

The development of a national policy framework for physical activity in Oman 1

Huda Al Siyabi, MD¹ Ruth M. Mabry, MPH, PhD^{2*} Amal Al Siyabi, MD¹ Moosa Al Subhi, 2

MD³ and Karen Milton⁴ 3

¹Department of Community-Based Initiatives, Directorate General of Primary Health Care, 4

Ministry of Health, Oman 5

² World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo, Egypt 6

³Department of Investment and Financing Alternatives, Directorate General of Planning, 7

Ministry of Health, Oman 8

⁴Norwich Medical School, University of East Anglia, UK 9

*Correspondence to: R Mabry; rmmabry@gmail.com 10

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The Eastern Mediterranean is the second most inactive region globally and has the highest levels of inactivity among women.¹ In addition, few countries in the region have national policies on Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and/or physical activity. In Oman, a country in the Arabian Gulf, the prevalence of insufficient physical activity is particularly high, especially in women and girls (men: 29.6%; women: 48.5%; adolescent boys: 84.6%, girls: 91.7%).²⁻³ Demographic and epidemiological changes brought on by modernization, economic development and shifts in traditional lifestyles and occupational patterns have contributed to the low prevalence of physical activity.⁴⁻⁵ The rising prevalence of obesity and diabetes, and increased susceptibility of the population to these conditions, demands accelerated multisectoral action to promote physical activity.⁴⁻⁷

In 2014 officials in Oman embarked on positive action to address high levels of inactivity in the country. The process of developing a national policy framework for physical activity began in December 2014 with the appointment of a national focal point for physical activity in the Ministry of Health (MOH). This appointment provided a dedicated resource and a leader to drive the physical activity agenda. Policymakers in Oman followed seven key strategic steps in the development of a national physical activity plan. These actions took place over a three-year period, from January 2015 to February 2018; each step is explained below.

1. Mapping existing actions on physical activity promotion

In January 2015 the MOH began mapping existing actions on physical activity promotion from the education, health, municipalities, sports and planning sectors. This mapping exercise facilitated the policy development process by providing a shared understanding of the actions already underway in each sector.

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2. <i> Holding meetings with stakeholders from each ministry</i>	52
Throughout February and March 2015, meetings were held with key ministries including the	53
education, municipalities, sports and planning sectors. Discussions focused on the increasing	54
prevalence of NCDs resulting from insufficient physical activity. The need for multisectoral	55
collaboration was emphasized, alongside discussions on potential areas of shared action.	56
During these meetings each sector was requested to nominate a focal point to join a	57
multisectoral executive team to support the MOH in developing a plan of action that was	58
aligned to the needs of each sector and existing strategies and resources.	59
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3. <i> Drafting a multisectoral action plan</i>	61
Based on the information obtained throughout the multisector meetings, the MOH drafted a	62
physical activity action plan for Oman. Following the guidance of the “seven best	63
investments” for national action to promote physical activity, ⁸ the draft plan included actions	64
across seven key areas: public education; schools; communities; health services; sports; urban	65
design; and transport policies.	66
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4. <i> Meeting with a WHO expert and hosting two one-day workshops</i>	68
The draft action plan was reviewed by a WHO expert in March 2015. During the visit,	69
meetings with decision-makers from key sectors were conducted. Two one-day workshops	70
with technical officers from the education, health, municipality and sports sectors were also	71
held. These interactions raised awareness about physical activity and health and provided an	72
opportunity to share experiences on promoting physical activity in the country. Further	73
examinations of the challenges and opportunities in Oman allowed refinement of the draft	74
plan of action.	75

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5. <i>Integrating physical activity into the broader NCD policy agenda</i>	77
In February 2016, the Ministry of Health committed to the development of a National Policy	78
for the Prevention and Controls of NCDs. ⁹ Eight multisectoral task forces were formally	79
established in August 2016, one of which was responsible for physical activity. The physical	80
activity task force included members from four sectors (education, health, municipalities and	81
sports) and was chaired by the Ministry of Sports Affairs. Each task force was responsible for	82
developing a five-year plan of action following the structure outlined in the national policy.	83
The draft physical activity plan prepared the preceding year was translated into Arabic and	84
reviewed and finalized by the taskforce.	85
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6. <i>Adoption of the plan</i>	87
Once the physical activity plan of action was finalized, it was presented to the National NCD	88
Committee. This committee compiled the plans from each task force to create the National	89
NCD Plan of Action 2017 - 2025, and the plan was circulated to all relevant sectors for	90
endorsement. In February 2018 the plan was launched during a large multisectoral event	91
under the patronage of His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq Al Said, Advisor to His	92
Majesty Sultan Qaboos Al Said and in the presence of high level decision-makers.	93
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7. <i>Leading the implementation of the new national plan</i>	95
The National Policy Framework for Physical Activity, which forms part of the wider National	96
NCD Plan of Action, comprises a range of actions across multiple sectors and settings. Each	97
action is assigned to a ministry that is primarily responsible for its implementation. Targets	98
have been set for many of the actions, as well as timelines over which the actions will be	99
completed.	100

Since the launch, a range of initiatives have been implemented including: the delivery of 101
capacity building courses to train mid-level managers from various sectors about physical 102
activity and health; the development of a national protocol for counselling on physical 103
activity in the healthcare setting; the implementation of initiatives to promote physical 104
activity in schools including playground markings, the introduction of active classrooms and 105
the development of guidelines on adopting a whole-of-school approach to physical activity 106
promotion; and initiatives to improve the environment for physical activity including marking 107
footpaths to indicate distance walked in the capital area and the production of guidelines on 108
public open spaces for physical activity. 109

Over the past few years, support for physical activity promotion has been substantially 111
strengthened in Oman and a national action plan now exists to address high levels of 112
inactivity in the country. This builds on previous successes in NCD policy and intersectoral 113
partnerships in Oman, including the school health, community-based initiatives and tobacco 114
control programmes.^{7, 10} Support for the physical activity agenda was strengthened by 115
political commitment to the NCD agenda more broadly. Embedding the physical activity plan 116
within the broader NCD policy was important for getting the policy both approved and 117
funded. 118

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