorsed by the government (legislature or a government agency). Mere alignment with international guidance or best practice standards does not suffice. The glossary should be read with this understanding in mind.

Term

Alternative terms

Definition

Policy^a

A policy is a formal statement that defines goals, priorities and parameters for action by government in response to a societal need. It defines a vision for the future which in turn helps to establish targets and points of reference for the short and medium term. It outlines priorities and the expected roles of different stakeholders, builds consensus, and informs people. (1)

Law^b

Laws are rules that govern behaviour. Laws can be made by a legislature, resulting in primary legislation (often called statutes or acts), by executive or local government through the issue of secondary legislation (including decrees, regulations and bylaws), or by judges through the making of binding legal precedent (normally in common law jurisdictions). (2)

National Health Strategy

National Health Plan,
National Health
Strategic Plan

A national health strategy provides a model of an intended future situation, and a programme of action predetermined to achieve the intended situation. It contains the broad, long-term lines of action to achieve the policy vision and goals for the health sector, incorporating the identification of suitable points for intervention, the ways of ensuring the involvement of other sectors, the range of political, social, cultural, economic, legal and technical factors, as well as constraints and ways of dealing with them. (3)

National [Disease] Control Plan

National [Disease]
Strategy / Strategic
Plan / Programme

A national control plan is a strategic plan to guide the control of a particular disease or health problem at national level, with the intended actions to achieve the goals of a given programme, ideally aligned to the national health strategy. (3)

Action Plan

An action plan is a strategic document that outlines specific steps taken by government agencies to implement a policy or address a societal issue at the local, regional or national level, typically identifying key stakeholders, tasks, timelines, resource allocation, and measures of success.

Guideline

Protocol/Best Practice
/Consensus/Statement
/Expert Committee
/Recommendation/
Integrated Care/
Pathway

Guidelines are systematically developed evidence-based formal advisory statements which assist providers, recipients and other stakeholders to make informed decisions about appropriate health interventions. Health interventions are defined broadly to include not only clinical procedures but also public health actions. (4)

^a Many policies are developed and adopted to expressly protect, promote or strengthen health, healthcare, or public health (referred to as health, healthcare, or public health policy). However, policies outside of health-related sectors impact health. Therefore, the GHLP uses a definition which does not restrict policy to health-specific policies but may include any policy impacting health, healthcare or public health (positively or negatively).

^b Many laws are adopted to expressly protect and promote health, commonly referred to as public health law. However, many non-health related laws influence health, for example by shaping and preserving social conditions, known in public health as “social determinants of health”. Consequently, the GHLP uses a definition which does not restrict law to public health law but may include any legal instrument impacting health (positively or negatively).

References

- ¹ Adapted from WHO and UHC2030 definitions: Katwan E, Bisoborwa G, Butron-Riveros B, et al. (2022). Creating a global legal and policy database and document repository: challenges and lessons learned from the World Health Organization sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health policy survey. *Int J Health Policy Manag* 1(11):2415–2421. doi: 10.34172/ijhpm.2021.153. UHC2030 and PMNCH. (2021). Health budget literacy, advocacy and accountability for universal health coverage. Toolkit for capacity-building.
- ² Clarke D. Law, regulation and strategizing for health. In: Schmets G, Rajan D, Kadandale S, eds. Strategizing National Health in the 21st Century: A Handbook. Geneva: WHO; 2016.
- ³ Slightly adapted from: World Health Organization. Health Systems Strengthening Glossary. Geneva: WHO; 2011.
- ⁴ World Health Organization, Global Program on Evidence for Health Policy. Guidelines for WHO guidelines. Geneva: WHO; 2003.

Authors

Simone Bösch, SICABO Consulting, Switzerland

Michael Bayerlein & Branwen J Hennig, Global Health Policy Lab, Germany

Global Health Policy Lab

Making evidence-based health policy development
a universal reality.

© Global Health Policy Lab, April 2025

c/o Virchow Foundation

Dorotheenstr. 83
10117 Berlin, Germany
www.globalhealthpolicylab.org