

# Geopolitical determinants of mental health and global health inequities

## ABSTRACT

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Geopolitical determinants of health have been well recognized by the World Health Organization and are increasingly being discussed across governments, institutions, academics, policy makers, and across global health sector. Geopolitical determinants of health are events, structures, processes, and factors that influence individual health including mental health, public and population mental health both directly and indirectly. Consequently, nation's responses to these factors will affect short-term and long-term health outcomes. Geopolitical factors are becoming increasingly more important as they influence directly and indirectly social determinants of health. These factors clearly impact both physical and mental health leading to health inequities and inequalities. It is important to factor in geopolitical determinants in resource allocation and funding as well as policy making as has been highlighted by the recent pandemic and variable access to vaccines. Geopolitical determinants would be integral when addressing all global health inequities. These play a major role in resource allocation, policy and planning to meet today's global health challenges.

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Geopolitical determinants are increasingly being recognized as important contributors to population ill-health. These determinants include political, commercial, and geographical factors along with cultural, economic, and physical determinants. Often geographical factors and commercial or political factors have been studied in silos. Our proposal is to link these together as these factors influence each other in multiple ways. In this paper, we aim to offer a brief overview of geopolitical determinants and how these impact social determinants and how these observations can be used in the context of social justice and equity.

### Determinants

The impact of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and some manmade such as conflict, wars, etc., has been recognized as influencing the mental and physical health of populations. However, many disasters are manmade such as flooding, droughts, etc., A large number of these events can lead to displacement and migration both within the borders of the country and across borders. These can also cause an increase in the numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers. In addition, the impact of globalization, foreign policy, climate change, ecological imbalance, resulting migration, forced displacement, and a range of other geopolitical factors contribute to and affect mental health and well-being.<sup>[1]</sup>

Geopolitical factors have always influenced physical and mental health but their importance often focused on specific events such as the Asian tsunami or Ebola outbreak rather than a cohesive understanding. Collectively, these have been generally underrecognized and there has been an overreliance on the social determinants of health.<sup>[2]</sup> However, geopolitical determinants of health are becoming increasingly obvious and important. The learning from the COVID-19 pandemic makes it even more evident that health is not merely determined by social determinants; geopolitical factors play a major role in the global response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine nationalism caused substantial delays in making vaccines accessible in many poor countries around the globe, particularly in Africa which still has the lowest vaccination rates compared to the rest of the world. As a result, nations without local manufacturing capabilities suffered substantial avoidable deaths.<sup>[3]</sup> This is a poignant reminder of the pervasive inequities that plagued every crucial aspect of the global response.<sup>[4]</sup>

Geopolitical determinants influence and contribute to social determinants of health, and as this is being increasingly acknowledged, there is a need to embed geopolitical determinants within social determinants.<sup>[2]</sup> Social justice and human rights globally are also influenced by geopolitical

determinants. These need to be contextualized only through a thorough understanding of subtle nuances of how geopolitical determinants influence and impact the ‘individual’ as a whole person but also on the healthcare system including population and public mental health. The interface and interplay of geopsychiatry including geopolitical determinants need to be integrated into research, healthcare planning, and policy to ensure inclusiveness, equity.<sup>[5]</sup> There are varied multidimensional global challenges that are shaping geopolitical determinants and their impact cannot be underestimated.

Persaud sets the scene in a commentary on geopolitical determinants of health.<sup>[1]</sup> Kickbusch highlighted political determinants of health in 2015<sup>[6]</sup> and concurred with Bambra as to why health is political.<sup>[7]</sup> According to Bambra, health is political because the latter provides three arguments as to why health is political – 1) it is unevenly distributed, 2) many health determinants are dependent on political actions and decisions, and 3) health is a critical dimension of human rights and citizenship.

Persaud emphasizes that the world is facing a number of crises at the geopolitical level including rising population, climate change, man-made and natural disasters, ongoing conflicts, an increase in refugee and asylum-seekers, and mass migration.<sup>[1]</sup> More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic with associated restrictions including the closing of borders has added further complexity to the health and well-being and highlights the significance of geopolitical determinants.<sup>[8]</sup>

### Impact

It is important to understand and unpick the impact of geopolitical determinants on policy and the execution of policies on health.

Geopolitical determinants lead to power structures that are related to placed entities such as boundaries, continental geographies, and proximity/distance from neighbors. Loneliness and alienation can thus result. These factors also represent a system of relationships among assets and processes linking communities at higher levels of organization than the level of the community, or neighborhood. Thus, a reassessment of the role of geopolitical factors in shaping policy decisions on foreign aid is needed urgently.<sup>[9]</sup> Geopolitical determinants are also influenced by various policies on aid, wealth distribution, the organization and delivery of healthcare, and the quality and uniformity of health provision.<sup>[10]</sup> Hence, reshaping geopolitical factors could be an efficient way to impact change.

Whereas social determinant models frame health outcomes as products of local, regional, and national policies, it

is important to recognize that overarching geopolitical factors affect these both directly and indirectly, thus there is an urgent need to look at international factors. These determinants consequently influence relations with neighboring countries, migration of people, refugees, and prevailing distribution of resources and conflict, which must be made explicit.<sup>[2]</sup>

By positioning social determinants within country contexts, it becomes difficult to disentangle the real importance of local distributions of wealth, poverty, hunger, and other factors from the structural and political conditions that shape the way and how data are collected and then interpreted.<sup>[10]</sup> Social determinants frameworks do not sufficiently account for the impact of overarching governmental structures, geopolitics, and cross-national economic, social, and political trends in shaping health. The social determinants frameworks focus on the impact and influence of wealth, income, education, employment, and hunger (as well as other factors) on health. However, they do not incorporate the importance of legal status (such as migration/refugee/asylum status), minority status (including ethnic/racial minority status), and ethnocultural factors.<sup>[11]</sup> For inclusivity, the key is to embed the model of geopsychiatry into social determinants.<sup>[12]</sup>

Some of the challenges that social determinants of health are best understood in a geopolitical context and as levers for health improvement. The story of social determinants, emanating from the work of Black,<sup>[13]</sup> and earlier work on mortality inequalities (e.g., Farr and the bills of mortality),<sup>[14]</sup> is one of trying to understand how *individual health* is produced. This is true even when examining the role of family and wider social organization factors. While this is nearly always implicit, geopolitical frameworks can help to disentangle the ways in which models of understanding an individual as a whole person. In this way, geopolitical understandings can call attention to cultural, political, social, commercial, shaped factors that drive policies on how resources are allocated. Resource allocation and the ability to utilize resources appropriately are key aspects and these must be considered for the population to make progress across the strands of social justice and human rights. Furthermore, geopolitical and social determinants need to be seen in a coherent manner impacting upon each other and affecting health.

### Challenges and solutions

As mentioned above, migration as a consequence of various geopolitical factors can lead to pressures on the new country and may also deprive the country migrants leave poorer in human resources especially if this migration is across borders. Migration- flows globally are shaped by processes that are in themselves geopolitical (war,

famine, colonization, climate change, political unrest, and refugees). Migrant health status and healthcare use by immigrant groups are geopolitically *determined*. Of course, the state of being a migrant intersects importantly with the social determinants as conventionally framed, including employment, education, adversity, and social support. Migrants have a higher risk than the general population for developing various psychiatric disorders, including severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and psychotic disorders, depression, substance use disorders, and self-harm and suicidal attempts.<sup>[15-18]</sup> However, they may also have limited access to healthcare services that are available to other members of the community for a number of reasons including unfamiliarity with the healthcare system, different explanatory models, and stigma among others. Additionally, difficulties in communication and understanding between migrants and health professionals may occur due to poor proficiency with the local language and cultural differences.<sup>[19]</sup> This leads to poor engagement and thus limited therapeutic interactions and therefore poor outcomes contributing further to stigma and alienation.

Climate change is also greatly influenced by geopolitical factors, which in turn can lead to various psychiatric disorders. Countries with more developed economies are responsible for a large part of the greenhouse gas emissions whose effects are felt all over the world.<sup>[20]</sup> However, it is the poorest countries that have greater difficulty in adapting to these effects because they lack the infrastructure, technology, and financial resources to do so. It is recognized that climate change affects mental health both directly and indirectly through a range of mechanisms, including persistent environmental changes, such as global warming, as well as more sudden and extreme events like heat waves and natural disasters.<sup>[21]</sup> Higher temperatures have been associated with an increase in psychiatric morbidity, especially for mood and anxiety disorders and schizophrenia.<sup>[22]</sup> Environmental disasters have been associated with an increased prevalence of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other anxiety disorders.<sup>[23]</sup> However, access to mental health services may be hampered due to damaged infrastructure. Importantly, when an entire community is affected, the availability of and access to social support can be compromised, increasing the need for appropriate responses by policymakers and funders.

Finally, grief, survivor guilt, economic downturn, and social isolation are among the stressors that influence mental health after epidemics and pandemics as has been illustrated by Ebola, Zika, and COVID-19 infections. These factors combined with a lack of political leadership, healthcare infrastructure, and socioeconomic conditions played a significant role in the mixed response to these

issues.<sup>[24]</sup> The pandemic was a clear example of how mental health services can be easily overwhelmed when a major crisis happens. Increased rates of major depressive disorders (28%) and anxiety disorders (26%) were observed during the first year of the pandemic<sup>[25,26]</sup> when access to mental healthcare was limited in many regions. In Brazil, for example, it was found that there were about 28% less outpatient appointments in mental health between March and August 2020.<sup>[27]</sup> Additionally, the pandemic has generated long-term mental health effects for which we need to establish coping responses.<sup>[28]</sup>

What these geopolitical crises have in common is that their effects are not equally distributed among the population and not surprisingly, those in a condition of greater social vulnerability have a greater likelihood of suffering and unequal access to mental healthcare.<sup>[27,29,30]</sup> These cases also highlight an interconnectedness at different levels related to trade, manufacturing, and exports as well as the sharing of information. Therefore, trying to deal with these matters in an isolated nationalistic way can be counterproductive.<sup>[2]</sup>

The economic crisis of 2008 was a prime example of the interconnectedness between countries as seen in a number of contexts such as how geopolitical factors could interfere with mental health, and how different public policies adopted by the most affected countries improved or worsened mental health outcomes.<sup>[30]</sup> Resulting from failures in the regulation of American markets, the crisis led to an increase in unemployment and a drop in revenue in a large number of countries. In response, austerity measures were adopted and included major cuts in public health and social protection at a time when the population was most vulnerable. Consequently, in the following years, an increase in depression, anxiety, alcohol-related disorders, and suicide rates was observed, especially in the groups of individuals most affected by the crisis. However, Iceland did not adhere to such austerity measures and in that country the crisis had little or no effect on the population's health.<sup>[30]</sup>

Another important lesson from the European economic crisis is that investing in social protection mitigated the short-term rise in deaths by suicide.<sup>[31]</sup> This same strategy was proposed regarding handling the social burden of the pandemic in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>[32]</sup> This suggests that social care policies can be as important as healthcare policies to protect mental health in the context of a crisis.

Policies toward immigrants also vary between nations and impact the health of this population. For example, while countries that invest in mobile clinics to reach low-income immigrants have shown positive results across different health outcomes, those in which health professionals

are required to report individuals in the country illegally reduce their access to healthcare.<sup>[29]</sup> These authors indicate that there is still an important lack of mechanisms of self-evaluation by governments on their policies for immigrants or comparing policies across nations.<sup>[29]</sup>

The mental health effects of most geopolitical factors are not well quantified, and most studies come from high-income countries. Assessing the impact of these factors in low- and middle-income countries is essential to inform policy and advocate for better outcomes especially as several refugees are seeking shelter in low-income countries.

### Policy and practice implications

World Health Organization (WHO) member states have adopted the WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030, which aims to promote mental health services, by strengthening leadership and governance, community-based care, promotion and prevention, and information systems and research.<sup>[33]</sup> However, according to the latest WHO's analysis, progress has been made albeit slowly across countries.<sup>[25]</sup> Only 21% of countries reported implementing policies and plans that fully comply with human rights instruments.<sup>[25]</sup> Although many low- and middle-income countries have developed mental health policies based on frameworks and lessons learned from high-income countries, not surprisingly due to cultural variations policy adaptation is not always successful.<sup>[34]</sup> Inadequate data collections and research on mental health, limited funding for mental health services, and shortage of mental health professionals are often the main barriers to policy development and implementation in these countries. Global health spending for 2020 increased to US\$9 trillion, which is about 11% of global GDP<sup>[35]</sup> an increase attributed to COVID-19 pandemic costs. However, the average global health spend on mental health remains pitifully low at just over 2%.<sup>[25]</sup>

People with both mental health problems and geopolitical disadvantages are clearly at risk of receiving suboptimal treatments and support, and international and national policies need to address this point. Many low- and middle-income countries struggle with recurring political instabilities and climate crises, leading to forced migration and famine. Many countries often have rapid urbanization, huge socioeconomic inequalities, and a considerable number of people with poor access to health and social care and education, including lower health literacy.<sup>[25]</sup> These can have detrimental effects on the physical and mental health of their population and further hinder the successful implementation of mental health policies. In low- and middle-income countries, mental health funding and policies are also focused on increasing the capacity

of psychiatric hospitals, which commonly concentrate in major cities. Unfortunately, many countries still do not include mental healthcare in their universal health coverage schemes.<sup>[25,34]</sup> These make mental health services not geographically and financially accessible to everyone, especially those with geopolitical disadvantages.

**Recommendations**

In an impressive move forward in many countries, mental health services have been integrated into primary care and community-based services. Some countries have closed down psychiatric institutions with increased emphasis on the development of mental health promotion and prevention programs.<sup>[34]</sup> Although most low-income countries still lack community mental health services and the direct adoption of this approach may have difficulty at the early stages, political will and continuing investment will eventually improve the capacity of community services and increase the coverage of mental health care. There need to be plans and policies for destigmatization of mental health problems and improving the social inclusion of persons

with mental health problems. Negative past experiences with mental health services and distrust of mental health professionals can further prevent help-seeking and, thus, lead to poor outcomes. Affordable and culturally sensitive mental healthcare is, therefore, crucial to enhancing the accessibility and adherence to the persons’ treatments.

The recent devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria left millions of people homeless and caused a serious death toll, leading to complicated grief and survivor guilt among people who survived.<sup>[36]</sup> These observations and events signify the importance of a policy in place for immediate and long-term responses to future unforeseen situations, such as pandemics, political conflicts, and natural and man-made disasters [see Table 1]. This must include, for example, screening, referral, and follow-up programs for mental health issues among people affected. Although the mental health policy is critical to support the mental health of people with geopolitical risks, a policy for the prevention and management of the root causes of the geopolitical risks is still much needed, for example, a financial safety

**Table 1: Examples of policy recommendations and corresponding interventions to tackle geopolitical challenges**

Geopolitical determinant	Issues	Mental health outcomes	Psychosocial outcomes that could impact mental health	Short-term interventions	Long-term interventions
Climate change	Extreme weather events	Posttraumatic stress disorder Depression Anxiety Suicide Climate anxiety	Food insecurity Loss of livelihood Property loss or damage Loss of autonomy Violence Displacement Loss of social support	Facilitate access to mental healthcare, which may have been destroyed by the extreme weather event Have an emergency response plan before the event happens Social care	Collect data and analyze the mental health impacts of climate change Government commitment to actions to mitigate climate change Training of professionals in disaster psychiatry
Climate change	Increased temperatures	Anxiety Depression Suicide	Lack of access to healthy living and working environments	Facilitate access to mental healthcare Reduce the urban heat island effect through interventions such as: increasing green and blue areas, promoting the use of green transport (electric cars, bicycles, etc.)	Government commitment to actions to mitigate climate change Promote policies that make urban spaces healthier, including the use of solar energy and quality public transport Training of professionals to identify climate change factors of mental illnesses
Migration	Forced migration due to economic hardship, climate change, and situational unrest	Anxiety Depression Suicide Posttraumatic stress disorder Schizophrenia	Loss of autonomy Violence Displacement Stigma Fear of being deported Cultural differences	Facilitate access to mental healthcare Provide affordable and culturally sensitive mental healthcare	Training of professionals to deal with cultural and language barriers Legal, social, and financial protection
Migration	Vulnerable population, e.g., children, older adults, asylum seekers	Depression Anxiety Suicide Posttraumatic stress disorder Schizophrenia Dementia	Lack of access to healthcare services Loss of social support Language barriers	Tailor mental health care to meet the needs of vulnerable population Timely provision of social and financial protection	Evidence-based approach to monitor, prevent, and manage mental health issues in vulnerable population Enhanced coverage of educational program and long-term care

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net for people at risk of economic hardship and support for poor living condition among displaced people. There is substantial evidence supporting the economic and social returns of improving mental healthcare, which can lead to better social inclusion and engagement.

## CONCLUSIONS

Geopsychiatry is an exciting emerging and developing field focusing on the interface between geopolitical determinants and the mental health of populations and individuals, which are strongly connected, but often under-recognized worldwide. Long-existing socioeconomic inequalities and a decline in global political rights and civil liberties put some people at risk of mental health problems and hinder them from seeking treatments or receiving appropriate support. Climate change, migration, pandemics, and disasters further deteriorate people's mental health. Policies and measures adapted to local cultures and resources will help identify people in need and provide them with appropriate interventions. However, we believe that successful implementation of such policies and measures requires adequate funding and staffing resources, which will require global actions and collaboration.

In a fast-developing world of technology, utilizing the geopolitical determinants of mental health approach has the potential to revitalize, accelerate, and drive progress in many global policy areas. The application of artificial intelligence in these geopolitical determinants of the mental health model could help policy makers and clinicians better understand the interconnectedness of factors, as policy making, research, and practice must focus on actions that prevent, mitigate, and respond to these geographical events that impact on mental health and mental illness. Geopolitical determinants of health can give health professionals and policymakers an important additional context and perspective, which is essential and relevant to policy making and healthcare delivery. We propose that awareness of geopolitical determinants, informed by empirical evidence, would improve knowledge on the determinants of health by presenting a model for understanding these social determinants of health. With the rapid growth in globalization, social determinants of health must be seen within a geopolitical framework, and geopsychiatry will determine future direction.

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