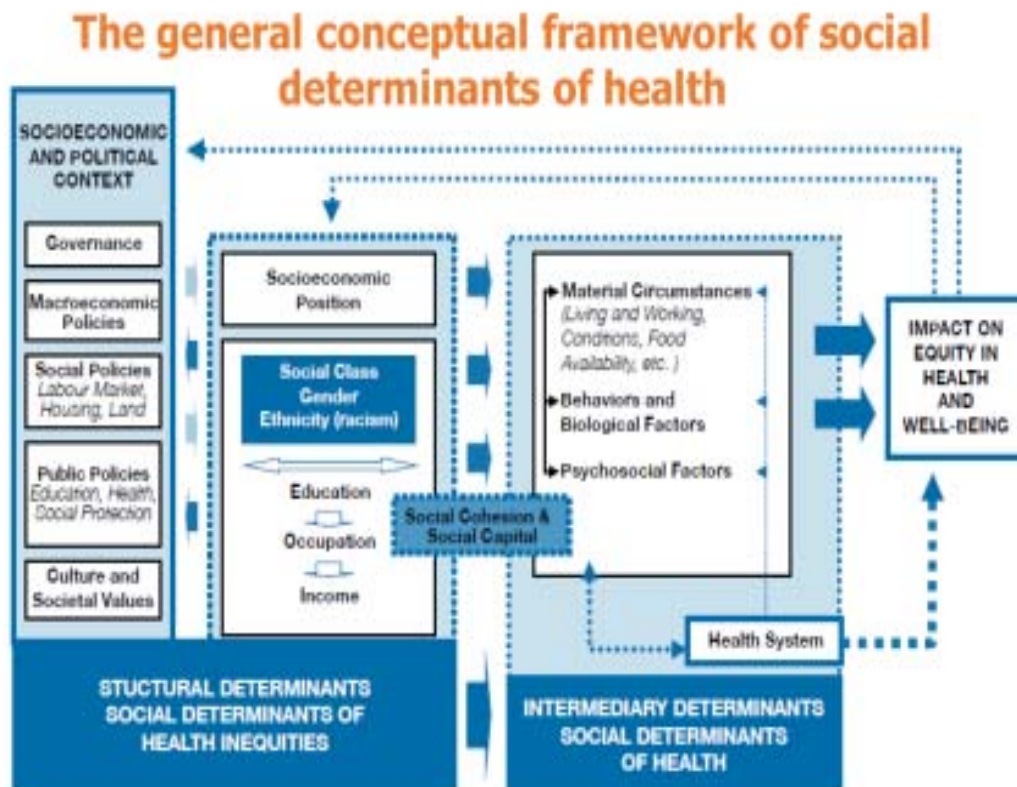


## Social determinants of health

The social determinants of health (SDH) are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 1. Framework of Social Determinants of Health



Source: Solar O, Irwin A. (2010) A conceptual framework for action on the social determinants of health. Social Determinants of Health Discussion Paper 2 (Policy and Practice).WHO: Geneva.

This framework shows how social, economic and political mechanisms give rise to a set of socioeconomic positions, whereby populations are stratified according to income, education, occupation, gender, race/ethnicity and other factors; these socioeconomic positions in turn shape specific determinants of health status (intermediary determinants) reflective of people's place within social hierarchies; based on their respective social status, individuals experience differences in exposure and vulnerability to health-compromising conditions. Illness can "feed back" on a given individual's social position, e.g. by compromising employment opportunities and reducing income; certain epidemic diseases can similarly "feed back" to affect the functioning of social, economic and political institutions<sup>2</sup>.

Structural determinants are considered as the causes of health inequalities. *Health inequalities* are "unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries". Health inequities are systematic: they usually affect particular groups of people, and they occur across the social gradient. The most vulnerable

people have the least access, not only to health services, but also to the resources that contribute to good health<sup>3</sup>.

According to WHO <sup>1</sup> *“Many factors combine together to affect the health of individuals and communities. Whether people are healthy or not, is determined by their circumstances and environment. To a large extent, factors such as where we live, the state of our environment, genetics, our income and education level, and our relationships with friends and family all have considerable impacts on health, whereas the more commonly considered factors such as access and use of health care services often have less of an impact.*

*The context of people’s lives determine their health, and so blaming individuals for having poor health or crediting them for good health is inappropriate. Individuals are unlikely to be able to directly control many of the determinants of health. These determinants—or things that make people healthy or not—include the above factors, and many others:*

- *Income and social status - higher income and social status are linked to better health. The greater the gap between the richest and poorest people, the greater the differences in health.*
- *Education – low education levels are linked with poor health, more stress and lower self-confidence.*
- *Physical environment – safe water and clean air, healthy workplaces, safe houses, communities and roads all contribute to good health. Employment and working conditions – people in employment are healthier, particularly those who have more control over their working conditions*
- *Social support networks – greater support from families, friends and communities is linked to better health. Culture - customs and traditions, and the beliefs of the family and community all affect health.*
- *Genetics - inheritance plays a part in determining lifespan, healthiness and the likelihood of developing certain illnesses.*
- *Personal behaviour and coping skills – balanced eating, keeping active, smoking, drinking, and how we deal with life’s stresses and challenges all affect health.*
- *Health services - access and use of services that prevent and treat disease influences health”*

It is crucial to recognize gender, migration, ethnicity and sexuality as social stratifiers linked to systematic forms of discrimination. One of the considerations that the conceptual framework of SDH has received is the tendency to reduce ‘social determinants’ to ‘socioeconomic determinants’ and to ignore the role of ethnicity, migration and other factors in the creation of inequities <sup>4</sup>.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> WHO. Website: <http://www.who.int/hia/evidence/doh/en/> (retrieved: July 24, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Solar O, Irwin A. (2010) A conceptual framework for action on the social determinants of health. Social Determinants of Health Discussion Paper 2 (Policy and Practice).WHO: Geneva

<sup>3</sup> CSDH (2008). Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final report of the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. Geneva, World Health Organization.

<sup>4</sup> Ingleby D. (2012) Ethnicity, Migration and the 'Social Determinants of Health' Agenda. Psychosocial Intervention Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 331-341.