

# Stressors at Work and Elsewhere – A Global Survival Approach

By Lennart Levi, MD, PhD

I have devoted almost my entire professional life to psychosocial environmental medicine, with some focus on occupational medicine.

My intention has been to find ways to prevent noxious stress and ill health resulting from it, and to promote health and wellbeing.

One source of inspiration has been our world's leading social epidemiologist, professor Michael Marmot. In his search for the causes for disease as well as for health, his plea was to "Look for the causes behind the causes".

A series of recent and most impressive searches for such causes is provided by the World Economic Forum's annual reports on "Global Risks" facing mankind. They demonstrate that many risks at work and elsewhere are indeed very real, powerful and likely to materialize. In addition, they usually are very complex, and highly interconnected.

They can't be ticked off one by one or dealt with effectively with any quick fixes.

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## Earn thy Neighbor's Love

I have also been inspired by the discoverer of the biological stress concept, the late Hans Selye. Discussing the foundation for a good life, Selye disagreed with the Bible's command "Love thy neighbor as thyself". In its place, he proposed "Earn thy neighbor's love". To work for a more humane future for humankind and its planet may be such a way.

To counteract the global risks described by the World Economic Forum – as well as the present mounting disaffection and disruption across the world, partly due to short-term and silo thinking by many elites – all 193 member states of the United Nations have agreed on an Agenda 2030, comprising 17 very ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and 169 targets.

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## Focusing on the Causes Behind the Causes

The SDGs are concerned with a wide multitude of stressors, and accordingly



intend to reach an entire package of interacting goals: end poverty; end hunger; encourage good health and well-being; provide quality education; promote gender equality; provide clean water and sanitation; promote affordable and clean energy; provide decent work and economic growth; address industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduce inequalities; develop sustainable cities and communities; encourage responsible consumption and production; take action on climate change; promote life below water; promote life on land; work towards peace, justice and strong institutions; and create partnerships to achieve these goals.

However, recent political changes put this hope at risk. To increase the likelihood of success for these 17 SDGs, higher education institutions worldwide must teach and train today's students – tomorrow's decision-makers – to think both critically and ethically, to learn to cope with ethical dilemmas and apply systems-thinking approaches to serious and complex societal problems (Levi &

Rothstein, 2018).

Needless to say, the resulting stress and pathogenic effects of noxious exposures also depend on our resilience and coping ability. Such aspects remain important targets for disease prevention and health promotion.

But they can never replace the situational factors focused on in this paper.

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### **Developing Critical and Ethical Leaders of the Future**

Students need to be aware of the local, regional and global contexts in which they live and make decisions. Many of today's students do not grasp their role in, and responsibility to, the world – and large numbers don't seem to care.

A single course at college can only ever be a beginning. Families, media, religious bodies, primary and secondary schools and workplaces as well as higher education institutions must be educated and recruited to play their part.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to promote the entire



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cluster of 17 SDGs and 169 targets. The critical-ethical analytical skills and systems-based approach mentioned above are indispensable prerequisites to achieving this.

By 'critical' we may refer to the application of careful, exact evaluation and judgement. By 'ethical' we may refer to a set of principles about the right way to behave. By 'systems' we may refer to a group of interacting, interrelated or interdependent elements forming a complex whole. Accordingly, systems-thinking is based on the recognition of interconnect- edness and systems processes.

### What needs to be done?

Universities need to start to become ethical leaders by looking first at themselves. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation/International Quality Group and UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning have issued an advisory statement on combating 'corruption' in higher education internationally.

The statement, however, uses 'corruption' as a general term to designate a broad variety of malpractice in institutions of higher education, such as appropriation, bribery, cheating, corruption, deceit, embezzlement, extortion, favouritism, fraud, graft, harassment, nepotism, etc – an ABC of misconduct.

To deliver the badly needed SDGs and targets, we need trustworthy, ethical, honest and impartial government institutions that exercise public power, oversee policies fairly and take into account their range, complexity and occasional incompatibility. These institutions are much more likely to promote trust and social capital which in turn improves health and well-being. Tackling corruption is vital

(Levi & Rothstein, 2018).

We also need higher education institu- tions that can teach the crucial necessary skills we have highlighted. These should be taught and implemented throughout people's entire life span. It is crucially important that leading higher education institutions start leading by example to increase future decision-makers' motivation and ability to act ethically.

### Involvement from 650 Universities

The International Association of Universities (IAU) with 650 member universities world-wide, has engaged itself for these purposes, designating 16 univer- sities, each taking on one of the SDGs, and each in collaboration with half a dozen or so allies for its specific purpose, but with an awareness of the dynamic interaction between all ingredients of the system.

Although IAU had been active in Sustainable Development long before, the adoption of the Agenda 2030 convinced the Association to make this one of its Key Priorities.

An IAU-created Cluster works on all dimensions of the SDGs, combining economic, social, cultural, and environ- mental sustainability. Especially the cultural dimension of SD will be at the core of this Cluster, since this is an area not touched-upon a lot by others. Yet, due to the diverse nature of the IAU, the association believes that this is the key to successful partnerships and a holistic understanding of the Global Goals.

Peer-to-peer learning is likely to spark new ideas and creativity among the Members of the Cluster and is also likely to encourage other universities to step up their game towards achieving a more sustainable future.

Work on goal 17, which will consist of multiple organizations working together,



is led by IAU. Gradually, additional institutions will be invited on board. The Cluster will be supported, monitored and steered by an IAU Working Group. Initiatives developed by the Cluster will be made available to all IAU Members

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## **The European Network Occupational Safety and Health**

**T**he European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health (ENETOSH) offers a platform for systematic knowledge-sharing on issues concerning education and training in occupational safety and health.

Accordingly, it concerns primarily SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) but remains aware of a multitude of additional SDGs and their interactions.

More than 80 partners from 33 countries all over the world are involved in ENETOSH. The network is coordinated by the Institute for Work and Health (IAG) of the German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV).

The fundamental aim of ENETOSH is to mainstream occupational safety and health (OSH) into education and training at all levels. Its assumption is that this will help boost the overall quality of education and prepares the ground for the development of a culture of prevention.

Briefly, then, the ENETOSH network activities aim at promoting the following at both the national and international level:

1. Joint quality assurance of education and training on occupational safety and health;
2. High-quality mainstreaming of health and safety into the education system; and
3. Active knowledge-sharing between the OSH sphere and education experts.

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## **Systematic Collection and Assessment of Examples of Good Practice**

**T**he process of identifying, selecting and presenting examples of good practice in education and training in occupational safety and health for ENETOSH is quality-assured.

A quality management system was developed, including the following: a list of criteria for selecting examples of good practice, a data-collection sheet, a coding system, the advisory editing committee plus its statutes and a code of conduct for users of the ENETOSH platform. These tools are used in accordance with a defined workflow.

All of the selected examples of good practice are published in the database (“Tool box”) on the ENETOSH website. The system displays a brief note in English and a link to the project’s or institution’s website in the national language. Certain examples of good practice are presented in more detail (“Examples”) or grouped by topic (“Hot Topics”), media (“Videos”) or online availability and interactivity (“Education Online”).

ENETOSH’s special focus is on the improvement of the competences of teachers, lecturers and trainers as the determining factor for the quality of education and training in OSH. Well-qualified teachers are key to developing a culture of prevention. They need appropriate competences to ensure the transfer of knowledge about safety and health, to promote changes of attitudes and behavior in individuals regarding their own safety and health and to foster the establishment of a safety and health culture.

To achieve such a culture, we may wish to prepare

- Curricula in higher education in different

subjects (health sciences, engineering, economics, management sciences);

- Models of good practice of decent work;
- Holistic approaches of higher education institutions to guarantee decent work conditions for their own institutions.

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## Involvement of the World Health Organization (WHO)

In its recent resolution on “Healthy, Prosperous Lives for All”, WHO’s Regional Committee for Europe requested its Regional Director:

- To support Member States in placing health equity at the center of sustainable development and inclusive economies; To take the lead in exploring ways of bringing together policy-makers from other sectors responsible for the determinants of health, including education, housing, employment, the environment, and poverty reduction, in order to develop a systematic approach to taking action.

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## Words Do Not Cook Rice – Next Steps

But as a Chinese proverb formulates it – “words do not cook rice.” There exists a very considerable gap between what we know – and what we implement.

Recognizing the university sector’s potential and responsibility to help shape the moral contours of society for the better and given the societal benefits from increased social capital, we ask universities and institutions of higher education to shoulder their role as key agents of change, as stated in the Compostela Group of Universities’ Poznan Declaration of 2014. They should:

- Endorse a cross-faculty approach to broaden the curricula to include components of critical-ethical analysis and systems thinking. To some extent,

this is presently being considered by the European Commission in their endeavours to modernise European higher education.

- Appreciate the unique opportunity they have to shape professional identities. At universities, the norms and boundaries of acceptable behaviour are to a large extent set for a number of professions. Universities have a possibility as well as a responsibility to help shape the normative contours of society for the better.
- Teach the teachers through the provision of pedagogical resources and training to a wide range of faculty.
- Develop a web page for information dissemination of pedagogical material, discussion topics, case studies, e-learning tools etc.
- Organize conferences to exchange good practice as regards implementation of the 17 SDGs and 169 targets of the UN Agenda 2030. The Karolinska Institute, in collaboration with the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the University of Gothenburg, and the Chalmers University of Technology has already held such a conference, in Stockholm on 30 March 2019.
- Develop partnerships with other universities, networks, national authorities for higher education and civil society organisations championing the critical-ethical agenda.
- Commit for the long term. Changing norms and behaviour is an inherently slow process. While there may indeed be ripple effects from promoting critical-ethical behaviour and systems-thinking, it is likely that the ‘exposed’ generation will need to reach a critical mass and/or managerial positions before true and measurable change will occur.
- Coordinate with national education

authorities and social partners with regard to fulfilling the state's obligation under the UN Agenda 2030 SDGs.

- Encourage voluntary associations and participation in these.
- Talk the talk and walk the walk. In addition to teaching critical-ethical behaviour and promoting systems thinking, it is crucial that higher education institutions – as agents providing public goods – act accordingly, ensuring impartiality in teaching, student assessment and research and that matters regarding awards of degrees, employment and promotions are based on legitimate, transparent and objective criteria.

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## Low Costs, High Gain

Considering the relatively low costs of implementation and the possible societal gains if these proposals are implemented broadly, this initiative has the potential to be extremely cost efficient in the long term. More important, however, is that, ethically, it is the right thing to do.

This is why we propose additional high-level conferences on such issues, with a focus on the implementation of Agenda 2030 (what should be taught and how). Based on the outcomes of

these, recommendations should be made regarding the necessary redesign of all higher education -- and for its subsequent and urgent implementation.

*This article is based on contributions by professor Bo Rothstein and the author to the World Academy of Art and Science and Roma Tre University's International Conference in Rome on 'Future Education' in November 2017, the European Commission's Working Group Meeting in Brussels in December 2017 and in an article for the University World News in November 2018.*

## SUGGESTED READING

- Levi L, Rothstein B. To Cope with Present and Future Catastrophic Risks Higher Education Must Train Future Decision Makers to Think Critically, Ethically and in Systems. World Academy of Arts and Sciences Rome Conference Proceedings, March 2018, 13-15. <http://worldacademy.org/files/rome2017/papers/RCP-complied-papers.pdf>
- Additional information on UN recommendations and where to obtain support is available at <https://hr.un.org/page/healthy-workforce-better-world>

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