



## Call to Action: Putting Brain Health on the Global Agenda

*On the occasion of the 78th United Nations General Assembly, the European Brain Council and partner organizations hosted a Brain Health & Research Day as part of the Science Summit, bringing together over 150 key stakeholder organisations all committed to the same goal: fostering and enhancing global collaboration in the brain area, with the ultimate goal of improving the lives of people living with brain conditions, neurological and mental alike. This call to action reflects the urgent calls from the community.*

*New York, 18 September 2023*

In a time of increased attention on international health crises, we cannot ignore the pandemics that are all around us: the growing prevalence of non-communicable diseases accounts for a staggering 74% of all deaths globally<sup>1</sup>.

Brain disorders – encompassing neurological diseases and disorders and mental illnesses – are widespread, disabling and difficult to treat. These include a range of conditions: epilepsy, depression, Alzheimer’s disease, Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson’s, depression, stroke, Schizophrenia, headache, , anxiety disorders, chronic pain and rarer brain disorders such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), dystonia and ataxia. In fact, it is estimated that **up to one billion people worldwide live with a neurological condition and 970 million people around the world were living with a mental health disorder as of 2019, with anxiety and depressive disorders the most common**<sup>2</sup>.

These numbers are alarming without considering that they pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic, which we now know led to higher rates of mental health conditions<sup>3</sup> as well as COVID-19-triggered neurological complications<sup>4</sup>. These conditions represent a high individual, social and economic burden and contribute to the global disease burden and disability.

However, understanding the brain is not just to address a “burden”. It is also to allow people to thrive: to live in health and in happiness, to power our labor markets and economies, and to build for future generations. Instead of divesting in a cost, policymakers and society at large should view the prioritization and support of brain research as an investment into prevention, wellness and optimization, creating a better future for every citizen of the world.

While we are still far from having a complete understanding of how the brain functions as one system and how it is impacted by the rest of the human system and the external environment, advances in science and technology, and global commitments to greater collaboration and coordination, have created pathways for accelerating progress.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, Noncommunicable Diseases: Progress Monitor 2022, Geneva: World Health Organization; (2022).

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation. Global Health Data Exchange (GHDx), (<https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-results/>).

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament Briefing: Mental health and the pandemic, Nicole Scholz, EPRS - European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021, <https://bit.ly/42607x4>

<sup>4</sup> National Institutes of Health COVID-19 Research: How COVID-19 Affects the Brain, <https://bit.ly/43sWges>

### **The priorities to address the burden of brain disease and improve brain health in the future include:**

- ❖ Addressing the unmet needs of patients. More research on early diagnosis and opportunities to integrate mental and brain health risk detection and treatment protocols into primary and pediatric healthcare settings and expand workforce to include non-clinical healthcare workers to help detect risk early, treat mild conditions and improve population health and wellbeing.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ Learning from health crises such as COVID-19, to rethink health systems and design, to improve population health and wellbeing and ensure we are better equipped for the future. This will require a paradigm shift for health systems, moving on from a hospital-centric focus and a disease specific approach to integrated, multidisciplinary coordinated care but also include health promotion and prevention strategies that address health determinants and relevant risk factors.
- ❖ Go beyond the “traditional” recommendations and targets and work toward a new normal that addresses the healthcare system pitfalls of the past – interlinking health, welfare and economics while addressing unmet needs and diagnostic and treatment gaps, as well as economic and organisational challenges.
- ❖ Developing and deploying a strategic research and innovation agenda at the local, regional and global levels, with the aim to provide recommendations on future areas for excellent, innovative, and translational research. This would require stronger engagement and alignment with decisionmakers, regulators and payers in the fostering of an enabling environment to understand the brain and its disorders and improved patient outcomes.
- ❖ Developing validated metrics and tools for measuring brain health across the lifespan, by integrating existing data, and addressing gaps in data collection in communities and countries.

### **We call on the United Nations and Member States to:**

- Recognize brain health as an urgent priority in planning for Global Action Plans and the post-Sustainable Development Goals era: there is no health without brain health, and we must expand on the current goals for healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages to factor in non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Furthermore, access to health care and treatment remain pertinent and should be viewed as a priority in the fight against the growing burden of brain disorders and other NCDs.
- Recognize pronounced disparities in brain health research, care, and infrastructure across regions and foster the establishment of National Brain Plans at Member State level, to be supported by policymakers and society as a whole, for countries to run a concerted national strategy to maintain health and combat brain diseases throughout the human lifespan.
- Encourage inclusive, equitable and supportive frameworks for research collaboration at international level and foster participation and inclusion from all regions in project leadership, access to data and funding, infrastructure, and capacity building, etc. This should include targeted support — financial, infrastructural, and educational — for regions that are lagging, ensuring they can leverage these recommendations effectively.
- Place health and science at the forefront of the Summit of the Future and post-Sustainable Development Goals strategies: recognizing the vital role and contribution of science to attaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and spearhead the development and launch of science collaborations across the Global North and South to tackle global public health issues.

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<sup>5</sup> European Brain Council, Value of Treatment 2017, <https://www.braincouncil.eu/projects/the-value-of-treatment/>

