

**"Sport Is Essential for Mental Health" –
Sir Mo Farah Leads Evidence-Based Call at World Health Assembly Side Event
Co-Hosted by the Commonwealth and WFSGI**

Four-time Olympic gold medallist joins Commonwealth Ministers of Health, WHO, Nike, ASICS and United for Global Mental Health in Geneva to make the evidence-based case for sport and physical activity as a key focus of youth mental health policy.

GENEVA, 20 MAY 2026 - The Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI) today co-hosted a high-level side event at the 79th World Health Assembly (WHA), bringing together government ministers, global health leaders, youth leaders and sporting goods industry representatives to make the evidence-based case for sport, physical activity and physical education as critical enablers of youth mental health.

Sir Mo Farah, four-time Olympic gold medallist, Save the Children Ambassador and National School Sport Champion, headlined the event, drawing on his own lived experience and his work through Mo's Mission to illustrate why keeping young people active is inseparable from keeping them mentally well.

"Being physically active isn't just about fitness or sport – it's about mental strength, confidence and feeling you belong. Sport gives young people confidence, connection and a positive outlet – and that's never been more important for their mental health." – **Sir Mo Farah, four-time Olympic Gold Medallist.**

The event, titled **"Building Resilient Futures: Unlocking the Power of Sport and Physical Activity for Youth Mental Health in the Commonwealth,"** was convened at a pivotal moment in global health policy, on the sidelines of the [2026 Inaugural Commonwealth Health Coordination Forum](#), in the build up to the [12th Commonwealth Sports Ministers Meeting](#) on 22 July 2026 in Glasgow, Scotland and the [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting \(CHOGM\)](#) in November 2026.

Dr Janneth Mghamba, Health Adviser at the Commonwealth Secretariat, said: *"Sport and physical activity play a vital role in promoting both physical and mental health, providing trusted, supportive environments where young people build resilience, enhance their wellbeing and connect to the support they need. Working with member governments, partners and young people, we can translate these areas of focus into tangible action in communities that strengthen health and well-being for all."*

The scale of the challenge is clear:

- Mental health conditions affect at least 13% of young people aged 10–19 globally.
- Anxiety and depression rose 25% in the wake of COVID-19.
- 81% of adolescents worldwide fail to meet recommended physical activity guidelines — a deficit most acute in lower-income Commonwealth countries.
- With 60% of the Commonwealth's 1.5 billion people under the age of 30, the intersection of sedentary lifestyles and declining mental health represents one of the defining public health challenges of this generation.



Yet the evidence for sport as a solution is equally compelling. Research presented at the event showed that regular physical activity can reduce symptoms of depression by up to 30%, improve cognitive function, build social connectedness and foster the resilience that protects young people across the life course. In settings where formal mental health services remain scarce or inaccessible, sport-based interventions are frequently the most viable first point of contact - a cost-effective, high-impact extension of the health system, not an add-on.

" Sport and physical activity are proven, scalable tools that can form a critical part of a holistic support system for youth mental health, helping them feel connected, valued and heard. As the industry that moves the world, we have a unique opportunity to support youth mental health by deepening cross-sector collaboration to meet young people where they already are with sport-related interventions and turn evidence into impact." - **Emma Zwiebler, CEO, World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry.**

Speakers from the sporting goods industry – including Caroline Fisher, Global Brand Communications Director at ASICS – presented case studies demonstrating how companies are deploying their global reach and youth-facing platforms to advance sport-based mental health initiatives beyond what governments can achieve alone. They were joined by Dr Mehr M. Adeel Riaz, Director of Youth Affairs at Gender Interactive Pakistan and WHO Youth Council member, Mr Gang Wang, Deputy Director General of the National Centre for Mental Health of China and Sarah Kline, CEO and Co-Founder, United for Global Mental Health.

The session ended with a call for co-sponsoring member states to commit to integrating sport for development and physical activity into national youth mental health strategies, with measurable targets embedded in a joint communiqué, building on the foundations of the 2022 CHOGM Dhaka-Kigali Mental Health Compact and the forthcoming 12th Commonwealth Sports Ministers Meeting (12CSMM) with the theme *'Reimagining the Power of Sport towards Healthier, Fairer and Equitable Commonwealth Communities'* thereby positioning sport as a tool for inclusive development.

In a fitting conclusion, government ministers and attendees cycled to their next WHA meeting courtesy of WFSGI member Specialized's Mobile Bike Unit, with Sir Mo Farah leading the way.

ENDS

About the Commonwealth

- The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 56 independent and equal sovereign states. Our combined population is 2.7 billion, of which more than 60 per cent is aged 30 or under.
- The Commonwealth spans the globe and includes both advanced economies and developing countries. Thirty-three of our members are small states, many of which are island nations.
- The Commonwealth Secretariat supports member countries to build democratic and inclusive institutions, strengthen governance and promote justice and human rights. Our work helps to grow economies and boost trade, deliver national resilience, empower young people, and address threats such as climate change, debt and inequality.



- Member countries are supported by a network of more than 80 intergovernmental, civil society, cultural and professional organisations. For more information and regular updates about Commonwealth activities and initiatives, subscribe to our monthly newsletter.

Press Contact

Acting Senior Communications Officer

Dr Ijeoma Onyeator - i.onyeator@commonwealth.int

About WFSGI

The World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI) is the global, not-for-profit trade association for the sporting goods industry. WFSGI is officially recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as the industry representative within the Olympic Movement. Our members comprise of sports and sports-inspired leisure brands, manufacturers, suppliers, retailers, national/regional federations, industry and trade associations. This represents approximately 70% of the global industry by annual turnover. The purpose of the WFSGI is to unite and support the global sporting goods industry, and ensure a healthier, more active planet for all.

www.wfsgi.org

Press Contact

WFSGI Head of Communications

Linda Murphy – lmurphy@wfsgi.org