

# HEALTHY LIFESTYLES TO BOOST SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Physical activity levels are declining rapidly in the Western World, and the consequences this might cause to society are many – low fitness levels create economic problems that heavily burden countries' budgets. The keynote speech, presented by Professors **Petri Tapio** and **Tommi Vasankari** at the Futures Conference 2022, addressed the present situation and possible future scenarios of physical activity, as well as the impacts on society – more specifically, Finnish society.

The low volume of physical activity costs 3.2 billion euros annually to Finland, and the high level of sedentary behaviour is responsible for another 1.5 billion euros burdening the Finnish society. The main goal of the STYLE project, led by Professor Petri Tapio, is to understand how different factors influence and can be used to boost physical activity and avoid sedentary lifestyles.

To wrap-up the keynote speech presented by Professors Tapio and Vasankari is that there is no fixed answer to the question of how to better tackle this growing challenge and that a mixed approach is needed to answer both individual and societal issues, with encouraging possibilities coming from the use of technology to track and increase physical activities on individuals.

## Drastic change in physical activity

The challenge of counteracting sedentary lifestyle is a tricky one, especially from the socio-logical perspective. As the data presented by Professor Vasankari on physical aptitude in Finnish army conscripts shows, physical fitness profiles have changed drastically in the

past decades, and recent results show that only 5% of recruits were considered to be in optimal physical condition, in comparison to a percentage almost five times higher in 1975. While this data leads to the conclusion that physical ability has decreased, it does not allude to the reasons behind the change.

As Professors Tapio and Vasankari discuss during their keynote, one obvious notion is that Finnish society as a whole changed drastically over the same period of time. Industrialisation and digitalisation increased the wealth of the Finnish society while rapid structural change, drastic technological advances and increased motorisation are major forces that made the worklife more physically passive. Already school children are taught from a young age to remain seated in class, molding their bodies and actions to reflect the rise of academic, mentally focused professions.

## Searching for sustainable solutions

This change in the very structure of Finnish society also exemplifies one of the major questions raised by Professor Tapio: should the solution be societal or focus on individuals? The four different scenarios developed in the

STYLE project show different perspectives and possible outcomes to that, not aiming to forecast a future but address different behaviours and changes in the societal context of physical activity. As Professor Vasankari mentions, the importance of futures studies and scenario planning is to help others to get a glimpse of what might happen – and plan accordingly. Yet, scenarios very often fail to address drastic societal changes, as Professor Tapio points out, and these might have a huge impact on physical activity. As the world moves towards a new logic of rapid, drastic changes, these previously gloomy perspectives might become the reality when it comes to understanding and preparing for change.

And there is always a possibility to change, as Professor Vasankari says. The same technology that creates sedentary lifestyles is the one that boosts people towards a more active life through data and information. Better decisions, be it in urban planning or lifestyle choices, are very much empowered by information that allows individuals and societies to make smart choices. ●

## TOMMI VASANKARI

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- Part-time Professor of Military Medicine at Faculty of Medicine and Health Technology, Tampere University.
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## PETRI TAPIO

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- Responsible teacher of the major subject of Futures Studies in the Turku School of Economics.
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