



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO

Policy Framework for just and inclusive Global Health collaborations and partnerships

Policy framework drafted by a working group led by the Centre for Multidisciplinary Action for Global Health (MAGH) of the University of Milan, and presented to the University's Academic Senate on 9 December 2025

Introduction

The core principles of global health – solidarity, equity, transnational collaboration, and multisectoral approaches – have long guided efforts to improve health outcomes worldwide, particularly for the most vulnerable populations¹. Over the past decades, these principles have driven remarkable progress in addressing global health challenges, enabled by robust international cooperation and sustained development assistance for health^{2,3}.

However, this progress is now at risk. The global landscape is witnessing a troubling contraction in health aid, threatening both the capacities of low- and middle-income country (LMIC) governments and the survival of many non-governmental organizations active in global health.^{4,5} At the same time, the world faces mounting, complex health threats that transcend borders: climate change, inadequate pandemic preparedness, the silent crisis of antimicrobial resistance, harmful business and commercial practices, protracted conflicts, and the rising burden of non-communicable diseases driven by demographic, environmental, and economic transitions.

Addressing these interconnected challenges requires high levels of cooperation, human and financial resources, and solidarity to safeguard global public goods.^{6,7} Yet, many countries are increasingly embracing isolationist and nationalistic policies, undermining the foundations of sustainable global health progress and threatening to reverse decades of achievements that have saved millions of lives during what has been described as a “golden era” of international collaboration.^{8,9}

These global challenges also underscore the **critical role of universities and academic institutions** in advancing global health. In an era of deep interconnection, universities contribute far beyond research and innovation: they educate future leaders, strengthen institutional capabilities, foster critical thinking, and provide evidence to inform policies. Academic institutions serve as trusted platforms for equitable international collaboration, enabling respectful and inclusive knowledge exchange responsive to local priorities and contexts. Through research, education, and policy engagement, universities contribute to the development of effective and accountable health systems by generating high-quality scientific data, training health professionals and policy experts, and conducting critical evaluations of health policies and programs.

Global research partnerships led or supported by academic institutions are vital for addressing knowledge gaps – particularly in low- and middle-income countries – and for strengthening local research capacity. Academia also shapes public discourse and influences policy by providing

independent, evidence-based analyses of global health challenges and interventions, thereby fostering accountability and transparency.

This document also stems from the observation that academic institutions, as bodies inevitably endowed with institutional and epistemic power, have sometimes contributed to exacerbating global inequalities. The production of academic knowledge has often privileged Western perspectives and - despite being informed by a genuine desire to promote scientific progress - has, at times, legitimized transnational exploitation. In recent years, however, there has been growing recognition of the need to critically reflect on these issues, and to decolonize global health research and education. This has sparked intentional efforts to build equitable partnerships, embrace epistemic diversity, and prioritize local voices and agendas in global health initiatives.

The value of scientific collaboration was clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, where universities and research networks played a central role in rapidly generating knowledge, guiding policy, and developing life-saving technologies¹⁰. As global health threats become more complex, strengthening the engagement of academic institutions in international cooperation is crucial to achieve equitable, resilient and sustainable health outcomes worldwide. At the same time, academic institutions should embrace a comprehensive global health approach that explicitly incorporates environmental sustainability and One Health. The One Health perspective recognises that human health, animal health, and ecosystem health are interdependent, and that protecting well-being requires collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary action from the local to the global level.

The University of Milan has been actively engaged in national initiatives that promote international cooperation. As part of our internationalization strategy, it is essential that these partnerships be grounded in principles of equity, sustainability, and mutual respect.

This document sets out a policy framework to guide all UniMI staff involved in global health collaborations and partnerships with governmental and non-state actors, civil society organizations, academic partners, and community groups, with particular emphasis on equitable partnerships with actors from the Global South. It defines the university's vision, values, and principles for global health partnerships, to ensure that our international engagements are ethical, fair, and aligned with global standards and local priorities.

Background

Global health cooperation encompasses the collaborative efforts of governments, international organizations, civil society, academia, and the private sector to address health challenges that transcend national borders. Rooted in principles of solidarity, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, it reflects the understanding that global threats such as pandemics, climate change, and antimicrobial resistance require collective action beyond the capacity of individual states.

The origins of global health cooperation can be traced to the 19th century, when the cross-border spread of infectious diseases prompted the first International Sanitary Conference in 1851. These early initiatives evolved into formal institutions, including the League of Nations Health Organization and, later, the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948. Over time, the scope of cooperation expanded from disease control to include broader issues such as health systems strengthening, equitable access to medicines, pandemic preparedness, and addressing the social and commercial determinants of health.

Today, global health cooperation is enshrined in key international commitments, including the Alma-Ata Declaration (1978), the International Health Regulations (2005), and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), particularly Goal 3 on ensuring healthy lives and well-being for all. Within this landscape, academic institutions play a pivotal role by generating evidence, training professionals, and critically evaluating policies and programs.

Global Health is a multidisciplinary field that integrates diverse theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and areas of expertise. It lacks, however, a **unified epistemological**

foundation, and consensus among scholars and practitioners on its core assumptions and evolution trajectories remains limited.^{11 2} A widely cited definition describes Global Health as “an area for study, research, and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide”.² **Global Health considers the effects of globalization on health**, emphasizing trans-national health issues, determinants, and solutions, and their interactions with national and local systems.¹² Within this broad framework, Global Health also encompasses the One Health approach, which highlights the interdependence of human, animal, and ecosystem health and the need for integrated, multisectoral action to protect well-being at all levels¹³.

This inclusive vision, however, stems from a practice which for a long time – and at times still today – has been far from inclusive. **Historically, Global Health has often been conceptualized and operationalized through a high-income to low- and middle-income country (HIC-to-LMIC) lens**, with actors and institutions based in the Global North leading interventions in the Global South¹⁴ – a framing that – were it to persist – would risk perpetuating asymmetries in power and knowledge production, and may obscure the universality of health inequities. Health disparities and vulnerable populations are not exclusive to LMICs; they also exist within high-income settings, alongside emerging transnational challenges such as climate change, demographic transitions, shifting disease burdens, migration, and rapid urbanization¹⁵.

Despite considerable efforts to promote equitable partnerships and locally led agendas, progress has often been uneven and hampered by entrenched power imbalances. **Global Health has been shaped – both conceptually and institutionally – by legacies of colonial and donor-driven paradigms**. These dynamics have often contributed to the depoliticization of health challenges and the marginalization of structural determinants and power relations underlying many of the inequities that Global Health seeks to address. To move forward, Global Health must be reconceptualized as a truly global scientific and political endeavor—one that transcends geopolitical boundaries, acknowledges shared vulnerabilities, and aspires to achieve health equity for all through inclusive, collaborative, and critically engaged approaches.

A recent attempt to **re-define Global Health in this new post-pandemic era** characterised also by an increased awareness of ecological challenges and emphasis on more sustainable domestic financing of health describes it as “a field of academic study, research, policy, and applied practice that advances the equitable protection and improvement of population and planetary health”. A new “5 Ps model” illustrates global health as a grid that places health for all at the centre of two axes representing four domains: (1) People, (2) Planet, (3) Priorities, and (4) Policies and Practices.

Universities and research institutions play a central role in global knowledge production and act as conveners of dialogue among diverse stakeholders. Their engagement in global partnerships strengthens local research capacity—particularly in low- and middle-income countries—and informs policy through independent analysis. As global health challenges grow in scale and complexity, reinforcing the role of academia in fostering equitable partnerships is essential to advancing sustainable health outcomes, while promoting accountability and innovation in global health governance.

The University of Milan advances its commitment to global health cooperation through the creation and consolidation of networks that bring together higher education and research institutions engaged in global health and international collaboration. At the national level, the University of Milan is a member of the University Coordination for International Development Cooperation (CUCS), whose mission is to integrate international development cooperation into the mandate and initiatives of higher education institutions. Further momentum towards university-led international cooperation also comes from the Italian Conference of Rectors (CRUI), which has been advocating for collaboration among universities within the National Council for Development Cooperation (CNCS); recently, the CNCS established a Working Group on science diplomacy and scientific research, emphasizing equity in partnerships and mutual learning.

At the **international level**, UniMi is the only Italian member of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) and, since January 2019, has been part of the 4EU+ European University Alliance network, alongside Charles University (Prague), University of Heidelberg, Université Paris-Panthéon-Assas, Sorbonne Université, University of Copenhagen, University of Geneva, and University of Warsaw. Within this alliance, innovative mobility tools, teaching models, and advanced forms of cooperation are being tested.

In the field of global health, UniMi co-founded the European Global Health Research Institutes Network (EGHRIN) together with the Amsterdam Institute for Global Health and Development (AIGHD) and the Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal). EGHRIN brings together around twenty leading global health research institutions. Guided by principles of equal partnership and rooted in an interdisciplinary approach, EGHRIN aims to deliver innovative responses to global health challenges, support advocacy initiatives, and contribute to national and European policy-making with the ultimate goal of ensuring healthy lives for all and reducing health disparities worldwide.

Beyond its engagement in networks, the University of Milan views equitable global engagement as embedded across the three core missions of academic institutions: **teaching and training, research, and knowledge valorization—also known as the “Third Mission”**. This encompasses all activities aimed at disseminating culture and knowledge and transferring research results beyond the academic community, thereby contributing to social and cultural development.

In the domain of teaching and education, UniMi offers Italy’s first Master in Global Health (MGH). Developed in collaboration with leading international universities and partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the MGH provides a multidisciplinary foundation and practical field experience to prepare future leaders and decision-makers in global health.

Teaching and training mobility between Global North and Global South universities is a key priority in the Strategic Plan of the University of Milan, which calls for consolidating existing partnerships and creating new ones in line with the needs, knowledge, and resources of each partner, while striving to minimize power asymmetries. The University has signed bilateral agreements with institutions in countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America etc., and aims to further expand partnerships with universities in the Global South.

In addition to academic mobility programs, collaboration with NGOs and health organizations operating in the Global South is equally important. The University of Milan has established multiple partnerships, creating internship and training opportunities that enrich participants both professionally and personally. Cooperation and partnerships at the University of Milan extend beyond education into the domain of research. The *Centre for Multidisciplinary Research in Global Health* (MAGH), established in 2019, is at the forefront of studies on infectious disease transmission, antimicrobial resistance, and the social determinants of health—including poverty, migration, access to healthcare, and global health policies. Most projects are carried out in collaboration with academic institutions, NGOs, and international organizations.

Under its **Third Mission**, the University of Milan leverages research-based knowledge to benefit society along three main trajectories: contributing to policy-making to ensure better and more inclusive access to healthcare and prevention; developing effective vaccines and treatments; and designing and implementing sustainable international cooperation projects. These activities integrate collaboration with a wide range of actors, including academic institutions, NGOs, private entities, and international organizations.

Building on its experience in education, research, and knowledge valorization - and attentive to the ongoing discourse on decolonization - the University of Milan recognizes the need to adopt guiding principles that ensure fair and just cooperation across all its global health initiatives.

Rationale

Despite good intentions, international collaborations - particularly those between institutions in high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) - can unintentionally

reproduce unequal power dynamics and colonial legacies. Without clear guidance, university-led global health initiatives risk becoming extractive, unsustainable, or paternalistic.

This policy document provides guidance for all members of the University of Milan involved in, or seeking to establish, collaborative activities with institutions in the Global South in the areas of research and education. Specifically, it aims to:

- Prevent inequitable, short-term, or donor-driven engagements.
- Promote long-term, co-designed partnerships that foster mutual capacity strengthening.
- Align the international activities of the University of Milan with global commitments to health equity, decolonization, and sustainable development.
- Embed principles of ethical, fair, and responsible collaboration into the institutional culture and governance of the University of Milan.
- Support collaborative efforts to improve policies both locally and internationally.
- Provide practical guidance and preparatory steps for the staff of the University of Milan engaging in global health cooperation.

Vision and values

Guiding Values for Ethical and Inclusive Global Health Engagement

The University of Milan envisions a model of global health engagement that is fair, ethical, inclusive, sustainable, and transformative. This vision is grounded in a set of values that reflect our understanding of the structural, relational, and epistemic dimensions of global health work. These values inform our principles and practices, shaping how we engage with partners, communities, and knowledge systems.

Equity and Justice

We acknowledge the deep-rooted inequities in global health and recognize the need to address asymmetries in resources, power, and influence. We affirm the importance of redressing historical injustices and promoting fairness in all aspects of collaboration.

Solidarity and Shared Responsibility

We recognize that global health challenges require collective action based on shared interests and responsibilities. Solidarity guides our efforts to support common goals and foster inclusive partnerships.

Subsidiarity and Local Relevance

We affirm that decisions and actions are most effective when taken at the most local and appropriate level. We value practical and contextual expertise and recognize that academic knowledge must be situated within local realities.

Do no harm

We are mindful of the potential unintended consequences of global health interventions. We seek to avoid creating new inequities, disrupting existing services, eroding local expertise, or fostering dependency.

Knowledge Sharing and Epistemic Justice

We believe in the equitable exchange of knowledge, technology, and skills. We recognize the legitimacy of diverse knowledge systems and challenge practices that marginalize local expertise or impose external frameworks.

Competence and Cultural Humility

We acknowledge the importance of equipping staff with the necessary knowledge, skills, and cultural awareness. We value the perspectives of all partners and recognize the limits of our own understanding.

Reciprocity and Recognition of Agency

We affirm the importance of mutual benefit, shared ownership, and co-responsibility. We begin with the recognition that communities are actively engaged in addressing their own challenges and that external support must respect local agency.

Transparency and Accountability

We uphold the principles of openness and responsibility in goal-setting, resource management, authorship, and decision-making. Institutional structures play a key role in ensuring ethical and effective collaboration.

Environmental Responsibility

We recognize the interdependence between ecosystems and human wellbeing. We integrate environmentally sustainable practices and support the protection of ecosystems.

Sustainability and Long-Term Engagement

We value enduring partnerships that strengthen local systems and capacities. We favor approaches that support gradual, internally driven change over externally imposed solutions.

These principles align with international declarations and guidelines - including the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the Accra Agenda for Action (2008), the Busan Partnership (2011), and WHO's Policy on Engagement with Global Health Partnerships (2010) - as well as the Strategic Plan of the University of Milan, which emphasizes equity, sustainability, and global citizenship in international engagement.

Decalogue of ethical collaboration in Global Health

To operationalize these values, UniMI adopts the following Decalogue—ten essential principles to guide staff involved in international cooperation and global health partnerships:

1. *We Co-Design and Share Leadership*
Our initiatives are co-developed from inception to evaluation in partnership with local institutions. We ensure inclusive decision-making and shared leadership throughout all phases of collaboration.
2. *We Respond to Local Priorities*
We align our initiatives with priorities identified by partner communities and countries. Our work responds to locally relevant health needs and supports context-specific, sustainable solutions in a spirit of solidarity with our local partners and their needs.
3. *We Strengthen Capacity Together*
We invest in institutional, technical, and human capacities—both within UniMI and among our partners. We foster reciprocal learning and long-term sustainability.
4. *We Challenge Inequitable and Gendered Power Structures*
We actively confront socially exclusive, racialized and gendered power dynamics in global

health. We promote the leadership, participation, and rights of women, girls, and gender-diverse (including non-binary) individuals, using inclusive and respectful language and practices.

5. *We Share Resources and Recognition Fairly*

We ensure equitable access to funding, infrastructure, and training opportunities. We recognize all contributors in outputs, follow ethical authorship guidelines, and support open-access publication for all collaborators.

6. *We Promote Inclusive and Ethical Knowledge Practices*

We support research that serves the interests of local communities, avoids extractive approaches, and acknowledges the leadership and agency of local practitioners and researchers.

7. *We Commit to Long-Term, Trust-based Partnerships*

We prioritize enduring, trust-based relationships over short-term interventions. We support gradual, internally driven change that strengthens local systems rather than imposing external solutions.

8. *We Conduct Culturally Sensitive and Ethical Research*

We follow international ethical standards and engage communities meaningfully throughout the research process. We respect autonomy, cultural diversity, and the rights of vulnerable groups.

9. *We Act with Environmental Responsibility and embrace a One Health Approach*

We integrate environmentally sustainable practices into all global health activities and adopt a One Health perspective that recognizes the interconnections between human, animal, and ecosystem health. We actively reduce ecological footprints, support the protection of ecosystems essential to health, and promote multisectoral collaboration to safeguard well-being at all levels.

10. *We Take Institutional Responsibility Seriously*

Tutte le collaborazioni sono sostenute e monitorate dalle strutture di governance dell'Università degli Studi di Milano. Forniamo al personale una formazione scientifica, tecnica, culturale, etica e linguistica adeguata per garantire un impegno internazionale responsabile e rispettoso.

Approvazione istituzionale e diffusione

L'Università degli Studi di Milano attua questa politica attraverso un approccio strutturato, trasparente e partecipativo volto a promuovere consapevolezza, responsabilità e competenze in tutta la comunità accademica.

Il presente documento di indirizzo, insieme al Decalogo, ha ricevuto l'approvazione formale dagli organi di governo dell'Ateneo: un passaggio importante che riflette l'impegno dell'Università degli Studi di Milano nella promozione di collaborazioni e partenariati responsabili ed etici nell'ambito della salute globale. La politica viene integrata nei quadri strategici dell'Ateneo, in particolare quelli relativi all'internazionalizzazione, alla ricerca e alle partnership globali.

L'Università degli Studi di Milano incoraggia il coinvolgimento attivo della leadership dei Dipartimenti per allineare le attività ai principi contenuti in questo documento e garantirne un'applicazione coerente in tutte le facoltà, i centri di ricerca e le unità affiliate. Questa responsabilità condivisa è essenziale per radicare la collaborazione etica nella cultura e nella pratica quotidiana dell'Ateneo.

L'Università degli Studi di Milano si impegna a diffondere ampiamente questo documento e il Decalogo attraverso canali di comunicazione interni ed esterni, tra cui il sito web dell'università, newsletter, social media ed eventi dedicati. Saranno, inoltre, organizzate regolarmente iniziative di sensibilizzazione, come workshop, seminari e conferenze pubbliche, per coinvolgere la comunità universitaria e stimolare un dialogo continuo sulla salute globale etica e responsabile.