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Local Burden of Disease Anaemia Collaborators

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Anemia prevalence in women of reproductive age in low- and middle-income countries between 2000 and 2018

Damaris Kinyoki^{1,2}, Aaron E. Osgood-Zimmerman¹, Natalia V. Bhattacharjee¹, Local Burden of Disease Anaemia Collaborators*, Nicholas J. Kassebaum^{1,2,3,4} and Simon I. Hay^{1,2} 

Anemia is a globally widespread condition in women and is associated with reduced economic productivity and increased mortality worldwide. Here we map annual 2000–2018 geospatial estimates of anemia prevalence in women of reproductive age (15–49 years) across 82 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), stratify anemia by severity and aggregate results to policy-relevant administrative and national levels. Additionally, we provide subnational disparity analyses to provide a comprehensive overview of anemia prevalence inequalities within these countries and predict progress toward the World Health Organization’s Global Nutrition Target (WHO GNT) to reduce anemia by half by 2030. Our results demonstrate widespread moderate improvements in overall anemia prevalence but identify only three LMICs with a high probability of achieving the WHO GNT by 2030 at a national scale, and no LMIC is expected to achieve the target in all their subnational administrative units. Our maps show where large within-country disparities occur, as well as areas likely to fall short of the WHO GNT, offering precision public health tools so that adequate resource allocation and subsequent interventions can be targeted to the most vulnerable populations.

Anemia occurs when the number of healthy red blood cells is insufficient to meet the body’s physiological needs for oxygen delivery to the brain, heart, muscles and other vital tissues. Hemoglobin is the primary oxygen-carrying molecule within red blood cells, so anemia is most typically measured in terms of hemoglobin content of the blood rather than red blood cell volume^{1,2}. Anemia can reduce cognitive and physical capacities and is associated with reduced economic productivity^{3,4} and increased morbidity and all-cause mortality⁵. Maternal iron deficiency can lead to adverse pregnancy and newborn outcomes, including stillbirth, low birth weight and infant mortality⁶, and anemia in pregnancy has been suggested as a potential marker of increased risk of major hemorrhage⁷ and a risk factor for maternal death⁸.

Causes of anemia can be divided into three non-mutually exclusive pathways: blood loss, increased red blood cell destruction and inadequate red blood cell production. Blood loss can be acute due to events such as injuries, maternal hemorrhage or surgery, or it can be chronic, due to conditions such as gastrointestinal disorders, helminthic infections, bleeding disorders or abnormal uterine bleeding^{9,10}. Increased red blood cell destruction happens either as a consequence of abnormal red blood cell structure, such as in thalassaemia or sickle cell disease, or because of external mechanical, immune or infectious factors¹¹. Inadequate production of red blood cells can happen when the bone marrow itself is depressed, such as in HIV¹² or some malignancies; because there are hormonal imbalances, such as with chronic inflammation¹³ or due to increased demand (such as during pregnancy), nutrient malabsorption or inadequate supply of red blood cell building blocks, such as protein, iron, vitamin A¹⁴, folate or vitamin B-12 (ref. ¹⁵). Iron deficiency is often thought of as the most common cause of

anemia, which is true but also misleading, because absolute and/or functional iron deficiency can arise as a consequence of any of the three pathways and, therefore, as a consequence of multiple different causes. Women of reproductive age (WRA; ages 15–49 years) are at particularly increased risk of iron deficiency and, therefore, anemia, compared to men, due to physiological changes such as menstruation (blood loss pathway), pregnancy (inadequate production pathway due to increased demand) and bleeding in childbirth^{16,17}. Additionally, unequal household food allocation can make WRA vulnerable to anemia as they might not have access to iron-rich foods¹⁷.

Anemia continues to affect millions of women worldwide and remains concentrated in LMICs as defined by the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) Socio-Demographic Index (SDI)¹⁸. In 2019, 30.1% of WRA were estimated to have anemia globally, with wide geographical variation¹⁸, and dietary iron deficiency was among the highest-ranking conditions in both prevalence and years lived with disability (YLDs) among WRA in LMICs¹⁹. The WHO has set a GNT to reduce anemia in WRA by 50% by 2025 (refs. ^{2,20}); this target and other related WHO GNTs have since been extended to 2030 (ref. ²¹). In October 2019, the percentage of WRA with anemia was officially added as an indicator to track progress toward the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2.2 to end all forms of malnutrition by 2030 (refs. ^{22,23}). Although the WHO provides national-level anemia estimates and tracking tools, available reports do not show the subnational heterogeneity needed to inform within-country planning, annual changes to track progress or anemia severity stratifications^{20,24}. Maps of comparable estimates across space and time at policy-relevant administrative levels are vital to identify the most vulnerable populations, track progress toward international

¹Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA. ²Department of Health Metrics Sciences, School of Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA. ³Department of Anesthesiology & Pain Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA. ⁴Department of Global Health, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA. *A list of authors and their affiliations appears at the end of the paper. ✉e-mail: sihay@uw.edu

anemia goals and provide decision-makers and policy-makers with tools to aid targeted interventions.

This study is part of a series using high-spatial-resolution estimates to map progress toward the WHO GNTs^{25–27}. To perform this study, we compiled an extensive geo-positioned dataset from 218 surveys representing over 3 million women. Using Bayesian model-based geostatistics and the assumption that locations with similar socioeconomic and environmental patterns and proximity in time and space would have similar anemia levels, we produced estimates for all areas across 82 LMICs, even where data were sparse. The geospatial nature of our estimates also allows for the flexibility to aggregate to different (and sometimes changing) boundaries and catchment areas over the observation period.

Here we present annual geospatial estimates from 2000 to 2018 of prevalence and absolute counts of anemia of WRA (non-pregnant and pregnant combined), stratified by severity and aggregated to first-level (for example, provinces) and second-level (for example, districts) administrative units and national levels across 82 LMICs. Overall anemia was defined as $<12 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for non-pregnant WRA and $<11 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for pregnant WRA²⁸. Anemia severity categories are defined by the WHO: mild anemia ($11.0\text{--}11.9 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for non-pregnant WRA; $10.0\text{--}10.9 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for pregnant WRA), moderate anemia ($8.0\text{--}10.9 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for non-pregnant WRA; $7.0\text{--}9.9 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for pregnant WRA) and severe anemia ($<8.0 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for non-pregnant WRA; $<7.0 \text{ g dl}^{-1}$ for pregnant WRA). We also discuss our results in light of public health problem thresholds: no public health problem ($<5\%$ overall anemia prevalence), low public health problem ($5\text{--}19.9\%$ overall anemia prevalence), medium public health problem ($20\text{--}39.9\%$ overall anemia prevalence) and high public health problem ($\geq 40\%$ overall anemia prevalence)²⁸. We show annualized rates of change (AROCs) between 2000 and 2018 and estimate the probability of achieving the WHO GNT by 2025 and 2030 based on recent trends. Additionally, we provide subnational disparity analyses. These estimates can aid in focusing attention on exemplars of progress, highlighting subnational inequalities and identifying locations requiring further investments. The full suite of outputs from the analysis are publicly available on the Global Health Data Exchange (<http://ghdx.healthdata.org/record/ihme-data/global-anemia-prevalence-geospatial-estimates-2000-2019>) and via our interactive data visualization tool (<https://vizhub.healthdata.org/lbd/aneamia>).

Results

Prevalence and trends of overall anemia. The prevalence of overall anemia among WRA varied broadly across LMICs (Fig. 1a,b). In 2018, anemia prevalence was highest in West African, Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, including Gambia (50.3% (95% uncertainty interval: 43.3–57.5)), Senegal (47.3% (43.4–50.1)), Mali (47.6% (45.8–49.4)), Yemen (57.4% (50.9–63.8)) and India (49.9% (47.2–52.4)). The lowest national-level anemia prevalence in 2018 was found in Central America and the Caribbean, Andean South America and East Asia, including El Salvador (8.2% (3.6–16.1)), Colombia (9.2% (4.5–17.0)), Mexico (10.4% (7.3–15.3)) and China (11.1% (9.1–13.1)).

Gradual declines on a global scale indicate that little progress was seen in reducing anemia on a more local scale. Across the 82 LMICs, overall anemia among WRA decreased from 35.6% (25.7–46.9) in 2000 to 31.6% (25.2–39.1) in 2018. High levels of anemia remained widespread in 2018, with just over half (56.1%; 46 of 82) of LMICs with 20–39.9% prevalence of mean national-level overall anemia in 2018. On a subnational scale, 80 (97.6%) LMICs had at least one second administrative-level unit (hereafter ‘district’), and 38 (46.3%) LMICs had a majority of districts with 20–39.9% mean overall anemia prevalence. Over a quarter of LMICs (25.6%; 21 LMICs) had $>40\%$ mean national-level anemia in 2018, whereas 76 (92.7%) had at least one district, and 22 (26.8%) LMICs had most of their districts, with $>40\%$ mean overall anemia prevalence.

Anemia was at unacceptable levels ($>5\%$ prevalence)²⁸ in 99.7% (21,868 of 21,917) of districts across LMICs in 2000 and 98.9% (21,686 of 21,917) in 2018. (Fig. 1a,b). In 2000, 30.7% (6,725 of 21,917), 48.9% (10,726 of 21,917) and 20.1% (4,417 of 21,917) of subnational districts had low (5–19.9%), medium (20–39.9%) and high ($\geq 40\%$) public health threat levels of anemia among WRA²⁸, respectively (Extended Data Table 1). Global shifts led to 37.7% (8,273 of 21,917), 43.5% (9,523 of 21,917) and 17.7% (3,881 of 21,917) of districts having low, medium and high public health problem levels in anemia prevalence among WRA, respectively, in 2018. Only two countries (Peru and Ecuador) had districts that maintained levels below 5% prevalence of overall anemia in both 2000 and 2018. In Peru, 36 of 195 (19.5%) districts had overall anemia prevalence levels $<5\%$ in both 2000 and 2018, such as in San Román (Puno) in the south (2.3% (1.1–4.3) in 2000; 0.4% (0.2–0.7) in 2018); in Ecuador, only one of 223 (0.4%) districts mean estimates achieved $<5\%$ prevalence in both years: the centrally located Cevallos (Tungurahua) (4.4% (1.0–12.5) in 2000; 4.6% (1.2–11.4) in 2018). Although Mexico had 16 districts and Iran had two districts below public health problem levels ($<5\%$) in 2000, these districts exceeded 5% overall anemia prevalence in 2018. In 2018, only nine LMICs had at least one district with no public health problem in anemia ($<5\%$), including Bolivia (two of 114 districts), Colombia (13 of 1,065 districts), Ecuador (one of 223 districts), El Salvador (six of 266 districts), Guatemala (87 of 354 districts), Mexico (25 of 2,454 districts), Thailand (one of 928 districts) and Uganda (two of 203 districts). Peru has seen great success reducing childhood stunting²⁹, in part due to its targeted focus on those most in need—the poor, the more disadvantaged and rural populations—and some of this progress is mirrored in its low rates of anemia as demonstrated by half of its districts (57.9%; 113 of 195) having less than 5% mean overall anemia prevalence in 2018.

With few exceptions, we see that countries with the subnational units with the best anemia prevalence rates in 2000 continue to have administrative units that perform well in 2018, and likewise for countries with the worst-performing subnational units. To illustrate where these high and low pockets continue to be most pervasive and how their rates of change contribute to maintaining this relative status, we overlaid the highest and lowest deciles for prevalence (Fig. 1a,b) and AROCs (Fig. 1d) for overall anemia among WRA across LMICs to simultaneously show the best- and worst-performing districts as defined by both of these measures over the study period (Fig. 1c). Much of Central and South America had districts with the lowest levels of prevalence of overall anemia in 2000 and 2018, with some areas experiencing the largest decreases over time (largest AROCs), including in western Colombia and central and southern Peru. Much of Mexico and El Salvador, as well as districts in western Honduras, central Ecuador and select districts in eastern Brazil, also had among the lowest prevalence levels in both years, whereas western Bolivia and western Guatemala experienced some of the largest declines in the period that led to their place among the lowest decile of anemia prevalence in 2018. Within these same countries, however, there were also districts with the highest prevalence levels and/or largest increases or stagnating trends in anemia (smallest AROC) between 2000 and 2018. Districts in southern Mexico, eastern Honduras, eastern Venezuela and eastern Colombia had among the lowest prevalence levels in 2000, but increases pushed these districts out of the lowest prevalence decile by 2018. Eastern Guatemala, eastern Ecuador and northern Bolivia had among the highest prevalence levels in both 2000 and 2018. In Asia, northern Vietnam and large stretches of China experienced some of the largest declines and had the lowest levels of anemia prevalence. Districts throughout Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India and Papua New Guinea and in northern Myanmar, however, saw the highest consistent prevalence, and the centers of Laos and India and parts of Afghanistan experienced among the largest increases or stagnating trends (smallest

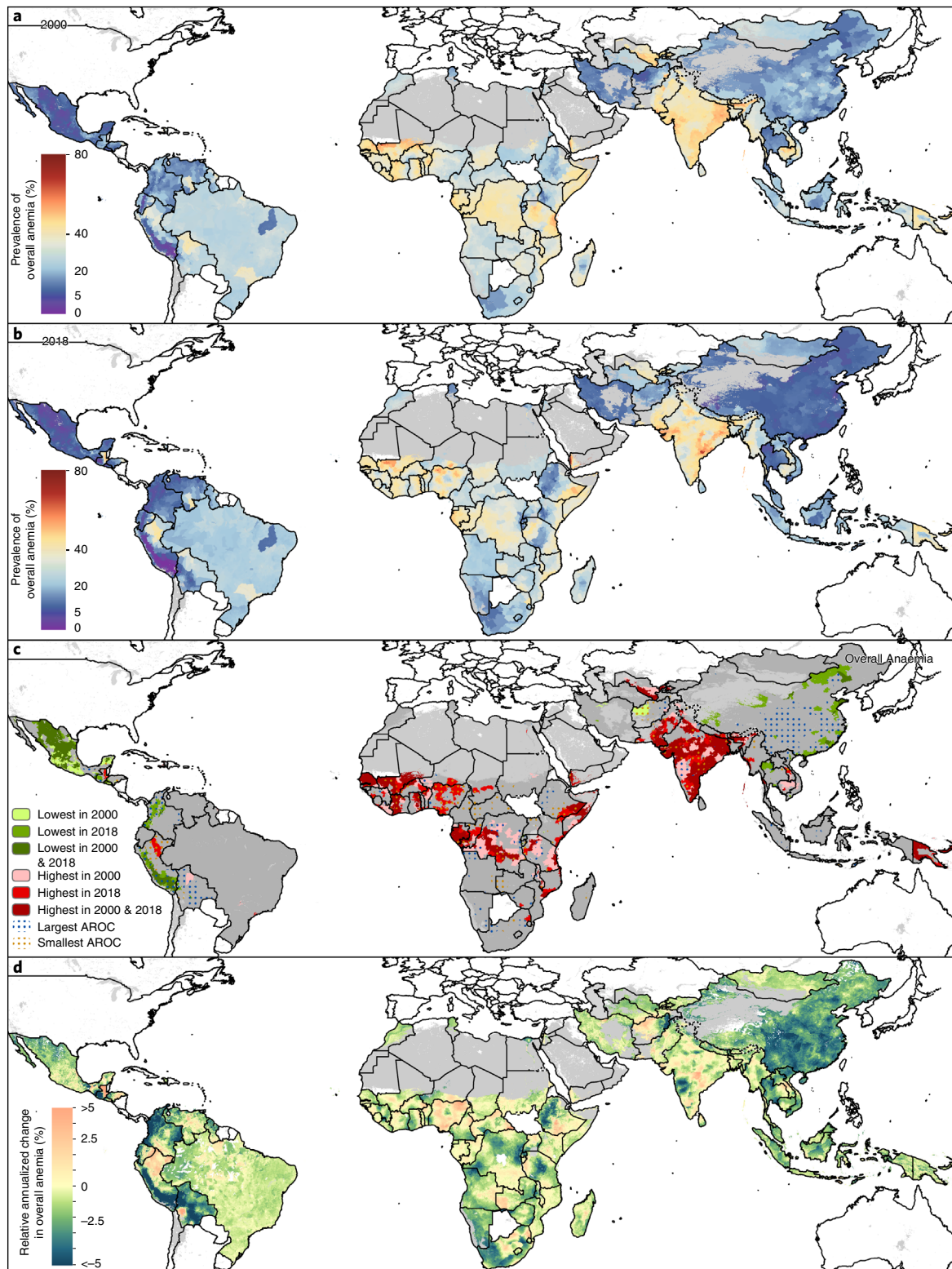


Fig. 1 | Prevalence and AROCs of overall anemia in WRA (2000–2018). **a, b**, Prevalence of overall anemia among WRA (ages 15–49) at the second administrative unit (for example, district) level in 2000 (**a**) and 2018 (**b**). **c**, Overlapping population-weighted highest and lowest (10th and 90th deciles) prevalence and AROCs between 2000 and 2018. Largest AROC indicates where largest decreases in overall anemia prevalence from 2000 to 2018 occurred, whereas smallest AROC indicates where the largest increases (or smallest decreases or stagnation) in overall anemia prevalence from 2000 to 2018 occurred. **d**, Weighted annualized percentage of change of overall anemia prevalence in WRA from 2000 to 2018. Maps reflect administrative boundaries, land cover, lakes and population; gray-colored grid cells had fewer than ten people per 1×1-km grid cell and were classified as ‘barren or sparsely vegetated’, whereas white-colored grid cells were not included in this analysis^{42–47}.

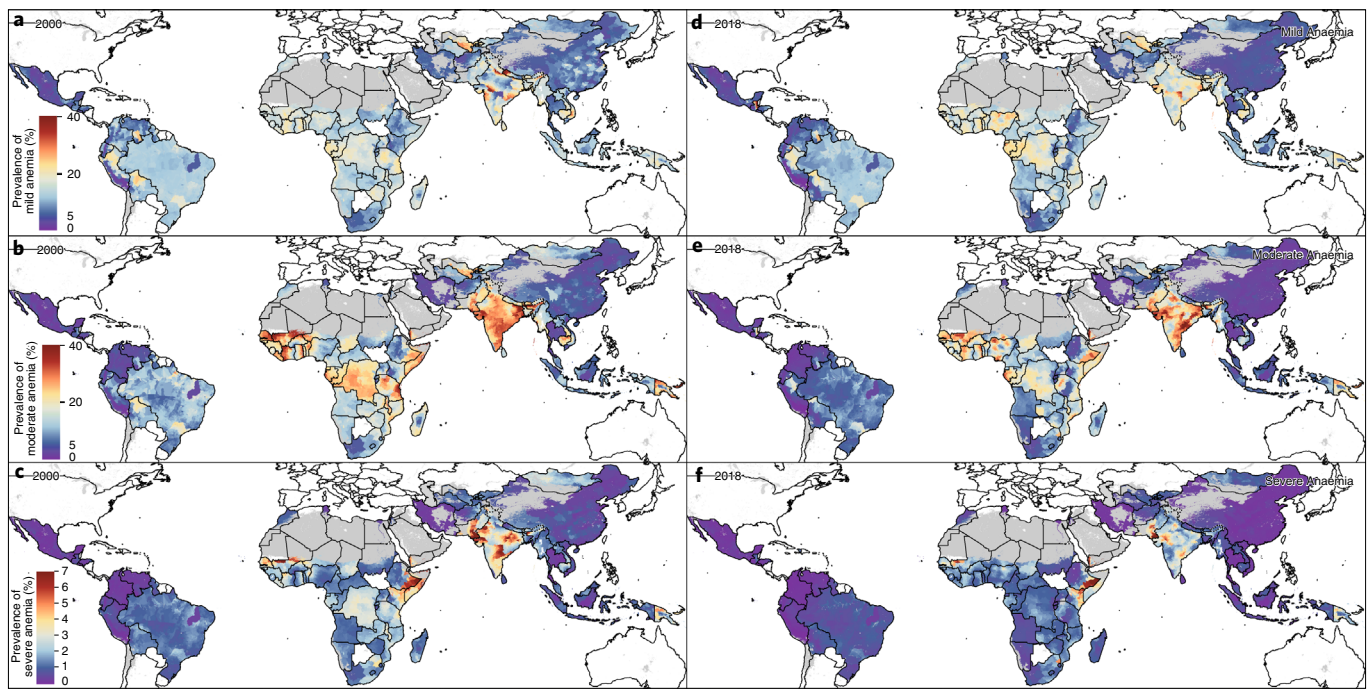


Fig. 2 | Prevalence of anemia in WRA by severity in LMICs (2000 and 2018). a–f, Prevalence of anemia stratified by severity among WRA (ages 15–49) at the second administrative unit (for example, district) level. Prevalence of mild anemia among WRA in 2000 (a) and 2018 (d). Prevalence of moderate anemia among WRA in 2000 (b) and 2018 (e). Prevalence of severe anemia among WRA in 2000 (c) and 2018 (f). See Supplementary Table 7 for the cutoffs defining mild, moderate and severe anemia. Maps reflect administrative boundaries, land cover, lakes and population; gray-colored grid cells had fewer than ten people per 1×1 -km grid cell and were classified as ‘barren or sparsely vegetated’, whereas white-colored grid cells were not included in this analysis^{42–47}.

AROC). Several African countries had among the highest levels of anemia in both years, including Senegal, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, eastern Ghana, southern Benin, central Niger, Nigeria, Gabon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Egypt, and the belt across the Sahel witnessed some of the worst stagnation. No African districts ranked among the lowest decile of anemia prevalence, but there were areas in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa and a few other select districts that experienced some of the fastest decreases.

Overall, 71 (86.6%) LMICs experienced decreases in mean anemia prevalence in most of their districts over the 2000–2018 period, and seven (8.5%) LMICs (Cape Verde, China, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Namibia, Tunisia and Turkmenistan) had annualized improvements (declines) in all districts. Increases in overall anemia prevalence were experienced in the majority of districts in nine LMICs (Burundi, Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Tajikistan and Yemen), and no countries experienced increases in all their districts. Many countries experienced extreme differences in their rates of change across their subnational units: 57 (69.5%) LMICs had at least 2.5% annualized decreases and increases across their districts, whereas 18 (22.0%) LMICs had districts with at least 5% AROC in both directions.

Prevalence and trends of anemia by severity. Mean prevalence of moderate and severe anemia had reduced in the majority (84.1%; 18,441 of 21,917) of districts across LMICs between 2000 and 2018 (Fig. 2). In almost a quarter of the districts in which moderate and severe anemia had declined (24.5%; 4,526 of 18,441 across 79 LMICs), mild anemia had increased, indicating a downward shift in severity levels over the populations. Among these, three-quarters (76.0%; 3,476 of 4,562) saw decreases in overall anemia, suggesting an overall shift toward normal levels of hemoglobin regardless of

the historical baseline and in spite of the observed increased prevalence of mild anemia. This is further corroborated by the remaining 13,915 districts, which experienced decreases in moderate, severe and mild anemia. Among the districts that saw increases in prevalence of moderate and severe anemia (15.9%; 3,476 of 21,917), 91.3% (3,175 of 3,476 in 57 LMICs) experienced increases in overall anaemia, indicating a population-wide shift toward reduced hemoglobin levels. This was seen particularly in Yemen and Nigeria, where 81.7% (272 of 333) and 68.8% (533 of 775) of their districts, respectively, saw increases in overall, moderate and severe anemia. In contrast, only 276 districts saw increases in moderate and severe anemia but decreases in overall anemia, possibly indicating a sub-population that has been left behind while the majority trend is toward non-anemic hemoglobin levels. Of note, Papua New Guinea and Burkina Faso experienced this divergent trend where 11.5% (10 of 87) and 11.1% (5 of 45) of their districts, respectively, saw increases in the prevalence of moderate and severe anemia while overall anemia decreased. Our stratified maps of the highest- and lowest-decile districts for prevalence and AROC for mild, moderate and severe anemia offer a detailed view of these shifts in severity across and within LMICs over time (Extended Data Fig. 1).

Absolute and relative geographic inequalities of anemia. In addition to the overall trend toward lower levels of anemia prevalence, the heterogeneity of district-level anemia prevalence and, thus, subnational inequality has decreased over the last two decades. By plotting the absolute geographic inequalities (Fig. 3a), we show the range of overall anemia prevalence among each country’s districts in 2000 and 2018. Subnational inequalities between districts with the highest and lowest anemia prevalence in each country have increased in most (65.9%; 54 of 82) LMICs over the study period. Absolute inequalities among districts as well as national median anemia prevalence increased in six countries during the period from 2000

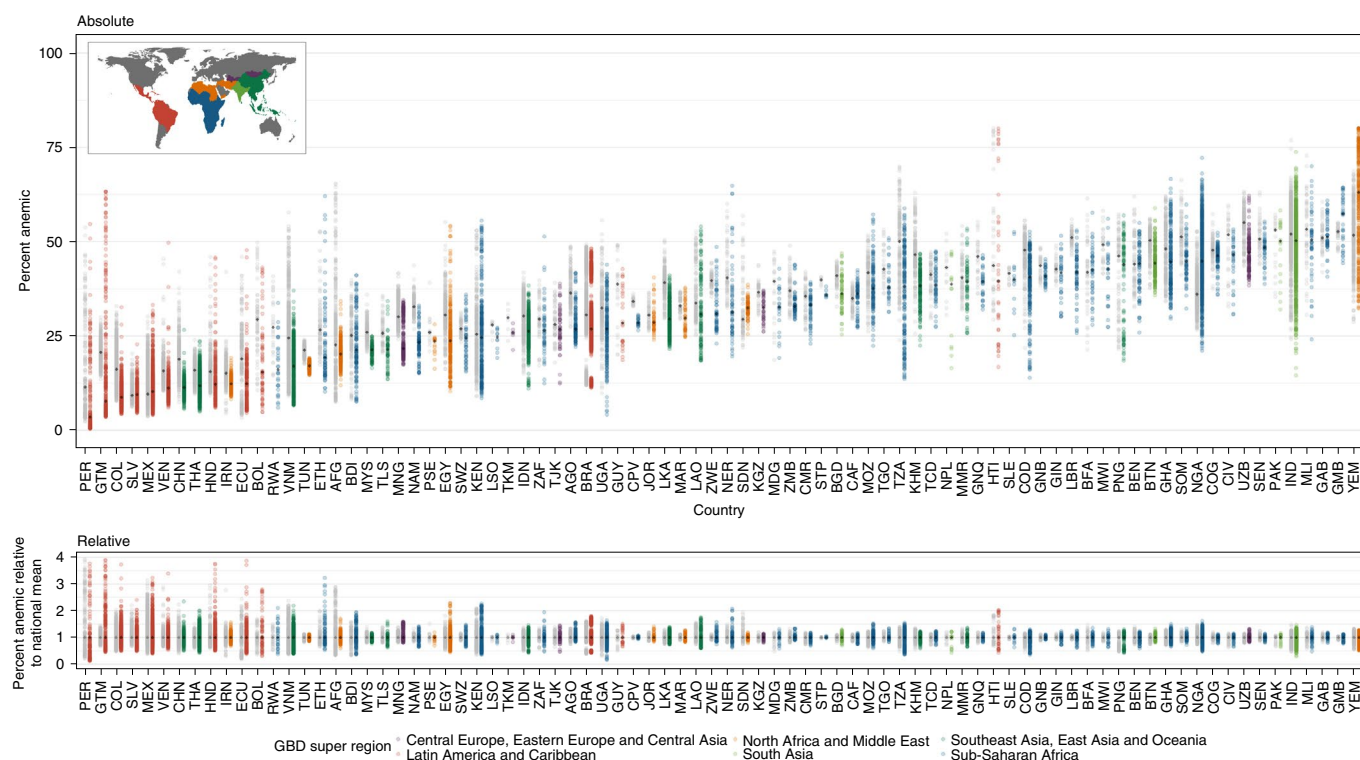


Fig. 3 | Geographical inequality in overall anemia among WRA across 82 countries for 2000 and 2018. **a**, Absolute inequalities: range of overall anemia estimates in WRA in second administrative-level units within 82 LMICs. **b**, Relative inequalities: range of ratios of overall anemia estimates in WRA in second administrative-level units relative to country means (administrative level/country level). Each dot represents a second administrative-level unit. The lower bound of each bar represents the second administrative-level unit with the lowest overall anemia in WRA in each country. The upper end of each bar represents the second administrative-level unit with the highest overall anemia in WRA in each country. Thus, each bar represents the extent of geographic inequality in overall anemia in WRA estimated for each country. Bars indicating the range in 2018 are colored according to their GBD super-region⁴⁸ (Extended Data Fig. 3). Gray bars indicate the range in overall anemia in WRA in 2000. The black diamond in each bar represents the median and mean overall anemia in WRA estimated across second administrative-level units in each country and year for the absolute (median) and relative (mean) inequalities plots. A colored bar that is shorter than its gray counterpart indicates that geographic inequality has narrowed.

to 2018: Yemen (2.4-fold to 2.6-fold difference; 51.7% (34.0–68.6%) to 63.0% (50.9–74.3%) national median prevalence); Gambia (1.2-fold to 1.5-fold difference; 52.7% (30.4–74.7%) to 637.4% (47.4–66.2%)); Nigeria (2.0-fold to 3.4-fold difference; 36.1% (17.4–58.4%) to 44.8% (37.2–66.2%)); Central African Republic (1.3-fold to 1.6-fold difference; 35.0% (19.5–53.5%) to 36.2% (20.4–54.2%)); El Salvador (3.3-fold to 5.0-fold difference; 9.2% (4.6–16.8%) to 9.5% (3.1–21.4%)); and Gabon (1.4-fold to 1.5-fold difference; 51.0% (32.2–70.5%) to 51.2% (33.8–67.9%)). Although absolute inequalities had also increased in the other 48 LMICs, national median anemia prevalence decreased in these countries, indicating select exemplar districts that made progress and/or districts that were left behind in national progress. Overall, 28 LMICs reduced absolute inequalities as well as their national median anemia prevalence; most notably, China had reduced absolute inequalities from 5.6-fold to 4.7-fold across its districts, reducing its national median from 18.8% (10.2–30.9%) to 11.4% (4.4–22.7%) between 2000 and 2018. In 2000, 19 LMICs experienced ≥ 3 -fold difference in overall anemia, and six LMICs experienced ≥ 6 -fold difference in overall anemia (Afghanistan, Ecuador, Iran, Mexico, Peru and Vietnam); in 2018, 30 LMICs had ≥ 3 -fold difference, and 11 LMICs had ≥ 6 -fold difference, across districts (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Mexico, Peru, Uganda and Venezuela) (Supplementary Table 10).

Our relative inequality plot shows the relative deviation of each country's districts from their national mean anemia prevalence (Fig. 3b). To elucidate these within-country differences, consider

that, in 2000, overall anemia prevalence varied across the national level by as much as 5.8-fold (9.5% (6.4–13.7%) in El Salvador; 55.5% (41.4–69.4%) in Gabon), and, in 2018, overall anemia varied by as much as 7.0-fold at the national level (8.2% (3.5–16.3%) in El Salvador; 57.4% (51.4–63.5%) in Yemen). Within-country relative inequalities in overall anemia increased in 63 LMICs between 2000 and 2018, with some of the most apparent deviations in Guatemala, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Thailand, Ethiopia, Egypt and Tajikistan; 19 LMICs experienced decreases in relative inequalities, including Iran, Vietnam, Palestine and Sudan. Although many of the countries with large subnational disparities in anemia prevalence could use the results from this study to efficiently target precision public health interventions where they are most needed, there is a second set of countries that had low subnational inequalities and high national prevalence, indicating a pervasive problem where ubiquitous intervention coverage is warranted. In 2018, among the 21 countries that qualified as high public health problems with a national mean overall anemia prevalence above 40%, four of these countries had low relative inequalities ranging from 75% to 125% of the national median: Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Republic of Congo and Senegal.

Population size, severity and disability burden of anemia. Of the estimated 1.2 billion WRA across the 82 LMICs represented by our analysis in 2000, we estimate that 378.3 million (95% uncertainty interval: 308.0–456.0) (32.8% (26.7–39.5)) of WRA were anemic (Extended Data Fig. 2a). Of these, 178.4 million (134.6–231.8) or

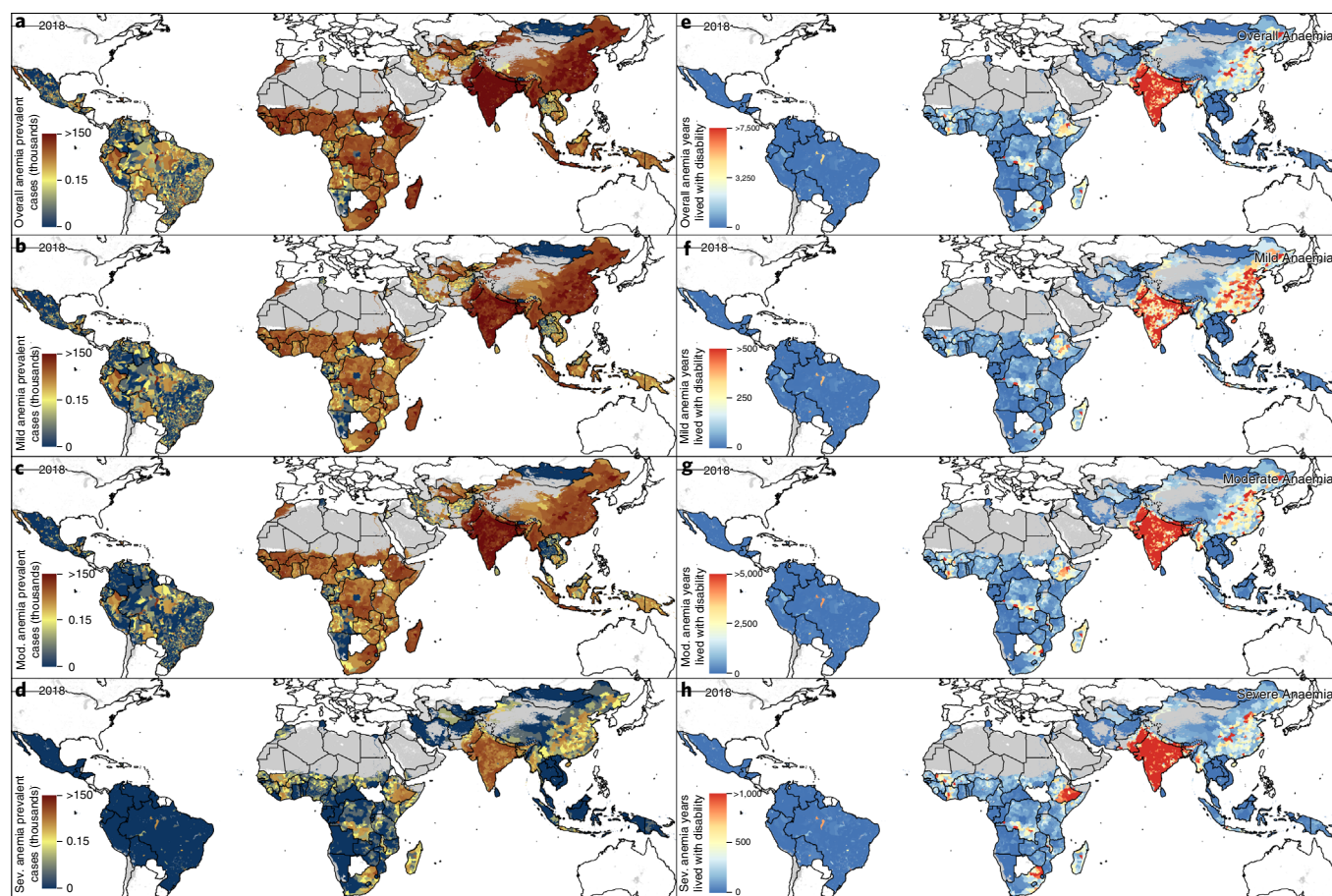


Fig. 4 | Counts and YLDs by anemia severity among WRA across LMICs in 2018. **a–d**, Number of WRA across 82 LMICs with overall **(a)**, mild **(b)**, moderate **(c)** and severe **(d)** anemia in 2018 by second administrative-level units. **e–h**, Number of YLDs among WRA attributable to overall **(e)**, mild **(f)**, moderate **(g)** and severe **(h)** anemia in 2018 by second administrative-level units. Maps reflect administrative boundaries, land cover, lakes and population; gray-colored grid cells had fewer than ten people per 1×1-km grid cell and were classified as ‘barren or sparsely vegetated’, whereas white-colored grid cells were not included in this analysis^{42–47}.

47.2% (43.7–50.8) were categorized as having mild anemia, whereas 182.4 million (138.1–234.5) or 48.2% (44.9–51.4) were moderate anemia cases, and 17.4 million (11.2–26.3) or 4.6% (3.6–5.8) were severe anemia cases (Extended Data Fig. 2b–d). In 2018, of the 1.5 billion WRA represented by our analysis, 449.1 million (382.4–526.9) (30.4% (25.9–35.6)) were estimated to be anemic—224.8 million (180.9–275.7) (50.1% (47.3–52.3%)) with mild cases of anemia, 208.1 million (173.1–247.3) (46.3% (45.3–46.9)) with moderate cases of anemia, and 16.1 million (12.2–21.3) (3.6% (3.2–4.0)) with severe cases of anemia (Fig. 4a–d).

A large proportion of anemic WRA were concentrated in a few countries in 2018; 83.0% (81.0–85.3) of overall anemia occurred in the Asian (61.7% (60.9–62.9)) and sub-Saharan African (21.3% (20.1–22.4)) regions (Fig. 4a). An estimated 59.6% (55.6–63.2) of anemic WRA, amounting to an estimated 267.5 million (241.5–293.2) cases across LMICs, lived in just four countries in 2018: India (181.3 million (171.4–190.2) cases; 40.4% (36.1–44.8) of anemia burden), China (39.5 million (32.3–46.9)); 8.8% (8.9–8.5)), Pakistan (23.8 million (15.3–32.6); 5.3% (4.0–6.2)) and Nigeria (23.0 million (22.5–23.5); 5.1% (5.9–4.5)). In 2018, we estimated that 65.2% (14,292 of 21,917) of districts contained fewer than 5,000 anemic WRA, 14.6% (3,199 of 21,917) with 5,000–14,999, 12.4% (2,716 of 21,917) with 15,000–49,999, 4.5% (991 of 21,917) with 50,000–150,000 and 1.7% (377 of 21,917) with 150,000–250,000, and 1.7% (374 of 21,917) had more than 250,000 WRA with any severity of anemia (Supplementary Table 12). The 374

districts that had more than 250,000 anemic WRA each were in 22 LMICs: Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, China, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Morocco, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, South Africa, Tanzania and Togo. Across the 1,545 first administrative-level units (hereafter ‘provinces’) in the 82 LMICs, 66 provinces located in 12 LMICs (Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan and South Africa) each had 1 million or more anemic WRA in 2018. All five of the provinces with the highest estimated number of WRA with anemia in 2018 were in India and Pakistan: Uttar Pradesh in India (29.0 million (26.3–31.5)), Bihar in India (15.8 million (14.4–17.1)), West Bengal in India (15.5 million (14.4–16.6)), Maharashtra in India (15.4 million (13.4–17.2)) and Punjab in Pakistan (12.6 million (6.8–18.8)).

Stratifying by severity, an estimated 57.9% (55.1–60.9) of moderately or severely anemic WRA lived in only three countries in 2018: India (103.4 million (94.2–112.7) cases; 46.1% (41.9–50.8%) of moderate or severe WRA anemia cases), Pakistan (13.4 million (8.5–19.0) cases; 6.0% (4.6–7.1%)) and China (13.0 million (10.2–16.5) cases; 5.8% (5.5–6.1%)) (Fig. 4c,d). We found that 133 districts had more than 250,000 WRA with moderate or severe anemia in 2018, located in nine LMICs: Bangladesh (two districts), Brazil (one district), China (one district), Côte d’Ivoire (one district), Democratic Republic of the Congo (one district), India (118 districts), Nepal (one district), Pakistan (seven districts) and Peru

(one district). The five provinces with the highest estimated numbers of moderate or severe WRA in 2018 were also all in India and Pakistan: Uttar Pradesh in India (16.7 million (14.7–19.0)), Bihar in India (9.4 million (8.4–10.5)), Maharashtra in India (8.2 million (6.7–9.8)), West Bengal in India (8.1 million (7.2–9.2)) and Punjab in Pakistan (6.9 million (3.7–10.6)).

Multiplying counts in each anemia severity category with the appropriate disability weights from the GBD study³⁰ allowed us to visualize where the majority of YLDs (attributable burden) due to anemia among WRA have been most concentrated in LMICs and how it has reduced over time (Extended Data Fig. 2e–h and Fig. 4e–h). Overall anemia contributed 12.7 million (5.9–22.2) YLDs in 2000, with 0.7 million (0.3–1.1), 9.4 million (4.7–15.4) and 2.6 million (0.9–5.7) YLDs from mild, moderate and severe anaemia, respectively (Extended Data Fig. 2e–h). By 2018, YLDs had increased to 14.0 million (9.0–20.4) overall; mild, moderate and severe anaemia increased to 0.8 million (0.5–1.3), 10.7 million (7.2–15.1) and reduced to 2.4 million (1.3–4.1) YLDs, respectively (Fig. 4e–h). In 2018, 0.7% (145 of 21,917) of districts each contributed more than 15,000 YLDs due to overall anemia among WRA; these districts were in just nine LMICs: Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Peru. Districts with over 5,000 YLDs attributed to overall anemia among WRA (3.1% (677 of 21,917)) were in 33 LMICs. The three countries with the most YLDs from overall anemia among WRA in 2018 were India (6.43 million (5.80–7.11) YLDs), Pakistan (0.85 million (0.53–1.21) YLDs) and China (0.83 million (0.65–1.06) YLDs). In 2018, 532 of 21,917 districts across 30 LMICs contributed more than half of YLDs (7.0 million (4.8–9.6)) attributed to overall anemia across the 82 LMICs in this analysis.

Between 2000 and 2018, the majority of districts across LMICs experienced reductions in estimates of YLDs attributable to moderate anemia (54.1%; 11,859 of 21,917 districts) and severe anemia (67.9%; 14,876 of 21,917 districts) among WRA (Extended Data Fig. 2g,h and Fig. 4g,h). This progress in reducing YLDs due to moderate and severe anemia was especially evident in China (1.74 million (1.40–2.17) YLDs in 2000 and 0.74 million (0.57–0.95) in 2018; declines in 359 of 364 districts). In 10,078 districts located across all 82 LMICs, however, YLDs from moderate anemia increased, including in 12 countries where all districts experienced increases: Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Jordan, Mali, Pakistan, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Yemen. The YLDs from severe anemia increased in 7,061 districts across 79 LMICs, including in Yemen (332 of 333 districts), Burkina Faso (44 of 45 districts), Chad (53 of 55 districts) and Jordan (48 of 52 districts). The district with the largest increase in YLDs from moderate anemia was Bangalore (Karnataka) in India, with 23,003 (7,665–44,041) YLDs in 2000 and 43,497 (30,063–57,816) YLDs in 2018. The largest increase in YLDs from severe anemia was in Bijnor (Uttar Pradesh) in India, with 791 (282–1,627) YLDs in 2000 and 6,884 (4,767–9,476) YLDs in 2018.

Prospects of meeting 2030 WHO GNT. We applied the estimated AROCs to the final year of our estimates to predicted anemia prevalence estimates for the year 2030 (Fig. 5a). In 2018, 29 of 21,917 districts had >80% mean prevalence of overall anemia; if current trends continue, 100 districts across Guatemala (11 districts), Haiti (seven districts), India (two districts), Nigeria (four districts) and Yemen (76 districts) are estimated to reach >80% mean prevalence for overall anemia among WRA by 2030. Subnational inequalities in Guatemala are expected to continue, and, although 17 northeastern districts are projected to reach >75% prevalence by 2030, 179 southwestern districts are expected to reduce to below 5% prevalence, considered acceptable levels of anemia. Including Guatemala, we estimate that districts in 15 LMICs will have less than 5% prevalence in overall anemia by 2030: Afghanistan (1 of 399 districts), Bolivia

(16 of 117), China (2 of 364), Colombia (123 of 1,065), Ecuador (1 of 223), El Salvador (32 of 266), Guatemala (179 of 354), Honduras (13 of 298), Mexico (31 of 2,454), Peru (120 of 195), Rwanda (3 of 30), Thailand (28 of 928), Uganda (4 of 203), Venezuela (1 of 338) and Vietnam (1 of 710). Based on current projections, we expect that 21 LMICs will maintain high national levels of overall anemia ($\geq 40\%$) in 2030; on a subnational scale, 16.4% (3,594 of 21,917) of districts located in 61 LMICs are estimated to have $\geq 40\%$ anemia prevalence in 2030 if existing trajectories continue.

Assuming that recent trends persist, and using the year 2012 (the year that WHO GNTs were established) as a baseline, we estimated the probability of subnational units across LMICs achieving the WHO GNT to relatively reduce anemia by 50% by the year 2030 (Fig. 5b). By 2030, only three of the 82 (3.7%) LMICs in this analysis are expected to achieve the target of 16.2% at a national scale with a high probability (>95% posterior probability): China, Iran and Thailand. Subnationally, however, no countries have a high probability of meeting the WHO GNT for anemia in all provinces, nor in all their districts, by the target year. About a third (31.7%; 26 of 82) of LMICs have a high probability (>95%) of meeting the target in at least one district, whereas only three LMICs (Guatemala, Iran and Peru) have a high probability of meeting the goal in most districts. We expect far more LMICs to have a low probability (<5% posterior probability) of achieving the target nationally and subnationally. By 2030, 64.6% (53 of 82) of LMICs have a low probability (<5%) of meeting the WHO GNT nationally, whereas 21.2% (18) have a low probability in all provinces, and four LMICs (Gabon, Gambia, Senegal and Togo) have a low probability of meeting the target in all their districts. Although 15 (18.3%) LMICs have a >50% probability of achieving the WHO GNT by 2030 nationally, five (6.1%) LMICs have >50% probability of achieving the target in all their province-level units, and only Tunisia has >50% probability of meeting the goal in all its district-level units by 2030.

Large inequalities in achieving the WHO GNT are expected to continue, and 56.1% (46 of 82) of LMICs are predicted to have districts with both >50% and <50% probability of meeting the goal by 2030. We estimate that 20 LMICs have districts with both high probability (>95%) and low probability (<5%) of achieving the WHO GNT by 2030.

Discussion

Marginal declines in anemia prevalence among WRA in LMICs have left individuals, populations and nations at risk of reduced economic productivity^{3,4}, increased all-cause mortality⁵ and increased potential for adverse outcomes for mothers and newborns³¹. Although most district-level units (80.5%; 17,651 of 21,917 districts) decreased their prevalence between 2000 and 2018, the overall prevalence among the 82 LMICs in our analysis has only declined, from 35.6% (95% uncertainty interval: 25.9–46.6) to 31.6% (25.7–38.2) in the nearly 20-year period. Even for the many countries with overall improvements in reducing anemia prevalence, our results highlight enduring disparities across global geographic regions and within select countries and subnational locations that have stagnated or fallen behind the general improvements of their neighbors. Although three LMICs (China, Iran and Thailand) have a high probability of meeting the WHO GNT of reducing anemia among WRA by 50% by the year 2030, no LMIC is predicted to meet the target in all provinces or all districts. Most LMICs (64.6%; 53 LMICs) have a low probability (<5%) of meeting the target even on a national scale. Broad inequalities are expected to continue into 2030; we estimate that 20 LMICs have districts with a high probability of meeting the target as well as districts with a low probability of meeting the target. Furthermore, population growth during this period has led to substantial increases in the number of WRA affected by anemia in various locations. Although the overall number of prevalence of anemia in WRA has decreased, growing popu-

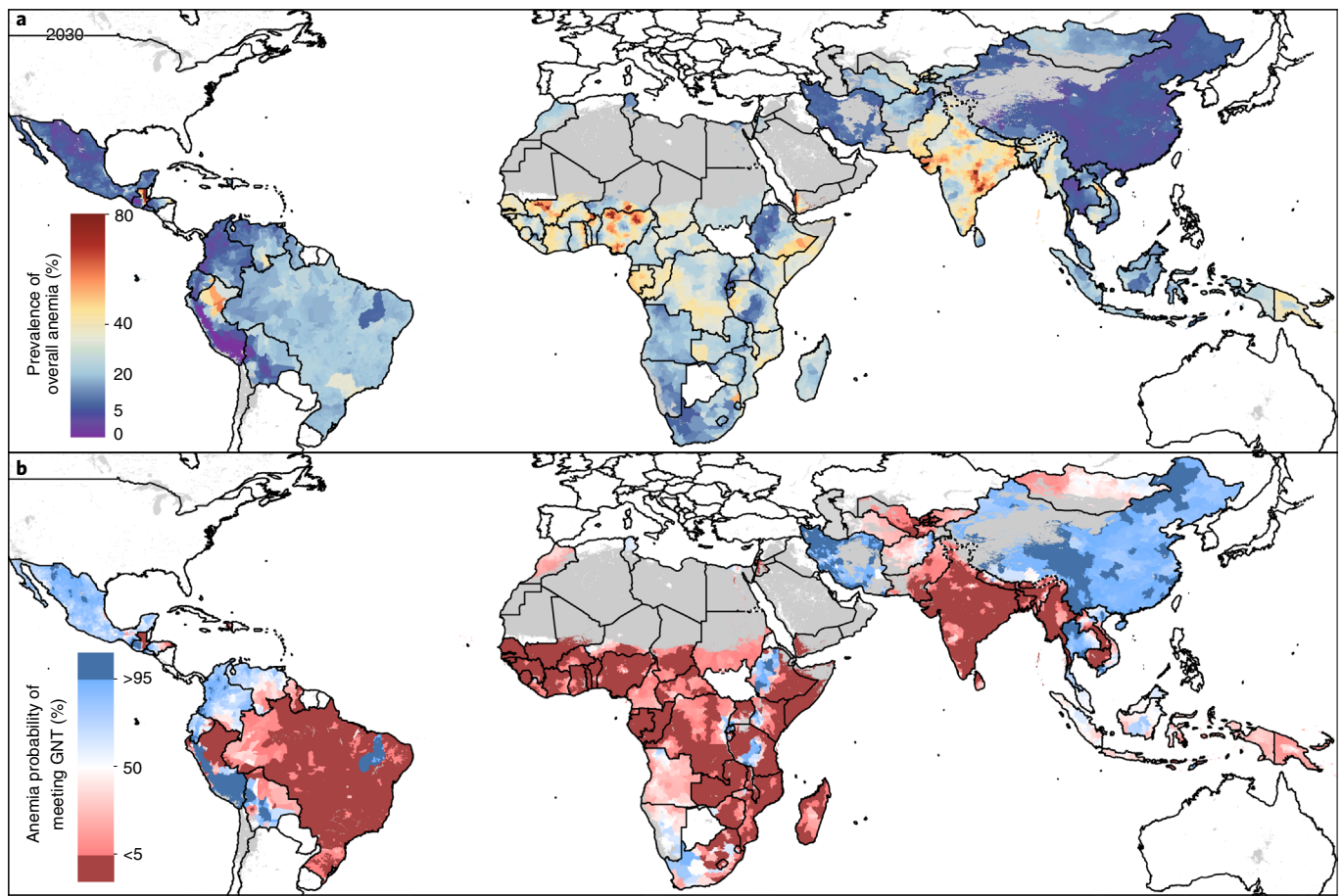


Fig. 5 | Prevalence for overall anemia among WRA in 2030 and probability of achieving the WHO GNT for overall anemia by 2030. a, Predicted prevalence of overall anemia among WRA in 2030 by second administrative-level units. **b,** Probability of achievement of the WHO GNT to reduce overall anemia in WRA by 50% by the year 2030, with the year 2012 as a baseline, by second administrative-level units. Maps reflect administrative boundaries, land cover, lakes and population; gray-colored grid cells had fewer than ten people per 1×1 -km grid cell and were classified as 'barren or sparsely vegetated' or were not included in this analysis^{42–47}.

lations have caused the number of anemic WRA to increase from 378.3 million to 449.1 million, with the largest increases in Central Asia and western, central and eastern sub-Saharan Africa (54.7% increase: 20.2–31.3 million; 88.0% increase: 24.6–46.2 million; 53.1% increase: 7.6–11.6 million; and 51.8% increase: 20.9–31.8 million, respectively), offsetting the large decreases seen in East Asia and Andean South America (44.1% decrease: 70.9–39.6 million and 13.7% decrease: 5.6–4.8 million, respectively).

The multitude of different diseases and injuries, nutritional and behavioral risk factors and sociodemographic factors that can lead to anemia mandate inter- and multi-sectorial approaches involving stakeholders and actors in the public and private sectors and coordination across food systems and health-related sectors if large-scale reductions in anemia prevalence are to be achieved^{2,16}. GBD 2019 estimated the top-ranked global causes of anemia in WRA to be, in order, dietary iron deficiency; thalassaemia trait; sickle cell trait; menstrual disorders; endocrine, metabolic, blood and immune disorders; and malaria¹⁹, although the specific cause composition varied by country and age group. Regardless of anemia prevalence levels, the WHO recommends a diet with adequate bio-available iron and iron folate and micronutrient fortification of rice and flours where they are major staples¹⁶. Intermittent or daily iron and folic acid supplementation is recommended for WRA depending on pregnancy and postpartum status, menstruation, tuberculosis diagnosis and population-level prevalence, with key prevalence thresholds of 20% and 40%¹⁶. Research suggests that multiple

micronutrient supplementation for pregnant women in LMICs might provide additional benefits of reducing low-birth-weight outcomes, small-for-gestational-age outcomes and preterm birth outcomes³². Universal antenatal hemoglobin testing can help identify anemic women early, providing time to investigate causality and eliminate anemia before delivery³³. In endemic areas, malaria control has demonstrated over 25% and 60% reduction in overall anemia and severe anaemia, respectively¹⁶. Countries with high levels of anemia and malaria³⁴, such as Mali, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan and India, might benefit from increased malaria control efforts. Proper water and sanitation, including safe water and education on hand-washing and hygienic disposal of fecal matter, can reduce infection risks and related nutritional losses². Additionally, the association between intestinal helminths and anemia, due to nutritional theft and direct blood loss, has led the WHO³⁵ to recommend de-worming pregnant women in helminth-endemic areas. LMICs with co-distribution of helminths³⁶ and high prevalence of anemia include Nigeria, Madagascar, Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea. A variety of intervention delivery platforms could be used, including regular routine antenatal care visits, community health workers and community-based social marketing¹⁶. Strategies and delivery platforms should be context-specific and tailored for populations based on the local culture and disease burden; these estimates provide policy-makers the opportunity to 'aim to ensure the most vulnerable members of the populations are reached'¹⁶. For those with chronic conditions, such

as sickle cell disease, thalassaemia, inflammatory bowel disease, endocrine disorders or chronic kidney disease, more nuanced and potentially more intensive treatments are likely to be required to manage the underlying disease and reduce anemia burden.

Future research could cross-reference our estimates with implemented policies by location to determine effective strategies and exemplars of progress to further aid policy-makers and decision-makers. Although the models used in this study are not inherently inferential, the complex, yet still relatively predictable, pathways that lead to anemia suggest that those populations with a high burden of anemia are also highly likely to have a high burden of the diseases that cause anemia and are likely to be suffering from multiple simultaneous deprivations of nutrition, economics, health systems and overall resilience. We have seen success, as evidenced in Peru, in using targeted programs to reach those most in need, and understanding where they might be is a prerequisite toward analogous future campaigns against anemia and many other inequitable global health crises. These maps thus provide a roadmap to identifying the most vulnerable populations in the world and can be viewed concurrently with our previous work tracking progress and/or predictions of meeting other WHO GNTs—including geospatial annual estimates of exclusive breastfeeding²⁵, childhood overweight and wasting³⁷ and childhood stunting, wasting and underweight^{26,27}—as well as estimates of child diarrhea³⁸, child mortality³⁹, malaria³⁴, inherited blood disorders (for example, sickle cell diseases⁴⁰), helminths³⁶ and food system sustainability⁴¹ to gain a more complete view of the needs of specific countries and communities.

Although this study sheds light on the varied levels of anemia across countries, the unequal levels within them and the varied rates of progress that have led them to their status, it is not without limitations. Most notably, the accuracy of these estimates is predicated on the quality and the quantity of the underlying data. We have invested substantial effort in building a geo-located database of over 3 million women for the purpose of this analysis, but large gaps in both the spatial and temporal data coverage remain. Supplementary Figs. 6 and 7 show the number of years of data underpinning each administrative level-one and level-two unit in the analysis, and Supplementary Figs. 1–5 illustrate the spatial resolution and temporal location of this data. The uncertainty of these estimates, shown in Supplementary Figs. 10–13, is largely driven by the consistency and volume of the data and, at times, can be quite high. Our validation analysis shows that our model is well-calibrated with minimal bias and good coverage of the 95% prediction intervals, demonstrating that the uncertainty of the estimates is appropriate given the data. To improve the precision of these estimates, increases in data collection and reporting will be needed, and the uncertainty maps provide a starting point for adaptive sampling techniques that can target areas that we uncertainly estimate to have high risk.

Combined with the lack of necessary data that would be needed to perform high-resolution mapping of the conditions that cause anemia, our analysis and some of its limitations underscore the challenges in large-scale global reduction of anemia. Venous sampling of whole blood followed by assessment via automated hematology analyzers is considered the gold standard measurement, but most population-based surveys use capillary samples and the HemoCue colorimetric point-of-care tool to measure hemoglobin concentration and assess population prevalence of anemia. There are documented differences in the concentration of hemoglobin in venous blood samples compared to capillary blood samples, but the direction and consistency of the error introduced by capillary measurement has not been definitively established. We did not have sufficient data to stratify by the mode of assessment in each country at the local level. In addition, we did not estimate anemia by underlying cause, which limits the precision with which we can make specific statements about likely appropriateness of specific interventions for specific locations, although we do expect the epidemiology

of anemia to track with the underlying causes of anemia. Similarly, prevalence and count maps of all-anemia burden can be used to target hotspots but are not sufficient to determine the best course of treatment for those communities. Neither the uncertainty from resampling polygonal data to point data, nor the uncertainty from modeled covariates, were accounted for in our models. Uncertainty plots of the outputs in our models can be found in Supplementary Figs. 10–13 and 16. We expect that propagating the uncertainty from the resampling and the modeled covariates would increase the overall uncertainty in our estimates. In contrast, if we were able to incorporate the assessment technique (venous versus capillary) or the processing technique, we expect that accounting for these possible confounders would decrease the uncertainty of these estimates.

The large global burden of anemia continues to underline the need for high-resolution estimates to track progress toward international targets and to aid policy-makers in targeting interventions and scarce resources. The recent addition of anemia reduction as a target for the Sustainable Development Goal 2 further highlights the global importance of the issue^{22,23}. This study details the subnational trends in anemia prevalence in WRA across 82 LMICs, broken down by severity, and highlights the local differences in burden and progress within and between countries. The results and the interactive visualizations presented in this study provide an unprecedented opportunity for policy-makers and health institutes to examine the variation in anemia prevalence and its historical progress within their communities and can aid targeting of further data collection, limited resources and interventions to populations most in need.

Online content

Any methods, additional references, Nature Research reporting summaries, source data, extended data, supplementary information, acknowledgements, peer review information; details of author contributions and competing interests; and statements of data and code availability are available at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-021-01498-0>.

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Local Burden of Disease Anaemia Collaborators

Lauren E. Schaeffer^{5,6}, Alice Lazzar-Atwood¹, Dan Lu¹, Samuel B. Ewald¹, Katie M. Donkers¹, Ian D. Letourneau¹, Michael Collison¹, Megan F. Schipp¹, Amanuel Abajobir⁷, Sima Abbasi⁸, Nooshin Abbasi⁹, Mitra Abbasifard^{10,11}, Mohsen Abbasi-Kangevari¹², Hedayat Abbastabar¹³, Foad Abd-Allah¹⁴, Ahmed Abdelalim¹⁴, Sherief M. Abd-Elsalam¹⁵, Amir Abdoli¹⁶, Ibrahim Abdollahpour¹⁷, Aidin Abedi¹⁸, Hassan Abolhassani^{19,20}, Biju Abraham²¹, Lucas Guimarães Abreu²², Michael R. M. Abrigo²³, Ahmed Abualhasan¹⁴, Eman Abu-Gharbieh²⁴, Abdelrahman I. Abushouk^{25,26}, Manfred Mario Kokou Accrombessi^{27,28}, Maryam Adabi²⁹, Oladimeji M. Adebayo³⁰, Adeyinka Emmanuel Adegbosin³¹, Victor Adekanmbi³², Olatunji O. Adetokunboh^{33,34}, Daniel Adedayo Adeyinka^{35,36}, Davoud Adham³⁷, Shailesh M. Advani^{38,39}, Pradyumna Agasthi⁴⁰, Mohammad Aghaali⁴¹, Sohail Ahmad⁴², Tauseef Ahmad⁴³, Keivan Ahmadi⁴⁴,

Sepideh Ahmadi⁴⁵, Muktar Beshir Ahmed^{46,47}, Miloud Taki Eddine Aichour⁴⁸, Budi Aji⁴⁹, Oluwaseun Oladapo Akinyemi^{50,51}, Addis Aklilu⁵², Chisom Joyqueenet Akunna^{53,54}, Ziyad Al-Aly^{55,56}, Turki M. Alanzi⁵⁷, Jacqueline Elizabeth Alcalde-Rabanal⁵⁸, Biresaw Wassihun Alemu^{59,60}, Ayinalem Alemu⁶¹, Robert Kaba Alhassan⁶², Sheikh Mohammad Alif⁶³, Vahid Alipour^{64,65}, Hesam Alizade⁶⁶, Syed Mohamed Aljunid^{67,68}, Amir Almasi-Hashiani⁶⁹, Hesham M. Al-Mekhlafi^{70,71}, Rajaa M. Al-Raddadi⁷², Nelson Alvis-Guzman^{73,74}, Saeed Amini⁷⁵, Fatemeh Amiri⁷⁶, Dickson A. Amugsi⁷⁷, Nahla Hamed Anber^{77,78}, Robert Ancuceanu⁷⁹, Tudorel Andrei⁸⁰, Masresha Tessema Anegago^{81,82}, Mina Anjomshoa⁸³, Fereshteh Ansari^{84,85}, Alireza Ansari-Moghaddam⁸⁶, Zelalem Alamrew Anteneh⁸⁷, Ernoiz Antriyandarti⁸⁸, Davood Anvari^{89,90}, Razique Anwer⁹¹, Muhammad Aqeel⁹², Jalal Arabloo⁶⁴, Morteza Arab-Zozani⁹³, Olatunde Aremu⁹⁴, Habtamu Abera Areri⁹⁵, Al Artaman⁹⁶, Afsaneh Arzani^{97,98}, Malke Asaad⁹⁹, Mehran Asadi-Aliabadi¹⁰⁰, Ali A. Asadi-Pooya^{101,102}, Mulusew A. Asemahagn¹⁰³, Mohammad Asghari Jafarabadi^{104,105}, Mengistu M. Ashebir¹⁰⁶, Zerihun Ataro¹⁰⁷, Seyyede Masoume Athari¹⁰⁸, Seyyed Shamsadin Athari¹⁰⁹, Maha Moh'd Wahbi Atout¹¹⁰, Marcel Ausloos^{80,111}, Nefsu Awoke¹¹², Beatriz Paulina Ayala Quintanilla¹¹³, Getinet Ayano¹¹⁴, Martin Amogre Ayanore¹¹⁵, Yared Asmare Aynalem¹¹⁶, Muluken Altaye Ayza¹¹⁷, Abbas Azadmehr¹¹⁸, Darshan B¹¹⁹, Tesleem Kayode Babalola^{120,121}, Alaa Badawi^{122,123}, Ashish D. Badiye¹²⁴, Mohammad Amin Bahrami¹²⁵, Mohan Bairwa¹²⁶, Shankar M. Bakkannavar¹²⁷, Palash Chandra Banik¹²⁸, Adhanom Gebregziabher Baraki¹²⁹, Miguel A. Barboza^{130,131}, Huda Basaleem¹³², Sanjay Basu^{133,134}, Mohsen Bayati¹³⁵, Bayisa Abdissa Baye¹³⁶, Gholamreza Bazmandegan^{10,11}, Neeraj Bedi^{137,138}, Tariku Tesfaye Tesfaye Bekuma¹³⁹, Michelle L. Bell¹⁴⁰, Isabela M. Bensenor¹⁴¹, Kidanemaryam Berhe¹⁴², Abadi Kidanemariam Berhe¹⁴³, Kidanemariam Alem Berhie¹⁴⁴, Dinesh Bhandari^{145,146}, Nikha Bhardwaj¹⁴⁷, Pankaj Bhardwaj^{148,149}, Kritika Bhattacharyya^{150,151}, Suraj Bhattarai¹⁵², Zulfiqar A. Bhutta^{153,154}, Ali Bijani¹⁵⁵, Boris Bikbov¹⁵⁶, Antonio Biondi¹⁵⁷, Minyichil Birhanu¹⁵⁸, Raaj Kishore Biswas¹⁵⁹, Moses John Bockarie^{160,161}, Somayah Bohlouli¹⁶², Mahdi Bohluli^{163,164}, Archith Bloor¹⁶⁵, Shiva Borzouei¹⁶⁶, Nicola Luigi Bragazzi¹⁶⁷, Dejana Braithwaite^{168,169}, Andre R. Brunoni^{141,170}, Sharath Burugina Nagaraja¹⁷¹, Zahid A. Butt^{172,173}, Florentino Luciano Caetano dos Santos¹⁷⁴, Luis Alberto Cámera^{175,176}, Josip Car^{177,178}, Rosario Cárdenas¹⁷⁹, Felix Carvalho¹⁸⁰, Joao Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia¹⁷⁰, Carlos A. Castañeda-Orjuela^{181,182}, Franz Castro¹⁸³, Muge Cevik^{184,185}, Wagaye Fentahun Chanie^{186,187}, Jaykaran Charan¹⁸⁸, Souranshu Chatterjee¹⁸⁹, Vijay Kumar Chattu¹⁹⁰, Sarika Chaturvedi¹⁹¹, Simiao Chen¹⁹², Ken Lee Chin^{193,194}, Mohiuddin Ahsanul Kabir Chowdhury^{195,196}, Aubrey J. Cook¹, Vera Marisa Costa¹⁸⁰, Elizabeth A. Cromwell^{1,2}, Berihun Assefa Dachew^{114,197}, Henok Dagne¹⁹⁸, Baye Dagne¹⁹⁹, Tukur Dahiru²⁰⁰, Saad M. A. Dahlawi²⁰¹, Haijiang Dai^{202,203}, Hancheng Dai²⁰⁴, Lalit Dandona^{1,205,206}, Rakhi Dandona^{1,2,205}, Parnaz Daneshpajouhnejad^{207,208}, Farah Daoud¹, Jai K. Das²⁰⁹, Rajat Das Gupta^{196,210}, Aditya Prasad Dash²¹¹, Claudio Alberto Dávila-Cervantes²¹², Kairat Davletov²¹³, Farah Deeba²¹⁴, Jan-Walter De Neve¹⁹², Edgar Denova-Gutiérrez²¹⁵, Kebede Deribe^{216,217}, Assefa Desalew²¹⁸, Getenet Ayalew Dessie²¹⁹, Sagnik Dey²²⁰, Meghnath Dhimal²²¹, Govinda Prasad Dhungana²²², Mostafa Dianatinasab^{223,224}, Daniel Diaz^{225,226}, Isaac Oluwafemi Dipeolu²²⁷, Shirin Djalalinia²²⁸, Hoa Thi Do²²⁹, Fariba Dorostkar²³⁰, Leila Doshmangir²³¹, Bereket Duko^{114,232}, Andre Rodrigues Duraes^{233,234}, Lucas Earl¹, Hisham Atan Edinur²³⁵, Ferry Efendi^{236,237}, Rajesh Elayedath²³⁸, Teshome Bekele Elema^{239,240}, Hala Rashad Elhabashy²⁴¹, Shaimaa I. El-Jaafary¹⁴, Iman El Sayed²⁴², Maysaa El Sayed Zaki²⁴³,

Aisha Elsharkawy²⁴⁴, Yasser Mohamed El-Sherbiny^{245,246}, Maha El Tantawi²⁴⁷, Daniel Adane Endalew²⁴⁸, Babak Eshtrati¹⁰⁰, Khalil Eskandari^{249,250}, Sharareh Eskandarieh²⁵¹, Ibtihal Fadhil²⁵², Emerito Jose A. Faraon²⁵³, Mohammad Fareed²⁵⁴, Pawan Sirwan Faris^{255,256}, Medhat Farwati^{257,258}, Farshad Farzadfar²⁵⁹, Abidemi Omolara Fasanmi^{260,261}, Nazir Fattahi²⁶², Nelsensius Klau Fauk^{263,264}, Valery L. Feigin^{1,265,266}, Berhanu Elfu Feleke²⁶⁷, Seyed-Mohammad Fereshtehnejad^{268,269}, Eduarda Fernandes²⁷⁰, Pietro Ferrara²⁷¹, Nataliya A. Foigt²⁷², Artem Alekseevich Fomenkov²⁷³, Masoud Foroutan²⁷⁴, Joel Msafiri Francis²⁷⁵, Richard Charles Franklin²⁷⁶, Marisa Freitas²⁷⁰, Takeshi Fukumoto²⁷⁷, Mohamed M. Gad^{278,279}, Abhay Motiramji Gaidhane²⁸⁰, Reta Tsegaye Gayesa²⁸¹, Biniyam Sahiledengle Geberemariam²⁸², Birhan Gebresillassie Gebregiorgis¹¹⁶, Hadush Gebremariam¹⁴², Tesfay B. B. Gebremariam²⁸³, Leake Gebremeskel^{284,285}, Gebreamlak Gebremedhn Gebremeskel^{286,287}, Assefa Ayalew Gebreslassie²⁸⁸, Yilma Chisha Dea Geramo²⁸⁹, Hailay Abrha Gesesew^{263,290}, Bradford D. Gessner^{291,292}, Lemma Getacher²⁹³, Keyghobad Ghadiri^{294,295}, Fatemeh Ghaffarifar²⁹⁶, Mansour Ghafourifard²⁹⁷, Mahsa Ghajarzadeh²⁹⁸, Farhad Ghamari²⁹⁹, Ahmad Ghashghae^{64,300}, Nermin Ghith³⁰¹, Syed Amir Gilani^{302,303}, Tiffany K. Gill³⁰⁴, Myron Anthony Godinho³⁰⁵, Philimon N. Gona³⁰⁶, Ayman Grada³⁰⁷, Mohammed Ibrahim Mohialdeen Gubari³⁰⁸, Nachiket Gudi³⁰⁹, Davide Guido³¹⁰, Rashid Abdi Guled³¹¹, Yuming Guo^{193,312}, Rachita Gupta³¹³, Rajeev Gupta^{314,315}, Arvin Haj-Mirzaian^{316,317}, Randah R. Hamadeh³¹⁸, Demelash Woldeyohannes Handiso³¹⁹, Asif Hanif³²⁰, Arief Hargono³²¹, Ahmed I. Hasaballah³²², Md Mehedi Hasan^{323,324}, Syed Shahzad Hasan^{325,326}, Maryam Hashemian^{327,328}, Abdiwahab Hashi³²⁹, Shoab Hassan^{330,331}, Amr Hassan¹⁴, Soheil Hassanipour^{332,333}, Hadi Hassankhani^{334,335}, Khezar Hayat^{336,337}, Mohamed I. Hegazy¹⁴, Reza Heidari-Soureshjani³³⁸, Nathaniel J. Henry^{1,339}, Claudiu Herteliu^{80,340}, Fatemeh Heydarpour³⁴¹, Sousan Heydarpour³⁴¹, Hagos Degefa de Hidru³⁴², Chi Linh Hoang³⁴³, Ramesh Holla³⁴⁴, Julia Hon¹, Sung Hwi Hong^{345,346}, Praveen Hoogar³⁴⁷, Seyyed Nasrollah Hosseini³⁴⁸, Mehdi Hosseinzadeh^{349,350}, Mihaela Hostiuc³⁵¹, Sorin Hostiuc^{352,353}, Peter J. Hotez³⁵⁴, Mowafa Househ³⁵⁵, Tanvir M. Huda^{195,356}, Dawit Hoyiso Huluko Huluko³⁵⁷, Syed Ather Hussain³⁵⁸, Bing-Fang Hwang³⁵⁹, Olayinka Stephen Ilesanmi^{51,360}, Irena M. Ilic³⁶¹, Milena D. Ilic³⁶², Leeberk Raja Inbaraj³⁶³, Usman Iqbal³⁶⁴, M. Mofizul Islam³⁶⁵, Sheikh Mohammed Shariful Islam^{366,367}, Chinwe Juliana Iwu^{34,368}, Chidozie C. D. Iwu³⁶⁹, Farhad Jadidi-Niaragh³⁷⁰, Mohammad Ali Jahani¹⁵⁵, Vardhman Jain³⁷¹, Mihajlo Jakovljevic^{372,373}, Amir Jalali^{374,375}, Farzad Jalilian³⁷⁶, Manthan Dilipkumar Janodia³⁷⁷, Tahereh Javaheri³⁷⁸, Ravi Prakash Jha^{379,380}, Oommen John^{381,382}, Kimberly B. Johnson¹, Jost B. Jonas^{383,384}, Jitendra Jonnagaddala^{305,385}, Nitin Joseph¹¹⁹, Ankur Joshi³⁸⁶, Farahnaz Joukar^{332,333}, Jacek Jerzy Jozwiak³⁸⁷, Ali Kabir³⁸⁸, Zubair Kabir³⁸⁹, Tanvir Kahlon^{390,391}, Leila R. Kalankesh³⁹², Rohollah Kalhor^{393,394}, Ashwin Kamath³⁹⁵, Zahra Kamiab^{11,396}, Tanuj Kanchan³⁹⁷, Umesh Kapil³⁹⁸, Neeti Kapoor¹²⁴, Behzad Karami Matin²⁶², Salah Eddin Karimi³⁹⁹, Ayele Semachew Kasa⁴⁰⁰, Gebremicheal Gebreslassie Kasahun²⁸⁴, Zemenu Yohannes Kassa⁴⁰¹, Gebrehiwot G. Kassa⁴⁰², Getinet Kassahun⁴⁰³, Gbenga A. Kayode^{404,405}, Ali Kazemi Karyani²⁶², Tibebeselassie S. Keflie⁴⁰⁶, Peter Njenga Keiyoro⁴⁰⁷, Bayew Kelkay⁴⁰⁸, Maryam Keramati⁸, Daniel Bekele Ketema⁴⁰⁹, Nauman Khalid⁴¹⁰, Mohammad Khammarnia⁴¹¹, Md Nuruzzaman Khan⁴¹², Maseer Khan⁴¹³, Junaid Khan⁴¹⁴, Khaled Khatab^{415,416}, Amir M. Khater⁴¹⁷, Mona M. Khater⁴¹⁸, Abdullah T. Khoja^{419,420}, Jagdish Khubchandani⁴²¹, Neda Kianipour⁴²², Young-Eun Kim⁴²³, Yun Jin Kim⁴²⁴, Ruth W. Kimokoti⁴²⁵, Sezer Kisa⁴²⁶, Adnan Kisa^{427,428}, Tufa Kolola¹³⁶, Ali Koolivand⁴²⁹, Soewarta Kosen⁴³⁰, Parvaiz A. Koul⁴³¹, Ai Koyanagi^{432,433}, Kewal Krishan⁴³⁴, Vijay Krishnamoorthy^{3,435}, Barthelemy Kuate Defo^{436,437},

Nuworza Kugbey⁴³⁸, Vaman Kulkarni¹¹⁹, G. Anil Kumar²⁰⁵, Nithin Kumar¹¹⁹, Pushendra Kumar⁴³⁹,
 Manasi Kumar^{440,441}, Om P. Kurmi^{442,443}, Dian Kusuma^{444,445}, Ben Lacey^{446,447}, Deepesh P. Lad⁴⁴⁸,
 Dharmesh Kumar Lal²⁰⁵, Faris Hasan Lami⁴⁴⁹, Iván Landires^{450,451}, Anders O. Larsson^{452,453},
 Savita Lasrado⁴⁵⁴, Matthew B. Laurens⁴⁵⁵, Carlo La Vecchia⁴⁵⁶, Avula Laxmaiah⁴⁵⁷, Paul H. Lee⁴⁵⁸,
 Shaun Wen Huey Lee^{459,460}, Kate E. LeGrand¹, Sonia Lewycka^{461,462}, Bingyu Li⁴⁶³, Shanshan Li⁴⁶⁴,
 Xuefeng Liu⁴⁶⁵, Jaifred Christian F. Lopez^{466,467}, Daiane Borges Machado^{468,469},
 Shilpashree Madhava Kunjathur⁴⁷⁰, Hassan Magdy Abd El Razek⁴⁷¹,
 Muhammed Magdy Abd El Razek⁴⁷², D. R. Mahadeshwara Prasad^{473,474}, Phetole Walter Mahasha⁴⁷⁵,
 Mina Maheri⁴⁷⁶, Narayan B. Mahotra⁴⁷⁷, Azeem Majeed¹⁷⁸, Venkatesh Maled^{478,479},
 Shokofeh Maleki⁴⁸⁰, Reza Malekzadeh^{328,481}, Deborah Carvalho Malta⁴⁸², Abdullah A. Mamun³²³,
 Fariborz Mansour-Ghanaei^{332,333}, Borhan Mansouri³⁷⁵, Mohammad Ali Mansournia⁴⁸³,
 Md Dilshad Dilshad Manzar⁴⁸⁴, Carlos Alberto Marrugo Arnedo^{73,485},
 Francisco Rogerlândio Martins-Melo⁴⁸⁶, Anthony Masaka⁴⁸⁷, Pallab K. Maulik^{488,489},
 Benjamin K. Mayala^{1,490}, Medhin Mehari⁴⁹¹, Man Mohan Mehndiratta^{492,493}, Entezar Mehrabi Nasab⁴⁹⁴,
 Fereshteh Mehri⁴⁹⁵, Kala M. Mehta⁴⁹⁶, Wahengbam Bigyananda Meitei⁴⁹⁷, Teferi Mekonnen⁴⁹⁸,
 Gebrekiros Gebremichael Meles¹⁰⁶, Mulugeta Melku⁴⁹⁹, Walter Mendoza⁵⁰⁰, Ritesh G. Menezes⁵⁰¹,
 Meresa Berwo Mengesha⁵⁰², Endalkachew Worku Mengesha⁵⁰³, Tuomo J. Meretoja^{504,505},
 Abera M. Mersha⁵⁰⁶, Workua Mekonnen Metekiya⁵⁰⁷, Tomasz Miazgowski⁵⁰⁸,
 Irmina Maria Michalek⁵⁰⁹, G. K. Mini⁵¹⁰, Shabir Ahmad Mir⁵¹¹, Andreea Mirica⁸⁰,
 Erkin M. Mirrakhimov^{512,513}, Hamed Mirzaei⁵¹⁴, Maryam Mirzaei⁵¹⁵, Mehdi Mirzaei-Alavijeh³⁷⁶,
 Sanjeev Misra⁵¹⁶, Babak Moazen^{192,517}, Masoud Moghadaszadeh^{518,519}, Yousef Mohammad⁵²⁰,
 Dara K. Mohammad^{521,522}, Naser Mohammad Gholi Mezerji⁵²³, Seyyede Momeneh Mohammadi⁵²⁴,
 Abdollah Mohammadian-Hafshejani⁵²⁵, Reza Mohammadpourhodki⁵²⁶, Hayat Maeruf Mohammed⁵²⁷,
 Salahuddin Mohammed^{528,529}, Ammas Siraj Mohammed⁵³⁰, Shafiu Mohammed^{192,531},
 Jemal Abdu Mohammed⁵³², Mohammad A. Mohseni Bandpei⁵³³, Ali H. Mokdad^{1,2}, Alex Molassiotis⁴⁵⁸,
 Lorenzo Monasta⁵³⁴, Masoud Moradi²⁶², Maziar Moradi-Lakeh¹⁰⁰, Rahmatollah Moradzadeh⁶⁹,
 Paula Moraga⁵³⁵, Abbas Mosapour^{536,537}, Simin Mouodi¹⁵⁵, Seyyed Meysam Mousavi⁵³⁸,
 Amin Mousavi Khaneghah⁵³⁹, Getaneh Baye B. Mulu⁵⁴⁰, Mehnaz Munir⁵⁴¹, Moses K. Muriithi⁵⁴²,
 G. V. S. Murthy⁵⁴³, Ghulam Mustafa^{544,545}, Ashraf F. Nabhan^{546,547}, Mehdi Naderi⁴⁸⁰,
 Ahamarshan Jayaraman Nagarajan^{548,549}, Shankar Prasad Nagaraju⁵⁵⁰, Mohsen Naghavi^{1,2},
 Gurudatta Naik⁵⁵¹, Mukhammad David Naimzada^{552,553}, Vinay Nangia⁵⁵⁴, Jobert Richie Nansseu^{555,556},
 Atta Abbas Naqvi^{557,558}, Bruno Ramos Nascimento^{559,560}, Smitha Nayak⁵⁶¹, Vinod C. Nayak¹²⁷,
 Javad Nazari⁵⁶², Rawlance Ndejjo⁵⁶³, Ionut Negoii^{564,565}, Ruxandra Irina Negoii^{566,567},
 Henok Biresaw Netsere^{568,569}, Georges Nguefack-Tsague⁵⁵⁶, Josephine W. Ngunjiri⁵⁷⁰,
 Cuong Tat Nguyen⁵⁷¹, Diep Ngoc Nguyen^{571,572}, Huong Lan Thi Nguyen⁵⁷¹, Yeshambel T. Nigatu^{573,574},
 Rajan Nikbakhsh³¹⁷, Amin Reza Nikpoor⁵⁷⁵, Chukwudi A. Nnaji^{368,576}, Vuong Minh Nong⁵⁷¹,
 Jean Jacques Noubiap⁵⁷⁷, Virginia Nunez-Samudio^{578,579}, Vincent Ebuka Nwatah^{580,581},
 Tafadzwa Nyanhanda⁵⁸², Bogdan Oancea⁵⁸³, Felix Akpojene Ogbo⁵⁸⁴, Onome Bright Oghenetega⁵⁸⁵,
 In-Hwan Oh⁵⁸⁶, Daniel Micheal Okello⁵⁸⁷, Morteza Oladnabi⁵⁸⁸, Andrew T. Olagunju^{589,590},
 Jacob Olusegun Olusanya⁵⁹¹, Bolajoko Olubukunola Olusanya⁵⁹¹, Ahmed Omar Bali⁵⁹²,
 Muktar Omer Omer³²⁹, Abidemi E. Emmanuel Omonisi⁵⁹³, Obinna E. Onwujekwe⁵⁹⁴,
 Alberto Ortiz^{595,596}, Eduardo Ortiz-Panozo⁵⁹⁷, Nikita Otstavnov⁵⁵², Stanislav S. Otstavnov^{552,598},
 Mayowa O. Owolabi^{599,600}, P. A. Mahesh⁶⁰¹, Jagadish Rao Padubidri⁶⁰², Abhijit P. Pakhare³⁸⁶,

Keyvan Pakshir⁶⁰³, Adrian Pana^{80,604}, Songhomitra Panda-Jonas³⁸³, Anamika Pandey⁶⁰⁵, Seithikurippu R. Pandi-Perumal⁶⁰⁶, Helena Ulliyartha Pangaribuan⁶⁰⁷, Deepak Kumar Pasupula⁶⁰⁸, Sangram Kishor Patel⁶⁰⁹, Urvish K. Patel⁶¹⁰, Ashish Pathak^{611,612}, George C. Patton^{613,614}, Hamidreza Pazoki Toroudi^{615,616}, Jeevan Pereira⁶¹⁷, Julia Moreira Pescarini⁴⁶⁸, Hai Quang Pham⁵⁷¹, Brandon V. Pickering¹, Saeed Pirouzpanah⁶¹⁸, Meghdad Pirsaeheb²⁶², Khem Narayan Pokhrel⁶¹⁹, Maarten J. Postma^{620,621}, Faheem Hyder Pottoo⁶²², Hadis Pourchamani⁶²³, Hadi Pourjafar^{624,625}, Hossein Poustchi³²⁸, Sergio I. Prada^{626,627}, Dimas Ria Angga Pribadi⁶²⁸, Zahiruddin Quazi Syed²⁸⁰, Navid Rabiee⁶²⁹, Ata Rafiee⁶³⁰, Fakher Rahim^{631,632}, Mohammad Hifz Ur Rahman⁶³³, Muhammad Aziz Rahman^{237,634}, Amir Masoud Rahmani^{349,635}, Rajesh Kumar Rai^{636,637}, Aashish Rajesh⁶³⁸, Pradhun Ram⁶³⁹, Kiana Ramezanzadeh⁶⁴⁰, Chhabi Lal Ranabhat^{641,642}, Sowmya J. Rao⁶⁴³, Satish Rao⁶⁴⁴, Prateek Rastogi⁶⁴⁵, Priya Rathi³⁴⁴, Lal Rawal⁶⁴⁶, Wasif Faraz Rawasia⁶⁴⁷, Reza Rawassizadeh⁶⁴⁸, Lemma Demissie Regassa¹⁸⁷, Robert C. Reiner Jr^{1,2}, Bhageerathy Reshmi^{649,650}, Nima Rezaei^{20,651}, Omid Reza Hosseini⁶⁵², Aziz Rezapour⁶⁴, Seyed Mohammad Riahi⁶⁵³, Daniela Ribeiro⁶⁵⁴, Ana Isabel Ribeiro⁶⁵⁵, Jennifer Rickard^{656,657}, Hirbo Shore Roba¹⁸⁷, Leonardo Roever⁶⁵⁸, Luca Ronfani⁵³⁴, Morteza Rostamian⁶⁵⁹, Susan Fred Rumisha^{660,661}, Godfrey M. Rwegerera⁶⁶², Siamak Sabour⁶⁶³, Ehsan Sadeghi²⁶², Sahar Saeedi Moghaddam²⁵⁹, Rajesh Sagar⁶⁶⁴, Amirhossein Sahebkar^{665,666}, Mohammad Ali Sahraian²⁵¹, S. Mohammad Sajadi^{667,668}, Nasir Salam⁶⁶⁹, Marwa Rashad Salem⁶⁷⁰, Hossein Samadi Kafil⁶⁷¹, Itamar S. Santos^{141,672}, Milena M. Santric-Milicevic^{361,673}, Sivan Yegnanarayana Iyer Saraswathy^{674,675}, Nizal Sarrafzadegan^{676,677}, Benn Sartorius^{2,678}, Arash Sarveazad⁶⁷⁹, Brijesh Sathian^{680,681}, Thirunavukkarasu Sathish⁶⁸², Deepak Saxena^{280,683}, Alyssa N. Sbarra¹, David C. Schwebel⁶⁸⁴, Anbissa Muleta Senbeta⁶⁸⁵, Debarka Sengupta⁶⁸⁶, Subramanian Senthilkumaran⁶⁸⁷, Sadaf G. Sepanlou³²⁸, Allen Seylani⁶⁸⁸, Feng Sha⁶⁸⁹, Omid Shafaat^{690,691}, Saeed Shahabi⁶⁹², Mohammad Shahbaz⁶⁶³, Izza Shahid⁶⁹³, Masood Ali Shaikh⁶⁹⁴, Mohammed Feyisso Shaka⁶⁹⁵, Ali S. Shalash⁶⁹⁶, Mahdi Shamali⁶⁹⁷, Mehran Shams-Beyranvand⁶⁹⁸, Mohammad Bagher Shamsi⁵¹⁵, Morteza Shamsizadeh⁶⁹⁹, Mohammed Shannawaz⁷⁰⁰, Kiomars Sharafi²⁶², Amrollah Sharifi⁷⁰¹, Aziz Sheikh^{702,703}, Abbas Sheikhtaheri⁷⁰⁴, Ranjitha S. Shetty⁷⁰⁵, B. Suresh Kumar Shetty⁶⁴⁵, Adithi Shetty⁷⁰⁶, Wondimeneh Shibabaw Shiferaw¹¹⁶, Mika Shigematsu⁷⁰⁷, Jae Il Shin⁷⁰⁸, Rahman Shiri⁷⁰⁹, Reza Shirkoobi^{710,711}, Velizar Shivarov^{712,713}, Soraya Siabani^{714,715}, Sudeep K. Siddappa Malleshappa⁷¹⁶, Tariq Jamal Siddiqi⁷¹⁷, Negussie Boti Sidemo²⁸⁹, Balbir Bagicha Singh^{718,719}, Surya Singh⁷²⁰, Yitagesu Sintayehu⁷²¹, Valentin Yurievich Skryabin⁷²², Anna Aleksandrovna Skryabina⁷²³, Mohammad Reza Sobhiyeh⁷²⁴, Amin Soheili⁷²⁵, Shahin Soltani²⁶², Muluken Bekele Sorrie²⁸⁹, Emma Elizabeth Spurlock¹, Chandrashekhar T. Sreeramareddy⁷²⁶, Agus Sudaryanto⁷²⁷, Mu'awiyah Babale Sufiyan²⁰⁰, Iyad Sultan^{728,729}, Rafael Tabarés-Seisdedos^{730,731}, Takahiro Tabuchi⁷³², Biruk Wogayehu Taddele⁷³³, Eyayou Girma Tadesse⁷³⁴, Amir Taherkhani⁷³⁵, Zemenu Tamir⁷³⁶, Animut Tagele Tamiru⁴⁰⁸, Md Ismail Tareque⁷³⁷, Abdelghani Tbakhi⁷³⁸, Hirut Teame³⁴², Yonas Getaye Tefera⁷³⁹, Arash Tehrani-Banihashemi^{100,740}, Yohannes Tekalegn²⁸², Merhawi Gebremedhin Tekle¹⁸⁷, Berhane Fseha Teklehaimanot³⁴², Mohamad-Hani Temsah⁷⁴¹, Getayeneh Antehunegn Tesema¹²⁹, Kavumpurathu Raman Thankappan⁷⁴², Nihal Thomas⁷⁴³, Takele Tiki⁷⁴⁴, Asres Bedaso Tilahun³⁵⁷, Mariya Vladimirovna Titova^{552,745}, Marcos Roberto Tovani-Palone^{746,747}, Khanh Bao Tran^{748,749}, Bach Xuan Tran⁷⁵⁰, Rajnish Tripathi⁷⁵¹, Jaya Prasad Tripathy⁷⁵², Phuong N. Truong⁷⁵³, Riaz Uddin^{366,754}, Anayat Ullah⁷⁵⁵, Chukwuma David Umeokonkwo⁷⁵⁶, Chigozie Jesse Uneke⁷⁵⁷, Bhaskaran Unnikrishnan⁷⁵⁸,

Era Upadhyay⁷⁵⁹, Muhammad Shariq Usman⁷⁶⁰, Marco Vacante¹⁵⁷, Alireza Vakilian^{761,762}, Sahel Valadan Tahbaz^{763,764}, Pascual R. Valdez^{765,766}, Yasser Vasseghian³⁴⁹, Madhur Verma⁷⁶⁷, Francesco S. Violante^{768,769}, Bay Vo⁷⁷⁰, Yohannes Dibaba Wado⁷⁷¹, Yasir Waheed⁷⁷², Yafeng Wang⁷⁷³, Yuan-Pang Wang¹⁷⁰, Kinley Wangdi⁷⁷⁴, Girmay Teklay Weldesamuel²⁸⁶, Andrea Werdecker⁷⁷⁵, Taweewat Wiangkham⁷⁷⁶, Nuwan Darshana Wickramasinghe⁷⁷⁷, Charles Shey Wiysonge^{368,576}, Tewodros Eshete Wonde⁴⁰⁹, Ai-Min Wu⁷⁷⁸, Chenkai Wu^{779,780}, Yang Xie⁷⁸¹, Ali Yadollahpour⁷⁸², Seyed Hossein Yahyazadeh Jabbari⁷⁶³, Tomohide Yamada⁷⁸³, Mingyou Yang¹, Sanni Yaya^{784,785}, Vahid Yazdi-Feyzabadi^{786,787}, Tomas Y. Yeheyis³⁵⁷, Alex Yeshaneh²⁴⁸, Yigizie Yeshaw¹²⁹, Yordanos Gizachew Yeshitila⁵⁰⁶, Mekdes Tigistu Yilma¹³⁹, Paul Yip^{788,789}, Melissa F. Young⁷⁹⁰, Zabihollah Yousefi⁷⁹¹, Taraneh Yousefinezhadi⁷⁹², Hebat-Allah Salah A. Yousof⁴¹⁸, Abdilahi Yousuf Yousuf³²⁹, Chuanhua Yu⁷⁷³, Yong Yu⁷⁹³, Shamsa Zafar^{794,795}, Syed Saoud Zaidi⁷⁹⁶, Zoubida Zaidi⁷⁹⁷, Josefina Zakzuk⁷⁹⁸, Sojib Bin Zaman^{195,799}, Mohammad Zamani⁸⁰⁰, Maryam Zamanian⁶⁹, Alireza Zandifar⁸⁰¹, Alireza Zangeneh³⁷⁶, Mikhail Sergeevich Zastrozhin^{802,803}, Anasthasia Zastrozhina⁸⁰⁴, Dejene Tesfaye Zewdie⁸⁰⁵, Kaleab Alemayehu Zewdie⁸⁰⁶, Yunquan Zhang^{807,808}, Cong Zhu⁸⁰⁹ and Arash Ziapour⁷¹⁴

⁵Global Programs, Medical Teams International, Seattle, WA, USA. ⁶Department of Pediatric Newborn Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA, USA. ⁷Maternal and Child Wellbeing, African Population and Health Research Center, Nairobi, Kenya. ⁸Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran. ⁹Montreal Neurological Institute, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada. ¹⁰Department of Internal Medicine, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran. ¹¹Clinical Research Development Unit, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran. ¹²Social Determinants of Health Research Center, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ¹³Advanced Diagnostic and Interventional Radiology Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ¹⁴Department of Neurology, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt. ¹⁵Tropical Medicine Department, Tanta University, Tanta, Egypt. ¹⁶Department of Parasitology and Mycology, Jahrom University of Medical Sciences, Jahrom, Iran. ¹⁷Neuroscience Research Center, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran. ¹⁸Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA. ¹⁹Department of Laboratory Medicine, Karolinska University Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden. ²⁰Research Center for Immunodeficiencies, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ²¹Department of Economics, NMSM Government College, Kalpetta, India. ²²Department of Pediatric Dentistry, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. ²³Department of Research, Philippine Institute for Development Studies, Quezon City, Philippines. ²⁴Department of Clinical Sciences, University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. ²⁵Harvard Medical School, Harvard University, Boston, MA, USA. ²⁶Department of Medicine, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt. ²⁷Department of Disease Control, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK. ²⁸Clinical Research and Operations, Foundation for Scientific Research (FORS), Cotonou, Benin. ²⁹Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran. ³⁰College of Medicine, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ³¹School of Medicine, Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD, Australia. ³²Population Health Sciences, King's College London, London, UK. ³³Centre of Excellence for Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa. ³⁴Department of Global Health, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa. ³⁵Department of Community Health and Epidemiology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada. ³⁶Department of Public Health, Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja, Nigeria. ³⁷School of Health, Ardabil University of Medical Science, Ardabil, Iran. ³⁸Social Behavioral Research Branch, National Institute of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA. ³⁹Department of Oncology, Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA. ⁴⁰Department of Cardiovascular Medicine, Mayo Clinic, Scottsdale, AZ, USA. ⁴¹Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Qom University of Medical Sciences, Qom, Iran. ⁴²Faculty of Pharmacy, MAHSA University, Kuala Langat, Malaysia. ⁴³Department of Epidemiology and Health Statistics, Southeast University, Nanjing, China. ⁴⁴Lincoln Medical School, Universities of Nottingham & Lincoln, Lincoln, UK. ⁴⁵School of Advanced Technologies in Medicine, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁴⁶Department of Epidemiology, Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia. ⁴⁷Australian Center for Precision Health, University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA, Australia. ⁴⁸Higher National School of Veterinary Medicine, Algiers, Algeria. ⁴⁹Faculty of Medicine and Public Health, Jenderal Soedirman University, Purwokerto, Indonesia. ⁵⁰Department of Health Policy and Management, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ⁵¹Department of Community Medicine, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ⁵²Department of Medical Laboratory Sciences, Arba Minch University, Arba Minch, Ethiopia. ⁵³Department of Public Health, The Intercountry Centre for Oral Health (ICOH) for Africa, Jos, Nigeria. ⁵⁴Department of Public Health, Federal Ministry of Health, Garki, Nigeria. ⁵⁵John T. Milliken Department of Internal Medicine, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, USA. ⁵⁶Clinical Epidemiology Center, Department of Veterans Affairs, St. Louis, MO, USA. ⁵⁷Health Information Management and Technology Department, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. ⁵⁸Center for Health System Research, National Institute of Public Health, Cuernavaca, Mexico. ⁵⁹College of Medicine and Health Science, Arba Minch University, Arba Minch, Ethiopia. ⁶⁰Department of Midwifery, Arba Minch University, Injbara, Ethiopia. ⁶¹HIV and TB Research Directorate, Ethiopian Public Health Institute, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ⁶²Institute of Health Research, University of Health and Allied Sciences, Ho, Ghana. ⁶³Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ⁶⁴Health Management and Economics Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶⁵Health Economics Department, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶⁶Infectious and Tropical Disease Research Center, Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences, Bandar Abbas, Iran. ⁶⁷Department of Health Policy and Management, Kuwait University, Safat, Kuwait. ⁶⁸International Centre for Casemix and Clinical Coding, National University of Malaysia, Bandar Tun Razak, Malaysia. ⁶⁹Department of Epidemiology, Arak University of Medical Sciences, Arak, Iran. ⁷⁰Medical Research Center, Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia. ⁷¹Department of Parasitology, Sana'a University, Sana'a, Yemen. ⁷²Department of Community Medicine, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. ⁷³Research Group in Health Economics, University of Cartagena, Cartagena, Colombia. ⁷⁴Research Group in Hospital Management and Health Policies, ALZAK Foundation, Cartagena, Colombia. ⁷⁵Health Services Management Department, Arak University of Medical Sciences, Arak, Iran. ⁷⁶Department of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ⁷⁷Mansoura University, Mansoura, Egypt. ⁷⁸Faculty of Medicine, Mansoura University, Mansoura, Egypt. ⁷⁹Pharmacy Department, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest, Romania. ⁸⁰Department of Statistics and Econometrics, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania. ⁸¹Division of Human

Nutrition and Health, Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, Netherlands. ⁸²Nutrition & Food Science Research Directorate, Ethiopian Public Health Institute, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ⁸³Social Determinants of Health Research Center, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran. ⁸⁴Research Center for Evidence Based Medicine, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ⁸⁵Razi Vaccine and Serum Research Institute, Agricultural Research, Education, and Extension Organization (AREEO), Tehran, Iran. ⁸⁶Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Zahedan University of Medical Sciences, Zahedan, Iran. ⁸⁷Department of Epidemiology, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. ⁸⁸Agribusiness Study Program, Sebelas Maret University, Surakarta, Indonesia. ⁸⁹Department of Parasitology, Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, Sari, Iran. ⁹⁰Department of Parasitology, Iranshahr University of Medical Sciences, Iranshahr, Iran. ⁹¹Department of Pathology, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. ⁹²Department of Psychology, Foundation University Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. ⁹³Social Determinants of Health Research Center, Birjand University of Medical Sciences, Birjand, Iran. ⁹⁴Department of Public Health, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK. ⁹⁵School of Nursing and Midwifery, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ⁹⁶Independent Consultant, Windsor, MB, Canada. ⁹⁷School of Nursing and Midwifery, Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran. ⁹⁸Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran. ⁹⁹Department of Plastic Surgery, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Houston, TX, USA. ¹⁰⁰Preventive Medicine and Public Health Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ¹⁰¹Epilepsy Research Center, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. ¹⁰²Department of Neurology, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA, USA. ¹⁰³School of Public Health, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. ¹⁰⁴Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ¹⁰⁵Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, Zanjan University of Medical Sciences, Zanjan, Iran. ¹⁰⁶School of Public Health, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ¹⁰⁷Department of Medical Laboratory Science, Haramaya University, Harar, Ethiopia. ¹⁰⁸Department of Biology, Maragheh University of Medical Sciences, Maragheh, Iran. ¹⁰⁹Department of Immunology, Zanjan University of Medical Sciences, Zanjan, Iran. ¹¹⁰Faculty of Nursing, Philadelphia University, Amman, Jordan. ¹¹¹School of Business, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK. ¹¹²Department of Nursing, Wolaita Sodo University, Wolaita Sodo, Ethiopia. ¹¹³The Judith Lumley Centre, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ¹¹⁴School of Public Health, Curtin University, Perth, WA, Australia. ¹¹⁵Department of Health Policy Planning and Management, University of Health and Allied Sciences, Ho, Ghana. ¹¹⁶Department of Nursing, Debre Berhan University, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia. ¹¹⁷Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ¹¹⁸Cellular and Molecular Biology Research Center, Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran. ¹¹⁹Department of Community Medicine, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ¹²⁰Department of Public Health Medicine, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. ¹²¹Department of Community Health and Primary Care, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria. ¹²²Public Health Risk Sciences Division, Public Health Agency of Canada, Toronto, ON, Canada. ¹²³Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada. ¹²⁴Department of Forensic Science, Government Institute of Forensic Science, Nagpur, India. ¹²⁵Department of Healthcare Management and Education, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. ¹²⁶Centre for Community Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, India. ¹²⁷Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ¹²⁸Department of Non-communicable Diseases, Bangladesh University of Health Sciences, Dhaka, Bangladesh. ¹²⁹Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ¹³⁰Department of Neurosciences, Costa Rican Department of Social Security, San Jose, Costa Rica. ¹³¹School of Medicine, University of Costa Rica, San Pedro, Costa Rica. ¹³²School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Aden College, Aden, Yemen. ¹³³Center for Primary Care, Harvard University, Boston, MA, USA. ¹³⁴School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, UK. ¹³⁵Health Human Resources Research Center, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. ¹³⁶Department of Public Health, Ambo University, Ambo, Ethiopia. ¹³⁷Department of Community Medicine, Gandhi Medical College Bhopal, Bhopal, India. ¹³⁸Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia. ¹³⁹Department of Public Health, Wollega University, Nekemte, Ethiopia. ¹⁴⁰School of the Environment, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA. ¹⁴¹Department of Internal Medicine, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. ¹⁴²Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ¹⁴³College of Medicine and Health Sciences, Adigrat University, Adigrat, Ethiopia. ¹⁴⁴Department of Biostatistics, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ¹⁴⁵School of Public Health, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA, Australia. ¹⁴⁶Public Health Research Laboratory, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. ¹⁴⁷Department of Anatomy, Government Medical College Pali, Pali, India. ¹⁴⁸Department of Community Medicine and Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Jodhpur, India. ¹⁴⁹School of Public Health, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Jodhpur, India. ¹⁵⁰Department of Statistical and Computational Genomics, National Institute of Biomedical Genomics, Kalyani, India. ¹⁵¹Department of Statistics, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India. ¹⁵²Department of Global Health, Global Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies, Kathmandu, Nepal. ¹⁵³Centre for Global Child Health, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada. ¹⁵⁴Centre of Excellence in Women & Child Health, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan. ¹⁵⁵Social Determinants of Health Research Center, Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran. ¹⁵⁶Mario Negri Institute for Pharmacological Research, Ranica, Italy. ¹⁵⁷Department of General Surgery and Medical-Surgical Specialties, University of Catania, Catania, Italy. ¹⁵⁸Department of Pediatrics and Child Health Nursing, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. ¹⁵⁹Transport and Road Safety (TARS) Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ¹⁶⁰European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership, Cape Town, South Africa. ¹⁶¹Department of Medicine, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. ¹⁶²Department of Veterinary Medicine, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran. ¹⁶³Department of Computer Science and Information Technology, Institute for Advanced Studies in Basic Sciences, Zanjan, Iran. ¹⁶⁴Department of Research and Innovation, Petanux Research GmbH, Bonn, Germany. ¹⁶⁵Department of Internal Medicine, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ¹⁶⁶Department of Endocrinology, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran. ¹⁶⁷University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy. ¹⁶⁸Department of Epidemiology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA. ¹⁶⁹Cancer Population Sciences Program, University of Florida Health Cancer Center, Gainesville, FL, USA. ¹⁷⁰Department of Psychiatry, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. ¹⁷¹Department of Community Medicine, Employee State Insurance Post Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Bangalore, India. ¹⁷²School of Public Health and Health Systems, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada. ¹⁷³Al Shifa School of Public Health, Al Shifa Trust Eye Hospital, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. ¹⁷⁴Institute of Microengineering, Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland. ¹⁷⁵Internal Medicine Department, Italian Hospital of Buenos Aires (Hospital Italiano de Buenos Aires), Buenos Aires, Argentina. ¹⁷⁶Board of Directors, Argentine Society of Medicine, Buenos Aires, Argentina. ¹⁷⁷Centre for Population Health Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore. ¹⁷⁸Department of Primary Care and Public Health, Imperial College London, London, UK. ¹⁷⁹Department of Health Care, Metropolitan Autonomous University, Mexico City, Mexico. ¹⁸⁰Research Unit on Applied Molecular Biosciences (UCIBIO), University of Porto, Porto, Portugal. ¹⁸¹Colombian National Health Observatory, National Institute of Health, Bogota, Colombia. ¹⁸²Epidemiology and Public Health Evaluation Group, National University of Colombia, Bogota, Colombia. ¹⁸³Gorgas Memorial Institute for Health Studies, Panama City, Panama. ¹⁸⁴Infection and Global Health Research, University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, UK. ¹⁸⁵Regional Infectious Diseases Unit, NHS National Services Scotland, Edinburgh, UK. ¹⁸⁶Institute of Public Health, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ¹⁸⁷School of Public Health, Haramaya University, Harar, Ethiopia. ¹⁸⁸Department of Pharmacology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Jodhpur, India. ¹⁸⁹Department of Microbiology & Infection Control, Medanta Medicity, Gurugram, India. ¹⁹⁰Department of Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada. ¹⁹¹Research Department, D. Y. Patil University, Pune, India. ¹⁹²Heidelberg Institute of Global Health (HIGH), Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany. ¹⁹³Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ¹⁹⁴Melbourne Medical School, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC, Australia. ¹⁹⁵Maternal and Child Health Division, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh. ¹⁹⁶Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA. ¹⁹⁷Department of Epidemiology, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ¹⁹⁸Department of Environmental Health and Occupational Health and Safety, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ¹⁹⁹Department of Human Physiology, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ²⁰⁰Department of Community Medicine, Ahmadu Bello University,

Zaria, Nigeria. ²⁰¹Environmental Health Department, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. ²⁰²Department of Cardiology, Central South University, Changsha, China. ²⁰³Department of Mathematics and Statistics, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada. ²⁰⁴College of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, Peking University, Beijing, China. ²⁰⁵Public Health Foundation of India, Gurugram, India. ²⁰⁶Indian Council of Medical Research, New Delhi, India. ²⁰⁷Department of Pathology, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA. ²⁰⁸Department of Pathology, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran. ²⁰⁹Division of Women and Child Health, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan. ²¹⁰James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. ²¹¹Asian Institute of Public Health University, Bhubaneswar, India. ²¹²Department of Population and Development, Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico. ²¹³Health Research Institute, Al Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan. ²¹⁴Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Basic Sciences, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India. ²¹⁵Center for Nutrition and Health Research, National Institute of Public Health, Cuernavaca, Mexico. ²¹⁶Wellcome Trust Brighton and Sussex Centre for Global Health Research, Brighton and Sussex Medical School, Brighton, UK. ²¹⁷School of Public Health, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ²¹⁸School of Nursing and Midwifery, Haramaya University, Harar, Ethiopia. ²¹⁹Department of Nursing, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. ²²⁰Centre for Atmospheric Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, New Delhi, India. ²²¹Health Research Section, Nepal Health Research Council, Kathmandu, Nepal. ²²²Department of Microbiology, Far Western University, Mahendranagar, Nepal. ²²³Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics and Shahrud University of Medical Sciences, Shahroud, Iran. ²²⁴Department of Epidemiology, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. ²²⁵Center of Complexity Sciences, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico. ²²⁶Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnics, Autonomous University of Sinaloa, Culiacán Rosales, Mexico. ²²⁷Department of Health Promotion and Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ²²⁸Development of Research and Technology Center, Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Tehran, Iran. ²²⁹Institute of Health Economics and Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam. ²³⁰Department of Medical Laboratory Sciences, Faculty of Allied Medicine, Tehran, Iran. ²³¹Department of Health Policy and Management, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ²³²School of Public Health, Hawassa University, Hawassa, Ethiopia. ²³³School of Medicine, Federal University of Bahia, Salvador, Brazil. ²³⁴Department of Internal Medicine, Bahiana School of Medicine and Public Health (Escola Bahiana de Medicina e Saúde Pública), Salvador, Brazil. ²³⁵School of Health Sciences, University of Science Malaysia (Universiti Sains Malaysia), Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, Malaysia. ²³⁶Department of Community Health Nursing, Airlangga University (Universitas Airlangga), Surabaya, Indonesia. ²³⁷School of Nursing and Midwifery, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ²³⁸School of Behavioural Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University of Medical Sciences and Technology, Kottayam, India. ²³⁹Department of Food Science and Nutrition, Arsi University, Asella, Ethiopia. ²⁴⁰Center for Food Science and Nutrition, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ²⁴¹Neurophysiology Department, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt. ²⁴²Biomedical Informatics and Medical Statistics Department, Alexandria University, Alexandria, Egypt. ²⁴³Reference Laboratory of Egyptian Universities Hospitals, Ministry of Higher Education and Research, Cairo, Egypt. ²⁴⁴Endemic Medicine and Hepatogastroenterology Department, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt. ²⁴⁵Department of Biosciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK. ²⁴⁶Clinical Pathology Department, Mansoura University, Mansoura, Egypt. ²⁴⁷Pediatric Dentistry and Dental Public Health Department, Alexandria University, Alexandria, Egypt. ²⁴⁸Department of Midwifery, Wolkite University, Wolkite, Ethiopia. ²⁴⁹Department of Medicinal Chemistry, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran. ²⁵⁰Pharmaceutics Research Center, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran. ²⁵¹Multiple Sclerosis Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ²⁵²Division of Non-Communicable Diseases, Ministry of Public Health and Population, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. ²⁵³Department of Health Policy and Administration, University of the Philippines Manila, Manila, Philippines. ²⁵⁴College of Medicine, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. ²⁵⁵Department of Biology and Biotechnology 'Lazzaro Spallanzani', University of Pavia, Pavia, Italy. ²⁵⁶Department of Biology, Cihan University-Erbil, Erbil, Iraq. ²⁵⁷Internal Medicine Department, Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH, USA. ²⁵⁸Department of Cardiovascular Medicine, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN, USA. ²⁵⁹Non-communicable Diseases Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ²⁶⁰Satcher Health Leadership Institute, Morehouse School of Medicine, Atlanta, GA, USA. ²⁶¹School of Medicine, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA. ²⁶²Research Center for Environmental Determinants of Health, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ²⁶³College of Medicine and Public Health, Flinders University, Adelaide, SA, Australia. ²⁶⁴Institute of Resource Governance and Social Change, Kupang, Indonesia. ²⁶⁵National Institute for Stroke and Applied Neurosciences, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. ²⁶⁶Research Center of Neurology, Moscow, Russia. ²⁶⁷Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. ²⁶⁸Department of Neurobiology, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden. ²⁶⁹Division of Neurology, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada. ²⁷⁰Associated Laboratory for Green Chemistry (LAQV), University of Porto, Porto, Portugal. ²⁷¹Research Center on Public Health, University of Milan Bicocca, Monza, Italy. ²⁷²Institute of Gerontology, National Academy of Medical Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. ²⁷³Department of Cell Biology and Biotechnology, K.A. Timiryazev Institute of Plant Physiology, Moscow, Russia. ²⁷⁴Department of Medical Parasitology, Abadan Faculty of Medical Sciences, Abadan, Iran. ²⁷⁵Department of Family Medicine and Primary Care, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. ²⁷⁶School of Public Health, Medical, and Veterinary Sciences, James Cook University, Douglas, QLD, Australia. ²⁷⁷Department of Dermatology, Kobe University, Kobe, Japan. ²⁷⁸Department of Cardiovascular Medicine, Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH, USA. ²⁷⁹Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA. ²⁸⁰Department of Community Medicine, Datta Meghe Institute of Medical Sciences, Wardha, India. ²⁸¹Department of Nursing, Wollega University, Nekemte, Ethiopia. ²⁸²Department of Public Health, Madda Walabu University, Bale Robe, Ethiopia. ²⁸³Department of Human Nutrition, Aksum University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ²⁸⁴School of Pharmacy, Aksum University, Aksum, Ethiopia. ²⁸⁵Department of Pharmacy, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ²⁸⁶Department of Nursing, Aksum University, Aksum, Ethiopia. ²⁸⁷Department of Nursing, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ²⁸⁸Department of Reproductive Health, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ²⁸⁹Department of Public Health, Arba Minch University, Arba Minch, Ethiopia. ²⁹⁰Department of Epidemiology, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ²⁹¹Pfizer Vaccines, Collegeville, PA, USA. ²⁹²Agency of Preventive Medicine, Paris, France. ²⁹³Department of Public Health, Debre Berhan University, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia. ²⁹⁴Infectious Disease Research Center, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ²⁹⁵Pediatric Department, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ²⁹⁶Department of Parasitology and Entomology, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran. ²⁹⁷Department of Medical Surgical Nursing, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ²⁹⁸Department of Neurology, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ²⁹⁹Occupational Health Department, Arak University of Medical Sciences, Arak, Iran. ³⁰⁰Student Research Committee, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ³⁰¹Research Group for Genomic Epidemiology, Technical University of Denmark, Copenhagen, Denmark. ³⁰²Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan. ³⁰³Afro-Asian Institute, Lahore, Pakistan. ³⁰⁴Adelaide Medical School, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA, Australia. ³⁰⁵School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of New South Wales, Kensington, NSW, Australia. ³⁰⁶Department of Exercise and Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts, Boston, Boston, MA, USA. ³⁰⁷Department of Dermatology, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA. ³⁰⁸Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Sulaimani, Sulaimani, Iraq. ³⁰⁹Department of Health Policy, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ³¹⁰Neurology, Public Health and Disability Unit, Carlo Besta Neurological Institute IRCCS (Fondazione IRCCS Istituto Neurologico Carlo Besta), Milan, Italy. ³¹¹College of Medicine and Health Science, Jijiga University, Jijiga, Ethiopia. ³¹²Department of Epidemiology, Binzhou Medical University, Yantai City, China. ³¹³Non-communicable Diseases Department, World Health Organization, New Delhi, India. ³¹⁴Department of Preventive Cardiology, Eternal Heart Care Centre & Research Institute, Jaipur, India. ³¹⁵Department of Medicine, Mahatma Gandhi University Medical Sciences, Jaipur, India. ³¹⁶Department of Pharmacology, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ³¹⁷Obesity Research Center, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ³¹⁸Department of Family and Community Medicine, Arabian Gulf University, Manama, Bahrain. ³¹⁹Department of Public Health, Wachemo University,

Hossana, Ethiopia. ³²⁰University Institute of Public Health, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan. ³²¹Department of Epidemiology, Airlangga University (Universitas Airlangga), Surabaya, Indonesia. ³²²Department of Zoology and Entomology, Al Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. ³²³Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, Indooroopilly, QLD, Australia. ³²⁴ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course, The University of Queensland, Indooroopilly, QLD, Australia. ³²⁵Department of Pharmacy, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK. ³²⁶School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW, Australia. ³²⁷Biology Department, Utica College, Utica, NY, USA. ³²⁸Digestive Diseases Research Institute, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ³²⁹Department of Public Health, Jigjiga University, Jijiga, Ethiopia. ³³⁰Center for International Health (CIH), University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway. ³³¹Bergen Center for Ethics and Priority Setting (BCEPS), University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway. ³³²Gastrointestinal and Liver Diseases Research Center, Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran. ³³³Caspian Digestive Disease Research Center, Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran. ³³⁴School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ³³⁵Independent Consultant, Tabriz, Iran. ³³⁶Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan. ³³⁷Department of Pharmacy Administration and Clinical Pharmacy, Xian Jiaotong University, Xian, China. ³³⁸School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ³³⁹Big Data Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ³⁴⁰School of Business, London South Bank University, London, UK. ³⁴¹School of Nursing and Midwifery, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ³⁴²Department of Public Health, Adigrat University, Adigrat, Ethiopia. ³⁴³Center of Excellence in Behavioral Medicine, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. ³⁴⁴Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ³⁴⁵Department of Pediatrics, Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea. ³⁴⁶Research Department, Electronic Medical Records for the Developing World, York, UK. ³⁴⁷Centre for Bio Cultural Studies (CBiCS), Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ³⁴⁸Deputy of Education, Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Tehran, Iran. ³⁴⁹Institute of Research and Development, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, Vietnam. ³⁵⁰Department of Computer Science, University of Human Development, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. ³⁵¹Department of Internal Medicine, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest, Romania. ³⁵²Department of Legal Medicine and Bioethics, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest, Romania. ³⁵³Clinical Legal Medicine Department, National Institute of Legal Medicine Mina Minovici, Bucharest, Romania. ³⁵⁴National School of Tropical Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX, USA. ³⁵⁵College of Science and Engineering, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Doha, Qatar. ³⁵⁶School of Public Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ³⁵⁷School of Nursing, Hawassa University, Hawassa, Ethiopia. ³⁵⁸Department of Internal Medicine, Rochester General Hospital, Rochester, NY, USA. ³⁵⁹Department of Occupational Safety and Health, China Medical University, Taichung, Taiwan. ³⁶⁰Department of Community Medicine, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ³⁶¹Faculty of Medicine, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia. ³⁶²Department of Epidemiology, University of Kragujevac, Kragujevac, Serbia. ³⁶³Division of Community Health and Family Medicine, Bangalore Baptist Hospital, Bangalore, India. ³⁶⁴College of Public Health, Taipei Medical University, Taipei, Taiwan. ³⁶⁵School of Psychology and Public Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ³⁶⁶Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ³⁶⁷Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ³⁶⁸South African Medical Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa. ³⁶⁹School of Health Systems and Public Health, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa. ³⁷⁰Department of Immunology, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ³⁷¹Department of Internal Medicine, Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH, USA. ³⁷²N. A. Semashko Department of Public Health and Healthcare, I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University, Moscow, Russia. ³⁷³Department of Global Health, Economics and Policy, University of Kragujevac, Kragujevac, Serbia. ³⁷⁴Health Institute, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ³⁷⁵Substance Abuse Prevention Research Center, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ³⁷⁶Social Development and Health Promotion Research Center, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ³⁷⁷Manipal College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ³⁷⁸Health Informatic Lab, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA. ³⁷⁹Department of Community Medicine, Baba Saheb Ambedkar Medical College & Hospital, Delhi, India. ³⁸⁰Department of Community Medicine, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India. ³⁸¹Renal and Cardiovascular Division, The George Institute for Global Health, New Delhi, India. ³⁸²Department of Medicine, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ³⁸³Department of Ophthalmology, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany. ³⁸⁴Beijing Institute of Ophthalmology, Beijing Tongren Hospital, Beijing, China. ³⁸⁵New South Wales Health, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ³⁸⁶Department of Community Medicine and Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Bhopal, India. ³⁸⁷Department of Family Medicine and Public Health, University of Opole, Opole, Poland. ³⁸⁸Minimally Invasive Surgery Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ³⁸⁹School of Public Health, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland. ³⁹⁰Division of Cardiology, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA. ³⁹¹Department of Medicine, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY, USA. ³⁹²School of Management and Medical Informatics, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ³⁹³Institute for Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases, Qazvin University of Medical Sciences, Qazvin, Iran. ³⁹⁴Health Services Management Department, Qazvin University of Medical Sciences, Qazvin, Iran. ³⁹⁵Department of Pharmacology, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ³⁹⁶Family Medicine Department, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran. ³⁹⁷Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Jodhpur, India. ³⁹⁸Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Clinical Research, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, India. ³⁹⁹Social Determinants of Health Research Center, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ⁴⁰⁰Department of Adult Health Nursing, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. ⁴⁰¹School of Nursing and Midwifery, Hawassa University, Hawassa, Ethiopia. ⁴⁰²Department of Biomedical Sciences, Aksum University, Aksum, Ethiopia. ⁴⁰³School of Midwifery, Hawassa University, Hawassa, Ethiopia. ⁴⁰⁴International Research Center of Excellence, Institute of Human Virology Nigeria, Abuja, Nigeria. ⁴⁰⁵Julius Centre for Health Sciences and Primary Care, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands. ⁴⁰⁶Institute of Biological Chemistry and Nutrition, University Hohenheim, Stuttgart, Germany. ⁴⁰⁷Open, Distance and eLearning Campus, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya. ⁴⁰⁸Department of Midwifery, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ⁴⁰⁹Department of Public Health, Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia. ⁴¹⁰School of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan. ⁴¹¹Health Promotion Research Center, Zahedan University of Medical Sciences, Zahedan, Iran. ⁴¹²Department of Population Science, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Mymensingh, Bangladesh. ⁴¹³Epidemiology Department, Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia. ⁴¹⁴Department of Population Studies, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India. ⁴¹⁵Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK. ⁴¹⁶College of Arts and Sciences, Ohio University, Zanesville, OH, USA. ⁴¹⁷National Hepatology and Tropical Medicine Research Institute, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt. ⁴¹⁸Department of Medical Parasitology, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt. ⁴¹⁹Department of Public Health, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. ⁴²⁰Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA. ⁴²¹Department of Public Health, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM, USA. ⁴²²Department of Public Health, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ⁴²³Big Data Department, National Health Insurance Service, Wonju, South Korea. ⁴²⁴School of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Xiamen University Malaysia, Sepang, Malaysia. ⁴²⁵Department of Nutrition, Simmons University, Boston, MA, USA. ⁴²⁶Department of Nursing and Health Promotion, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway. ⁴²⁷School of Health Sciences, Kristiania University College, Oslo, Norway. ⁴²⁸Global Community Health and Behavioral Sciences, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, USA. ⁴²⁹Department of Environmental Health Engineering, Arak University of Medical Sciences, Arak, Iran. ⁴³⁰Independent Consultant, Jakarta, Indonesia. ⁴³¹Department of Internal and Pulmonary Medicine, Sheri Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences, Srinagar, India. ⁴³²CIBERSAM, San Juan de Dios Sanitary Park, Sant Boi de Llobregat, Spain. ⁴³³Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA), Barcelona, Spain. ⁴³⁴Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. ⁴³⁵Department of Anesthesiology, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA. ⁴³⁶Department of Demography, University of Montreal, Montreal, QC, Canada. ⁴³⁷Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Montreal, Montreal, QC, Canada. ⁴³⁸Department of Family and Community Health, University of Health and

Allied Sciences, Ho, Ghana. ⁴³⁹International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India. ⁴⁴⁰Department of Psychiatry, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya. ⁴⁴¹Division of Psychology and Language Sciences, University College London, London, UK. ⁴⁴²Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Coventry University, Coventry, UK. ⁴⁴³Department of Medicine, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada. ⁴⁴⁴Imperial College Business School, Imperial College London, London, UK. ⁴⁴⁵Faculty of Public Health, University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia. ⁴⁴⁶Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ⁴⁴⁷National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Oxford Biomedical Research Centre, Oxford, UK. ⁴⁴⁸Department of Internal Medicine, Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, India. ⁴⁴⁹Department of Community and Family Medicine, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq. ⁴⁵⁰Unit of Genetics and Public Health, Institute of Medical Sciences, Las Tablas, Panama. ⁴⁵¹Ministry of Health, Herrera, Panama. ⁴⁵²Department of Medical Sciences, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden. ⁴⁵³Department of Clinical Chemistry and Pharmacology, Uppsala University Hospital, Uppsala, Sweden. ⁴⁵⁴Department of Otorhinolaryngology, Father Muller Medical College, Mangalore, India. ⁴⁵⁵School of Medicine, University of Maryland, Baltimore, MD, USA. ⁴⁵⁶Department of Clinical Sciences and Community Health, University of Milan, Milan, Italy. ⁴⁵⁷National Institute of Nutrition, Indian Council of Medical Research, Hyderabad, India. ⁴⁵⁸School of Nursing, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China. ⁴⁵⁹School of Pharmacy, Monash University, Bandar Sunway, Malaysia. ⁴⁶⁰School of Pharmacy, Taylor's University Lakeside Campus, Subang Jaya, Malaysia. ⁴⁶¹Centre for Tropical Medicine and Global Health, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ⁴⁶²Oxford University Clinical Research Unit, Wellcome Trust Asia Programme, Hanoi, Vietnam. ⁴⁶³Department of Sociology, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China. ⁴⁶⁴School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ⁴⁶⁵Department of Systems, Populations, and Leadership, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA. ⁴⁶⁶Department of Nutrition, University of the Philippines Manila, Manila, Philippines. ⁴⁶⁷Alliance for Improving Health Outcomes, Inc., Quezon City, Philippines. ⁴⁶⁸Center for Integration of Data and Health Knowledge, Oswald Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ), Salvador, Brazil. ⁴⁶⁹Centre for Global Mental Health (CGMH), London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK. ⁴⁷⁰Department of Biochemistry, BGS Global Institute of Medical Sciences, Bengaluru, India. ⁴⁷¹Radiology Department, Egypt Ministry of Health and Population, Mousara, Egypt. ⁴⁷²Ophthalmology Department, Ministry of Health & Population, Aswan, Egypt. ⁴⁷³Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Mysore Medical College & Research Institute, Mysuru, India. ⁴⁷⁴Department of Health & Family Welfare, Government of Karnataka, Bangalore, India. ⁴⁷⁵Grants, Innovation and Product Development Unit, South African Medical Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa. ⁴⁷⁶Department of Public Health, Urmia University of Medical Science, Urmia, Iran. ⁴⁷⁷Department of Clinical Physiology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. ⁴⁷⁸Department of Forensic Medicine, Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences, Dharwad, India. ⁴⁷⁹Department of Forensic Medicine, Shri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara University, Dharwad, India. ⁴⁸⁰Clinical Research Development Center, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ⁴⁸¹Non-communicable Disease Research Center, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. ⁴⁸²Department of Maternal and Child Nursing and Public Health, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. ⁴⁸³Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁴⁸⁴Department of Nursing, Majmaah University, Majmaah, Saudi Arabia. ⁴⁸⁵Technological Institution Colegio Mayor de Bolívar (Institución Tecnológica Colegio Mayor de Bolívar), Cartagena, Colombia. ⁴⁸⁶Campus Caucaia, Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Ceará, Caucaia, Brazil. ⁴⁸⁷Faculty of Health and Education, Botho University, Gaborone, Botswana. ⁴⁸⁸Research Division, The George Institute for Global Health, New Delhi, India. ⁴⁸⁹School of Medicine, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ⁴⁹⁰ICF International, DHS Program, Rockville, MD, USA. ⁴⁹¹Department of Epidemiology, Adigrat University, Adigrat, Ethiopia. ⁴⁹²Neurology Department, Janakpuri Super Speciality Hospital Society, New Delhi, India. ⁴⁹³Department of Neurology, Govind Ballabh Institute of Medical Education and Research, New Delhi, India. ⁴⁹⁴Tehran Heart Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁴⁹⁵Nutrition Health Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran. ⁴⁹⁶Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA. ⁴⁹⁷Department of Public Health and Mortality Studies, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India. ⁴⁹⁸Department of Nutrition, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway. ⁴⁹⁹Department of Hematology and Immunohematology, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ⁵⁰⁰Peru Country Office, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Lima, Peru. ⁵⁰¹Forensic Medicine Division, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. ⁵⁰²Department of Midwifery, Adigrat University, Adigrat, Ethiopia. ⁵⁰³Department of Reproductive Health and Population Studies, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. ⁵⁰⁴Breast Surgery Unit, Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland. ⁵⁰⁵University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland. ⁵⁰⁶Department of Nursing, Arba Minch University, Arba Minch, Ethiopia. ⁵⁰⁷Department of Psychiatry, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ⁵⁰⁸Department of Propedeutics of Internal Diseases & Arterial Hypertension, Pomeranian Medical University, Szczecin, Poland. ⁵⁰⁹Woman-Mother-Child Department, Lausanne University Hospital, Lausanne, Switzerland. ⁵¹⁰Global Institute of Public Health, Ananthapuri Hospitals and Research Institute, Trivandrum, India. ⁵¹¹College of Applied Medical Sciences, Majmaah University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. ⁵¹²Internal Medicine Programme, Kyrgyz State Medical Academy, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. ⁵¹³Department of Atherosclerosis and Coronary Heart Disease, National Center of Cardiology and Internal Disease, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. ⁵¹⁴Research Center for Biochemistry and Nutrition in Metabolic Diseases, Kashan University of Medical Sciences, Kashan, Iran. ⁵¹⁵Department of Rehabilitation and Sports Medicine, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ⁵¹⁶Department of Surgical Oncology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Jodhpur, India. ⁵¹⁷Institute of Addiction Research (ISFF), Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, Frankfurt, Germany. ⁵¹⁸Biotechnology Research Center, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ⁵¹⁹Molecular Medicine Research Center, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ⁵²⁰Internal Medicine Department, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. ⁵²¹Department of Forestry, Salahaddin University-Erbil, Erbil, Iraq. ⁵²²Department of Medicine-Huddinge, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden. ⁵²³Department of Biostatistics, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran. ⁵²⁴Department of Anatomical Sciences, Zanjan University of Medical Sciences, Zanjan, Iran. ⁵²⁵Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Shahrekord University of Medical Sciences, Shahrekord, Iran. ⁵²⁶Department of Nursing, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran. ⁵²⁷Department of Nursing, Adigrat University, Adigrat, Ethiopia. ⁵²⁸Department of Biomolecular Sciences, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, USA. ⁵²⁹Department of Pharmacy, Mizan-Tepi University, Mizan, Ethiopia. ⁵³⁰School of Pharmacy, Haramaya University, Harar, Ethiopia. ⁵³¹Health Systems and Policy Research Unit, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. ⁵³²Department of Public Health, Samara University, Semera, Ethiopia. ⁵³³Pediatric Neurorehabilitation Research Center, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁵³⁴Clinical Epidemiology and Public Health Research Unit, Burlo Garofolo Institute for Maternal and Child Health, Trieste, Italy. ⁵³⁵Computer, Electrical, and Mathematical Sciences and Engineering Division, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Thuwal, Saudi Arabia. ⁵³⁶Department of Clinical Biochemistry, Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran. ⁵³⁷Department of Clinical Biochemistry, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran. ⁵³⁸Department of Health Policy, Management, and Economics, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁵³⁹Department of Food Science, University of Campinas (Unicamp), Campinas, Brazil. ⁵⁴⁰Department of Pediatrics and Child Health, Debre Berhan University, Debre Berhan, Ethiopia. ⁵⁴¹Department of Community Health Sciences, Fatima Memorial Hospital (FMH), Lahore, Pakistan. ⁵⁴²School of Economics, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya. ⁵⁴³Indian Institute of Public Health, Public Health Foundation of India, Hyderabad, India. ⁵⁴⁴Department of Pediatric Medicine, The Children's Hospital & The Institute of Child Health, Multan, Pakistan. ⁵⁴⁵Department of Pediatrics & Pediatric Pulmonology, Institute of Mother & Child Care, Multan, Pakistan. ⁵⁴⁶Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt. ⁵⁴⁷Knowledge Translation and Utilization, Egyptian Center for Evidence Based Medicine, Cairo, Egypt. ⁵⁴⁸Research and Analytics Department, Initiative for Financing Health and Human Development, Chennai, India. ⁵⁴⁹Department of Research and Analytics, Bioinsilico Technologies, Chennai, India. ⁵⁵⁰Department of Nephrology, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ⁵⁵¹Comprehensive Cancer Center, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL, USA. ⁵⁵²Laboratory of Public Health Indicators Analysis and Health Digitalization, Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, Dolgoprudny, Russia. ⁵⁵³Experimental Surgery and Oncology Laboratory, Kursk State Medical University, Kursk, Russia. ⁵⁵⁴Suraj Eye

Institute, Nagpur, India. ⁵⁵⁵Department for the Control of Disease, Epidemics, and Pandemics, Ministry of Public Health, Yaoundé, Cameroon. ⁵⁵⁶Department of Public Health, University of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Cameroon. ⁵⁵⁷Department of Pharmacy Practice, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. ⁵⁵⁸Discipline of Social & Administrative Pharmacy, University of Science Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. ⁵⁵⁹Department of Clinical Medicine, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. ⁵⁶⁰Clinical Hospital, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. ⁵⁶¹Manipal Institute of Management, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ⁵⁶²Department of Pediatrics, Arak University of Medical Sciences, Arak, Iran. ⁵⁶³Disease Control and Environmental Health, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. ⁵⁶⁴Department of General Surgery, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest, Romania. ⁵⁶⁵Department of General Surgery, Emergency Hospital of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania. ⁵⁶⁶Department of Anatomy and Embryology, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest, Romania. ⁵⁶⁷Cardio-Aid, Bucharest, Romania. ⁵⁶⁸School of Nursing, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ⁵⁶⁹School of Health Sciences, Surgical Nursing, Bahir Dar University, Gondar, Ethiopia. ⁵⁷⁰Department of Biological Sciences, University of Embu, Embu, Kenya. ⁵⁷¹Institute for Global Health Innovations, Duy Tan University, Hanoi, Vietnam. ⁵⁷²Faculty of Pharmacy, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, Vietnam. ⁵⁷³Institute for Mental Health and Policy, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, ON, Canada. ⁵⁷⁴Department of Clinical Epidemiology, Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, Ottawa, ON, Canada. ⁵⁷⁵Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences, Bandar Abbas, Iran. ⁵⁷⁶School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. ⁵⁷⁷Centre for Heart Rhythm Disorders, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, WC, Australia. ⁵⁷⁸Unit of Microbiology and Public Health, Institute of Medical Sciences, Las Tablas, Panama. ⁵⁷⁹Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health, Herrera, Panama. ⁵⁸⁰Department of Pediatrics, National Hospital Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria. ⁵⁸¹Department of International Public Health, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK. ⁵⁸²Department of Public Health, CQ University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ⁵⁸³Administrative and Economic Sciences Department, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania. ⁵⁸⁴Translational Health Research Institute, Western Sydney University, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ⁵⁸⁵Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ⁵⁸⁶Department of Preventive Medicine, Kyung Hee University, Dongdaemun-gu, South Korea. ⁵⁸⁷Department of Rural Development and Agribusiness, Gulu University, Gulu, Uganda. ⁵⁸⁸Gorgan Congenital Malformations Research Center, Golestan University of Medical Sciences, Gorgan, Iran. ⁵⁸⁹Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada. ⁵⁹⁰Department of Psychiatry, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria. ⁵⁹¹Centre for Healthy Start Initiative, Lagos, Nigeria. ⁵⁹²Diplomacy and Public Relations Department, University of Human Development, Sulaimaniyah, Iraq. ⁵⁹³Department of Anatomic Pathology, Ekiti State University Teaching Hospital, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria. ⁵⁹⁴Department of Pharmacology and Therapeutics, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu, Nigeria. ⁵⁹⁵Department of Medicine, Autonomous University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain. ⁵⁹⁶Department of Nephrology and Hypertension, The Institute for Health Research Foundation, Jiménez Díaz University Hospital, Madrid, Spain. ⁵⁹⁷Center for Population Health Research, National Institute of Public Health, Cuernavaca, Mexico. ⁵⁹⁸Department of Project Management, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia. ⁵⁹⁹Department of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ⁶⁰⁰Department of Medicine, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. ⁶⁰¹Department of Respiratory Medicine, Jagadguru Sri Shivarathreeswara Academy of Health Education and Research, Mysore, India. ⁶⁰²Department of Forensic Medicine, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ⁶⁰³Department of Parasitology and Mycology, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. ⁶⁰⁴Department of Health Metrics, Center for Health Outcomes & Evaluation, Bucharest, Romania. ⁶⁰⁵Department of Research, Public Health Foundation of India, Gurugram, India. ⁶⁰⁶Somnogen Canada Inc, Toronto, ON, Canada. ⁶⁰⁷National Institute of Health Research and Development, Ministry of Health, Jakarta, Indonesia. ⁶⁰⁸Division of General Internal Medicine, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. ⁶⁰⁹Department of Poverty, Gender and Youth, Population Council, New Delhi, India. ⁶¹⁰Department of Neurology and Public Health, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, NY, USA. ⁶¹¹Department of Pediatrics, RD Gardi Medical College, Ujjain, India. ⁶¹²Global Public Health-Health Systems and Policy (HSP): Medicines Focusing Antibiotics, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden. ⁶¹³Department of Pediatrics, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ⁶¹⁴Population Health Theme, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ⁶¹⁵Department of Physiology, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶¹⁶Physiology Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶¹⁷Department of Orthopedics, Yenepoya Medical College, Mangalore, India. ⁶¹⁸Department of Biochemistry and Dietetics, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ⁶¹⁹HIV and Mental Health Department, Integrated Development Foundation Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal. ⁶²⁰University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands. ⁶²¹School of Economics and Business, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands. ⁶²²Department of Pharmacology, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. ⁶²³Clinical Research Development Centre, Taleghani and Imam Ali Hospital, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ⁶²⁴Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Maragheh University of Medical Sciences, Maragheh, Iran. ⁶²⁵Dietary Supplements and Probiotic Research Center, Alborz University of Medical Sciences, Karaj, Iran. ⁶²⁶Clinical Research Center, Valle del Lili Foundation (Centro de Investigaciones Clínicas, Fundación Valle del Lili), Cali, Colombia. ⁶²⁷PROESA, ICESI University (Centro PROESA, Universidad ICESI), Cali, Colombia. ⁶²⁸Health Sciences Department, Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, Sukoharjo, Indonesia. ⁶²⁹Department of Chemistry, Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran. ⁶³⁰Department of Medicine, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada. ⁶³¹Thalassemia and Hemoglobinopathy Research Center, Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Ahvaz, Iran. ⁶³²Metabolomics and Genomics Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶³³Department of Community Medicine, Maharishi Markandeshwar Medical College & Hospital, Solan, India. ⁶³⁴School of Nursing and Healthcare Professions, Federation University Australia, Berwick, VIC, Australia. ⁶³⁵Department of Computer Science, Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan. ⁶³⁶Society for Health and Demographic Surveillance, Suri, India. ⁶³⁷Department of Economics, University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany. ⁶³⁸Department of Surgery, The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX, USA. ⁶³⁹Department of Cardiology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA. ⁶⁴⁰Department of Pharmacology, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶⁴¹Research Department, Policy Research Institute, Kathmandu, Nepal. ⁶⁴²Health and Public Policy Department, Global Center for Research and Development, Kathmandu, Nepal. ⁶⁴³Department of Oral Pathology, Srinivas Institute of Dental Sciences, Mangalore, India. ⁶⁴⁴Department of Infectious Disease, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ⁶⁴⁵Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ⁶⁴⁶School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences, CQ University, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ⁶⁴⁷River Region Cardiology Associates, Montgomery, WV, USA. ⁶⁴⁸Department of Computer Science, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA. ⁶⁴⁹Department of Health Information Management, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ⁶⁵⁰Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ⁶⁵¹Network of Immunity in Infection, Malignancy and Autoimmunity (NIIMA), Universal Scientific Education and Research Network (USERN), Tehran, Iran. ⁶⁵²Department of Infectious Diseases, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark. ⁶⁵³Cardiovascular Diseases Research Center, Birjand University of Medical Sciences, Birjand, Iran. ⁶⁵⁴Department of Chemical Sciences, University of Porto, Oporto, Portugal. ⁶⁵⁵Epidemiology Research Unit Institute of Public Health (EPIUnit-ISPUP), University of Porto, Porto, Portugal. ⁶⁵⁶Department of Surgery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA. ⁶⁵⁷Department of Surgery, University Teaching Hospital of Kigali, Kigali, Rwanda. ⁶⁵⁸Department of Clinical Research, Federal University of Uberlândia, Uberlândia, Brazil. ⁶⁵⁹School of Medicine, Gonabad University of Medical Sciences, Gonabad, Iran. ⁶⁶⁰Malaria Atlas Project, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ⁶⁶¹Department of Health Statistics, National Institute for Medical Research, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. ⁶⁶²Department of Internal Medicine, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana. ⁶⁶³Department of Epidemiology, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶⁶⁴Department of Psychiatry, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, India. ⁶⁶⁵Halal Research Center of IRI, Food and Drug Administration of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, Iran. ⁶⁶⁶Neurogenic Inflammation Research Center, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran. ⁶⁶⁷Department of Phytochemistry, Soran University, Soran, Iraq. ⁶⁶⁸Department of Nutrition, Cihan University-Erbil, Erbil, Iraq. ⁶⁶⁹Department of Microbiology, Central

University of Punjab, Bathinda, India. ⁶⁷⁰Public Health and Community Medicine Department, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt. ⁶⁷¹Drug Applied Research Center, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. ⁶⁷²Center for Clinical and Epidemiological Research, Hospital Universitário, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. ⁶⁷³School of Public Health and Health Management, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia. ⁶⁷⁴Department of Community Medicine, PSG Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Coimbatore, India. ⁶⁷⁵PSG-FAIMER South Asia Regional Institute, Coimbatore, India. ⁶⁷⁶Isfahan Cardiovascular Research Institute, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran. ⁶⁷⁷School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada. ⁶⁷⁸Faculty of Infectious and Tropical Diseases, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK. ⁶⁷⁹Colorectal Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁶⁸⁰Department of Geriatrics and Long Term Care, Hamad Medical Corporation, Doha, Qatar. ⁶⁸¹Faculty of Health & Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK. ⁶⁸²Population Health Research Institute, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada. ⁶⁸³Department of Epidemiology, Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar, India. ⁶⁸⁴Department of Psychology, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL, USA. ⁶⁸⁵Department of Food Science and Nutrition, Jigjiga University, Jigjiga, Ethiopia. ⁶⁸⁶Department of Computational Biology, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi, India. ⁶⁸⁷Emergency Department, Manian Medical Centre, Erode, India. ⁶⁸⁸National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, MD, USA. ⁶⁸⁹Center for Biomedical Information Technology, Shenzhen Institutes of Advanced Technology, Shenzhen, China. ⁶⁹⁰Department of Radiology and Radiological Science, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA. ⁶⁹¹Department of Radiology and Interventional Neuroradiology, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran. ⁶⁹²Health Policy Research Center, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. ⁶⁹³Department of Internal Medicine, Ziauddin University, Karachi, Pakistan. ⁶⁹⁴Independent Consultant, Karachi, Pakistan. ⁶⁹⁵School of Public Health, Dilla University, Dilla, Ethiopia. ⁶⁹⁶Neurology Department, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt. ⁶⁹⁷Department of Clinical Research, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark. ⁶⁹⁸School of Medicine, Alborz University of Medical Sciences, Karaj, Iran. ⁶⁹⁹Faculty of Caring Science, Work Life, and Social Welfare, University of Borås, Borås, Sweden. ⁷⁰⁰Department of Community Medicine, BLDE University, Vijayapur, India. ⁷⁰¹Golestan Research Center of Gastroenterology and Hepatology (GRCGH), Golestan University of Medical Sciences, Gorgan, Iran. ⁷⁰²Centre for Medical Informatics, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK. ⁷⁰³Division of General Internal Medicine, Harvard University, Boston, MA, USA. ⁷⁰⁴Health Information Management, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁷⁰⁵Department of Community Medicine, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India. ⁷⁰⁶Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ⁷⁰⁷National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo, Japan. ⁷⁰⁸College of Medicine, Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea. ⁷⁰⁹Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki, Finland. ⁷¹⁰Cancer Research Institute, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁷¹¹Cancer Biology Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁷¹²Clinical Immunology and Hematology, Sofiamed University Hospital, Sofia, Bulgaria. ⁷¹³Department of Genetics, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski', Sofia, Bulgaria. ⁷¹⁴Department of Health Education and Health Promotion, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ⁷¹⁵School of Health, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ⁷¹⁶Department of Hematology-Oncology, Baystate Medical Center, Springfield, MA, USA. ⁷¹⁷Department of Medicine, Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi, Pakistan. ⁷¹⁸School of Public Health & Zoonoses, Guru Angad Dev Veterinary & Animal Sciences University, Ludhiana, India. ⁷¹⁹School of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia. ⁷²⁰Division of Environmental Monitoring & Exposure Assessment (Water & Soil), National Institute for Research in Environmental Health, Bhopal, India. ⁷²¹Department of Midwifery, Haramaya University, Harar, Ethiopia. ⁷²²Department No. 16, Moscow Research and Practical Centre on Addictions, Moscow, Russia. ⁷²³Therapeutic Department, Balashikha Central Hospital, Balashikha, Russia. ⁷²⁴Department of Vascular and Endovascular Surgery, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. ⁷²⁵Nursing Care Research Center, Semnan University of Medical Sciences, Semnan, Iran. ⁷²⁶Division of Community Medicine, International Medical University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. ⁷²⁷Nursing Department, Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia. ⁷²⁸Pediatric Services, King Hussein Cancer Center, Amman, Jordan. ⁷²⁹Pediatrics, University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan. ⁷³⁰Department of Medicine, University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain. ⁷³¹Carlos III Health Institute, Biomedical Research Networking Center for Mental Health Network (CiberSAM), Madrid, Spain. ⁷³²Cancer Control Center, Osaka International Cancer Institute, Osaka, Japan. ⁷³³Department of Pharmacy, Arbaminch College of Health Sciences, Arba Minch, Ethiopia. ⁷³⁴Department of Biomedical Sciences, Arba Minch University, Arba Minch, Ethiopia. ⁷³⁵Research Center for Molecular Medicine, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran. ⁷³⁶Department of Medical Laboratory Science, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ⁷³⁷Department of Population Science and Human Resource Development, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi, Bangladesh. ⁷³⁸Department of Cell Therapy and Applied Genomics, King Hussein Cancer Center, Amman, Jordan. ⁷³⁹Department of Clinical Pharmacy, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia. ⁷⁴⁰Department of Community and Family Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁷⁴¹Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. ⁷⁴²Department of Public Health and Community Medicine, Central University of Kerala, Kasaragod, India. ⁷⁴³Department of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism, Christian Medical College and Hospital (CMC), Vellore, India. ⁷⁴⁴Department of Psychiatry Nursing, Ambo University, Ambo, Ethiopia. ⁷⁴⁵K.A. Timiryazev Institute of Plant Physiology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia. ⁷⁴⁶Department of Pathology and Legal Medicine, University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, Brazil. ⁷⁴⁷Modestum LTD, London, UK. ⁷⁴⁸Molecular Medicine and Pathology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand. ⁷⁴⁹Clinical Hematology and Toxicology, Maurice Wilkins Centre, Auckland, New Zealand. ⁷⁵⁰Department of Health Economics, Hanoi Medical University, Hanoi, Vietnam. ⁷⁵¹Department of Zoology, Arabian Gulf University, Churu, India. ⁷⁵²Department of Community Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Nagpur, India. ⁷⁵³Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation, University of Twente, Enschede, Netherlands. ⁷⁵⁴School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia. ⁷⁵⁵Multidisciplinary Department, National University of Medical Sciences (NUMS), Rawalpindi, Pakistan. ⁷⁵⁶Department of Community Medicine, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Teaching Hospital Abakaliki, Abakaliki, Nigeria. ⁷⁵⁷Department of Medical Microbiology/Parasitology, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria. ⁷⁵⁸Kasturba Medical College, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Mangalore, India. ⁷⁵⁹Amity Institute of Biotechnology, Amity University Rajasthan, Jaipur, India. ⁷⁶⁰Department of Internal Medicine, Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi, Pakistan. ⁷⁶¹Department of Neurology, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran. ⁷⁶²Non-communicable Diseases Research Center, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran. ⁷⁶³Clinical Cancer Research Center, Milad General Hospital, Tehran, Iran. ⁷⁶⁴Department of Microbiology, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. ⁷⁶⁵Argentine Society of Medicine, Buenos Aires, Argentina. ⁷⁶⁶Velez Sarsfield Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina. ⁷⁶⁷Department of Community Medicine and Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Bathinda, India. ⁷⁶⁸Department of Medical and Surgical Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy. ⁷⁶⁹Occupational Health Unit, Sant'Orsola Malpighi Hospital, Bologna, Italy. ⁷⁷⁰Faculty of Information Technology, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. ⁷⁷¹Population Dynamics and Sexual and Reproductive Health, African Population and Health Research Center, Nairobi, Kenya. ⁷⁷²Foundation University Medical College, Foundation University Islamabad, Islamabad, Pakistan. ⁷⁷³Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China. ⁷⁷⁴Research School of Population Health, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia. ⁷⁷⁵Demographic Change and Aging Research Area, Federal Institute for Population Research, Wiesbaden, Germany. ⁷⁷⁶Department of Physical Therapy, Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand. ⁷⁷⁷Department of Community Medicine, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. ⁷⁷⁸Department of Orthopaedics, Wenzhou Medical University, Wenzhou, China. ⁷⁷⁹Global Health Research Center, Duke Kunshan University, Kunshan, China. ⁷⁸⁰Duke Global Health Institute, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA. ⁷⁸¹Department of Behavior and Operation Management, Beijing Advanced Innovation Center for Big Data-based Precision Medicine, Beijing, China. ⁷⁸²Psychology Department, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK. ⁷⁸³Department of Diabetes and Metabolic Diseases, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan. ⁷⁸⁴School of International Development and Global Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada. ⁷⁸⁵The George Institute for Global Health, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. ⁷⁸⁶Health Services Management Research Center,

Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran. ⁷⁸⁷Department of Health Management, Policy, and Economics, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran. ⁷⁸⁸Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China. ⁷⁸⁹Department of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China. ⁷⁹⁰Hubert Department of Global Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA. ⁷⁹¹Department of Environmental Health, Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, Sari, Iran. ⁷⁹²Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion Research Center, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. ⁷⁹³School of Public Health and Management, Hubei University of Medicine, Shiyan, China. ⁷⁹⁴Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Fazaia Medical College, Islamabad, Pakistan. ⁷⁹⁵Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan. ⁷⁹⁶Department of Pharmaceutics, Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi, Pakistan. ⁷⁹⁷Department of Medicine, University Ferhat Abbas of Setif, Sétif, Algeria. ⁷⁹⁸Institute for Immunological Research, University of Cartagena, Cartagena, Colombia. ⁷⁹⁹The School of Clinical Sciences at Monash Health, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia. ⁸⁰⁰Student Research Committee, Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran. ⁸⁰¹Department of Radiology, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, USA. ⁸⁰²Laboratory of Genetics and Genomics, Moscow Research and Practical Centre on Addictions, Moscow, Russia. ⁸⁰³Addictology Department, Russian Medical Academy of Continuous Professional Education, Moscow, Russia. ⁸⁰⁴Pediatrics Department, Russian Medical Academy of Continuous Professional Education, Moscow, Russia. ⁸⁰⁵Department of Psychiatric Nursing, Haramaya University, Harar, Ethiopia. ⁸⁰⁶School of Pharmacy, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia. ⁸⁰⁷School of Public Health, Wuhan University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China. ⁸⁰⁸Hubei Province Key Laboratory of Occupational Hazard Identification and Control, Wuhan University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China. ⁸⁰⁹Department of Epidemiology, Human Genetics, and Environmental Sciences, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Houston, TX, USA.

Methods

Overview. This study implemented continuous geostatistics modeling of mild, moderate and severe anemia prevalence over time, from which local-, administrative- and national-level estimates of prevalence, counts and all other estimated quantities were derived. An ensemble approach using a Bayesian generalized linear mixed effects model was used to embed non-linear algorithmically predicted mean functions within a Gaussian process framework, assumed to have a correlated space–time covariance structure. We sampled 1,000 draws from an approximate posterior distribution of this model and generated annual prevalence estimates for mild, moderate, and severe anemia prevalence of WRA (ages 15–49 years) on an approximate 5 × 5-km grid over 82 LMICs from 2000 to 2018 and performed population-weighted aggregation of these gridded estimates to administrative and national levels. Countries were selected for inclusion in this study using the SDI, a summary measure of development that combines education, fertility and poverty¹⁸. Selected countries were in the low, lower-middle and middle SDI quintiles, with several exceptions (Supplementary Table 3). China, Malaysia and Turkmenistan were included despite high-middle SDIs for geographic continuity with other included countries. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Korea and Moldova were excluded due to geographic discontinuity and lack of available survey data. Of this set of countries, we did not generate estimates for 26 countries, as no survey data could be sourced (Supplementary Table 4).

Data. Surveys and hemoglobin data. We extracted each individual woman's hemoglobin concentrations (g L⁻¹), age, pregnancy status, smoking status and elevation from household series, including the Demographic and Health Surveys, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, the Living Standards Measurement Study and the Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire, among other country-specific child health and nutrition surveys. Included across our models were 218 geo-referenced household surveys from 2000 to 2018 representing over 3 million WRA. Each individual woman's record was associated with a cluster, a group of neighboring households or a 'community' that acted as a primary sampling unit in the survey design. The 218 surveys with hemoglobin, pregnancy, smoking and elevation data included geographic coordinates or precise place names for each cluster within that survey. In the absence of geographic coordinates for each cluster, we assigned data to the smallest available administrative areal unit in the survey (polygon) while accounting for the survey sample design⁴⁹. Boundary information for these administrative units was obtained as shapefiles either directly from the surveys or by matching to shapefiles in the Global Administrative Unit Layers database⁴² or the Database of Global Administrative Areas (GADM)⁵⁰. In select cases, shapefiles provided by the survey administrator were used, or custom shapefiles were created based on survey documentation. Using methods from our previous works³⁸, these areal data were resampled to point locations using a population-weighted sampling approach over the relevant areal unit with the number of locations set proportionally to the number of grid cells in the area and the total weights of all the resampled points summing to 1. In addition, some data sources did not contain hemoglobin concentrations and, instead, reported only the anemia severity category. These severity categories were used directly, whereas hemoglobin concentrations were adjusted and thresholded as described in the following section.

Select data sources were excluded for the following reasons: missing survey weights for areal data, missing sex or age variable, incomplete sampling (for example, only women aged 20–24 years measured) or untrustworthy data (as determined by the survey administrator or by inspection). Data availability plots for anemia by country, data type and year can be found in Supplementary Figs. 1–5.

Hemoglobin adjustments and anemia severity. For the purpose of defining anemia severity status, hemoglobin concentrations are often first adjusted for individual smoking status and residential elevation²⁹. Many data sources provide some combination of raw hemoglobin, smoking-adjusted hemoglobin, elevation-adjusted hemoglobin and smoking- and elevation-adjusted hemoglobin concentrations. Wherever possible, this study started with the raw hemoglobin concentrations and performed both smoking and elevation adjustments, as suggested by the WHO. If only partially adjusted (either only smoking-adjusted or elevation-adjusted), we performed the second adjustment, and, if only completely adjusted hemoglobin concentrations were available, we used those. The elevation adjustments are shown in Supplementary Table 5, and the smoking adjustments are shown in Supplementary Table 6.

Once the hemoglobin concentrations had been doubly adjusted for smoking and elevation, they were then thresholded into non-anemic, mild anaemia, moderate anaemia or severe anaemia categories using the WHO definitions shown in Supplementary Table 7. Some data sources reported only the anemia severity categories, which were then used directly in the modeling stage. After classification into anemia severity categories, individual-level data observations were then collapsed to cluster-level totals for the number of WRA sampled and total number of WRA who were determined to be mildly, moderately or severely anemic.

Temporal resolution. We estimated the prevalence of mild, moderate and severe anemia annually from 2000 to 2018 using a model that allowed us to account

for data points measured across survey years and, as such, allows us to predict at monthly or finer temporal resolutions. We were limited, however, both computationally and by the temporal resolution of covariates and, thus, have produced annual estimates (Supplementary Table 8 and Supplementary Fig. 8).

Spatial covariates. A variety of socioeconomic and environmental variables were used to predict anemia. Where available, the finest spatio-temporal resolution of gridded datasets was used. These covariates were selected based on their potential to be predictive for anemia and the pathways to anemia, including certain nutritional deficiencies, according to literature review and plausible hypothesis as to their influence. Acquisition of temporally dynamic datasets, where possible, was prioritized to closely align with our observations and to predict the changing dynamics of the anemia severity indicators.

We used covariate-driven predictive models to leverage strength from locations with observations to the entire spatial-temporal domain. Several 5 × 5-km raster layers of putative socioeconomic and environmental correlates of anemia were compiled and used as covariates across the 82 LMICs in the modeling domain (Supplementary Table 8 and Supplementary Fig. 8). These covariates were selected based on their potential to be predictive for anemia and the pathways to anemia, including certain nutritional deficiencies, according to literature review and plausible hypothesis as to their influence. Acquisition of temporally dynamic datasets, where possible, was prioritized to closely align with our observations and to predict the changing dynamics of the anemia severity indicators. Of the 19 covariates included, 12 were temporally dynamic and were re-formatted as a mid-year estimate or synoptic mean for each year in the estimation period. These included average diurnal temperature range, average potential evapotranspiration, average daily mean rainfall (precipitation), outdoor air pollution (PM_{2.5}), educational attainment in WRA (ages 15–49 years), enhanced vegetation index, tasseled cap brightness, prevalence of underweight (ages 0–5 years), Healthcare Access and Quality Index, fertility, urbanicity and population. The remaining seven covariate layers were static throughout the study period and were applied uniformly across all modeling years; these covariates included growing season length, irrigation, nutritional yield for vitamin A, nutritional yield for zinc, nutritional yield for iron, distance to rivers and lakes and travel time to nearest settlement with more than 50,000 inhabitants.

Travel time to nearest settlement, nutritional yield for vitamin A, nutritional yield for iron and nutritional yield for zinc were selected because of their potential to be predictive for anemia and the pathways to anemia. Fertility, malaria incidence, population, outdoor air pollution and prevalence of underweight were selected for inclusion in modeling owing to their correlation with a wide variety of health-related outcomes. Average daily mean temperature, average daily mean rainfall, irrigation, land cover, multi-source weighted-ensemble precipitation and tasseled cap brightness were selected for their correlation with a variety of crop yields. In addition, the stacking methodology used in this study boosts the predictive performance of individual covariates by leveraging non-linear and high-order interactions among the covariates and generally performs better when given a variety of covariates.

Analysis. Geostatistical model. To model the full distribution of possible indicators of anemia status—that is, all, mild, moderate and severe anemia—we used an ordinal modeling approach³¹ to estimate the relative proportion of each indicator.

We implemented a continuation ratio model to estimate the prevalence of three categories: mild, moderate and severe. We first modeled the proportion of all anemia within a Bayesian hierarchical framework using logistic regression with a spatially and temporally explicit generalized linear mixed effects model. Second, we modeled the probability of being mildly anemic conditional on being anemic (that is, being mildly, moderately or severely anemic) using the same Bayesian modeling framework. Finally, we modeled the probability of being severely anemic conditional on being either moderately or severely anemic. The estimates from the two conditional models were combined with the all-anemia estimates to compute the marginal prevalence of mild, moderate and severe anemia.

For each modeling region, at each cluster, d , where $d = 1, 2, \dots, n$, and time t , where $t = 2000, 2001, \dots, 2018$, the prevalence of all anemia was modeled using the observed number of WRA in cluster d who were found to be anemic as a binomial count, C_d , among an observed sample of N_d :

$$C_d | P_{i(d),t(d)}, N_d \sim \text{Binomial}(P_{i(d),t(d)}, N_d) \forall \text{ observed clusters } d$$

$$\text{logit}(p_{i,t}) = \beta_0 + \mathbf{X}_{i,t}\beta + Z_{i,t} + \epsilon_{ctr(i)}$$

$$+ \epsilon_{i,t} + Z_{i,t} \forall i \in \text{spatial domain} \forall t \in \text{time domain}$$

$$\sum_{h=1}^3 \beta_h = 1$$

$$\epsilon_{ctr} \sim \text{iid Normal}(0, \gamma^2)$$

$$\epsilon_{i,t} \sim \text{iid Normal} \left(0, \sigma^2 \right)$$

$$Z \sim \text{GP} \left(0, \Sigma^{\text{space}} \otimes \Sigma^{\text{time}} \right)$$

$$\Sigma^{\text{space}} = \frac{\omega^2}{\Gamma(\nu) 2^{\nu-1}} \times (\kappa D)^\nu \times K_\nu(\kappa D)$$

$$\Sigma_{j,k}^{\text{time}} = \rho^{|k-j|}$$

For indices d, i and t , $*$ (index) is the value of $*$ at the index. The annual prevalence of all anemia, $p_{i,t}$, in spatial location i , in time t , was modeled as a linear combination of the three submodels (generalized additive model, boosted regression trees and lasso regression), rasterised covariate values, $X_{i,t}$, a correlated spatio-temporal random effect term $Z_{i,t}$, country random effects $\epsilon_{ctr(i)}$, with one unstructured country random effect fit for each country in the modeling region (Extended Data Fig. 3) and all ϵ_{ctr} sharing a common variance parameter, γ^2 , and an independent nugget random effect, $\epsilon_{i,t}$, with variance parameter σ^2 . Coefficients β_h , in the three submodels $h \in 1, 2, 3$ represent their respective predictive weighting in the logit-link, whereas the joint structured process, $Z_{i,t}$, accounts for residual spatio-temporal autocorrelation among individual data points that remain after accounting for the predictive effect of the submodel covariates, the country-level random effect, $\epsilon_{ctr(i)}$, and the nugget, $\epsilon_{i,t}$. The spatio-temporal residual process, $Z_{i,t}$, was modeled as a three-dimensional Gaussian process in space-time centered at 0 and with a covariance matrix constructed from a Kronecker product of spatial and temporal covariance kernels. The spatial covariance, Σ^{space} , was modeled using an isotropic and stationary Matérn function⁵² and the temporal covariance, Σ^{time} , as an annual autoregressive (AR1) function over the 19 years represented in the model. In the stationary Matérn function, the covariance between two spatial locations that are Euclidean distance D apart is a function of Γ , the gamma function, K_ν , the modified Bessel function of the second kind of order $\nu > 0$, $\kappa > 0$, a scaling parameter and ω^2 , the marginal variance. The scaling parameter, κ , is defined to be $\kappa = \sqrt{8\nu/\delta}$, where δ is the range parameter (interpreted to be the approximate distance at which the correlation between two locations drops to 0.1), and ν is a scaling constant, which is set to 2 rather than fit from the data. The number of rows and the number of columns of the spatial Matérn covariance matrix are both equal to the number of spatial mesh points for a given modeling region. The Matérn kernel is a practical and common choice that can flexibly model a wide variety of spatial surfaces and allows for fitting or selection of the smoothness of the surface, helping to avoid unrealistic over-smoothing⁵². For the temporal kernel, we chose to use an AR1 process owing to its stability, which aligns well with the observed relatively slow and smooth changes in anemia prevalence across time, and for its interpretability. In the AR1 function, ρ is the temporal correlation between adjacent time steps, taken to be single years in this study, and k and j are time steps. The number of rows and the number of columns of the AR1 covariance matrix are both equal to the number of temporal mesh points (19). The number of rows and the number of columns of the space-time covariance matrix, $\Sigma^{\text{space}} \otimes \Sigma^{\text{time}}$, for a given modeling region are equal (the number of spatial mesh points \times the number of temporal mesh points). Previous sensitivity analyses on these models showed these modeling choices to be generally quite robust^{37,53}.

This approach leverages the residual correlation structure to more accurately predict prevalence estimates for locations with no data while also propagating the dependence in the data through to uncertainty estimates⁵⁴. The posterior distributions were fit using computationally efficient and accurate approximations in R-INLA⁵⁵ (integrated nested Laplace approximation) with the stochastic partial differential equations (SPDE)⁵⁶ approximation to the spatio-temporal Gaussian process using R version 3.5.1. The SPDE approach using INLA was demonstrated elsewhere, including the estimation of health indicators, particulate air matter and population age structure⁵⁶. Uncertainty intervals were generated from 1,000 draws (that is, statistically plausible candidate maps)⁵⁷ created from the posterior-estimated distributions of modeled parameters.

Mesh construction. We constructed the finite elements mesh for the SPDE approximation to the Gaussian process regression using a simplified polygon boundary (in which coastlines and complex boundaries were smoothed) for each of the regions within our model. We set the inner mesh triangle maximum edge length (the mesh size for areas over land) to be 0.75 degrees and the buffer maximum edge length (the mesh size for areas over the ocean) to be 5.0 degrees⁵⁸. An example finite elements mesh constructed for eastern sub-Saharan Africa mesh can be found in Supplementary Fig. 7.

Post-estimation. To transform grid cell-level estimates into a range of information useful to a wide constituency of potential users, these estimates were aggregated at first and second administrative units specific to each country and at national levels⁴⁰. Although the models can predict all locations covered by available raster covariates, all final model outputs for which land cover was classified as 'barren or

sparsely vegetated' on the basis of Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer satellite data (2013) were masked⁵⁹. Areas where the total population density was fewer than ten individuals per 1×1 -km grid cell in 2015 were also masked in the final outputs. To compute the YLDs, we applied the corresponding disability weights from the GBD study³⁰ on prevalence estimates of the severity bins (mild, moderate and severe anemia) and summed to get the total YLDs for all anemia.

Model validation. Models were validated using spatially stratified five-fold out-of-sample cross-validation. To replicate real-world missingness in the datasets and to fairly assess model performance in areas far from observed data, acknowledging the spatial correlation inherent in the observation, holdout folds were created by combining sets of all data falling within first administrative-level units. Validation was performed by calculating bias (mean error), variance (root-mean-square error), 95% data coverage within prediction intervals and correlation between observed data and predictions. All validation metrics were calculated on the out-of-sample predictions from the five-fold cross-validation. All validation procedures and corresponding results are provided in Supplementary Tables 17–19 and Supplementary Figs. 20–22.

In-sample metrics. To assess the in-sample performance of our models and compare to national-level estimates produced by the GBD study, we generated a suite of diagnostic plots for anemia estimates in each of the regions and countries modeled. To explore residual error over space and time, absolute error (data minus predicted posterior mean estimates at the corresponding grid cells) was produced.

Metrics of predictive validity. To assess the predictive validity of our estimates, we validated our models using spatially stratified five-fold out-of-sample cross-validation⁶⁰. To construct each spatial fold, we used a modified bi-tree algorithm to spatially aggregate data points. This algorithm recursively partitions two-dimensional space, alternating between horizontal and vertical splits on the weighted data sample size medians, until the data contained within each spatial partition are of a similar sample size. The depth of recursive partitioning is constrained by the target sample size within a partition and the minimum number of clusters or pseudo-clusters allowed within each spatial partition (in this case, a minimum sample size of 500 was used). These spatial partitions are then allocated to one of five folds for cross-validation. For validation, each geostatistical model was run five times, each time holding out data from one of the folds, generating a set of out-of-sample predictions for the held-out data. A full suite of out-of-sample predictions over the entire dataset was generated by combining the out-of-sample predictions from the five cross-validation runs.

Using these out-of-sample predictions, we then calculated mean error (or bias), root-mean-squared error (RMSE, which summarizes total variance), coefficient of variation (defined to be the standard deviation divided by the mean and multiplied by 100, which is a measure of relative variability) and 95% coverage of our predictive intervals (the proportion of observed out-of-sample data that fall within our predicted 95% credible intervals) aggregated up to different administrative levels (levels 0, 1 and 2) as defined by the GADM³⁰. Administrative level 0 (admin 0) borders correspond to national boundaries; administrative level 1 (admin 1) borders generally correspond to regions, provinces or state-level boundaries within a country; and administrative level 2 (admin 2) borders correspond to the next finer subdivision, often districts, within regions. These metrics are summarized in Supplementary Tables 13–15 and Supplementary Figs. 15–17 and are calculated across all regions. Included in the sample tables for comparison are the same metrics calculated on in-sample predictions.

Sensitivity analysis. We ran four five-fold cross-validation holdout in-sample experiments, using different combinations of covariates and random effects:

1. Raw covariates + Gaussian process: $\text{logit}(p_i) = \beta_0 + X_i \beta_{\text{raw}} + \epsilon_{\text{GP}_i} + \epsilon_i$
2. Raw covariates: $\text{logit}(p_i) = \beta_0 + X_i \beta_{\text{raw}} + \epsilon_i$
3. Stacking predictions as covariates: $\text{logit}(p_i) = \beta_0 + X_i \beta_{\text{stack}} + \epsilon_i$
4. Stacking covariates + Gaussian process (standard model):
 $\text{logit}(p_i) = \beta_0 + X_i \beta_{\text{stack}} + \epsilon_{\text{GP}_i} + \epsilon_i$

The summary error measures for all models are shown in Supplementary Figs. 20 and 21 to demonstrate how adding stackers or the Gaussian process individually change predictive capacity on administrative level 1 and 2, respectively. Across the two levels of aggregation and all four validation metrics, the models with a Gaussian process outperformed those without, as they had smaller RMSE and greater correlation. For the standard model, which used both the stacking covariates and the Gaussian process, the in-sample RMSE and correlation were 0.053 and 0.078 and 0.87 and 0.77 at administrative levels 1 and 2, respectively. For the raw covariates model with the Gaussian process, RMSE = 0.069 and 0.084, and the correlation = 0.71 and 0.63; for the model that used raw covariates only, RMSE = 0.066 and 0.091, and the correlation = 0.55 and 0.43; and for the stacked covariates model, RMSE = 0.056 and 0.079, and the correlation = 0.85 and 0.75, at administrative levels 1 and 2, respectively.

Projections. To compare our estimated rates of improvement in all-anemia prevalence over the 19-year period across different locations, and to assess if

locations are on track to meet the WHO GNT for anemia given historical rates of improvement, we performed a simple projection using estimated AROCs applied to the final year of our estimates. Both AROCs and projections were calculated at the draw level to construct uncertainty estimates for both.

For all-anemia prevalence, we calculated AROCs at each administrative-level unit (a) by calculating the AROC between each pair of adjacent years, t :

$$AROC_{a,t} = \text{logit} \left(\frac{P_{a,t}}{P_{a,t-1}} \right)$$

We then calculated a weighted AROC for all-anemia by taking a weighted average across the years, where more recent AROCs were given more weight in the average. We defined the weights to be:

$$W_t = \frac{(t - 2000)^\gamma}{\sum_{2001}^{2018} (t - 2000)^\gamma},$$

where γ may be chosen to give varying amounts of weight across the years. Using the weights and the AROCs between consecutive years, the average AROC across the duration of the study was calculated:

$$AROC_a = \left(\sum_{2001}^{2018} W_t * AROC_{a,t} \right)$$

Finally, we calculated the projections (*Proj*) by applying the 7 years of the AROC (from 2018 to 2025) to our mean 2018 prevalence estimates. The projection was performed in logit-space (consistent with the AROC calculation) to ensure that the projected estimates range between 0 and 1:

$$Proj_{a,2025} = \text{logit}^{-1} \left(\text{logit} (p_{a,2018}) + AROC_a \times 7 \right).$$

This projection scheme is analogous to the methods used in the GBD 2017 measurement of progress and projected attainment of health-related SDGs¹⁸. The exponential power in the weighting scheme was chosen to match that used by the GBD study, which selects this parameter using an out-of-sample predictive validation framework. Our projections assume that areas will sustain the current AROC, and the precision of the AROC estimates is dependent on this assumption and the uncertainty from the all-anemia annual prevalence estimates.

Post-estimation calibration to national and subnational estimates. To leverage national-level data that were included in GBD 2017 (ref.¹⁸) but were outside the scope of our current geospatial modeling framework, and to ensure alignment between this study's estimates and GBD 2017 estimates, we performed a post hoc calibration to each of our 1,000 candidate maps. For each posterior draw, we calculated population-weighted grid cell aggregations at the level of GBD estimates (at national or subnational level) and compared these estimates in each year to the analogous and available GBD 2017 estimates from 2000 to 2017. We defined the raking factor to be the ratio between the GBD 2017 estimates and our current estimates and linearly interpolated raking factors in each country between the available years. Finally, we multiplied each of our grid cells in a country-year by its associated raking factor. This ensures alignment between our geospatial estimates and GBD 2017 estimates while preserving our estimated within-country geospatial and temporal variation.

Reporting Summary. Further information on research design is available in the Nature Research Reporting Summary linked to this article.

Data availability

The findings of this study are supported by data available in public online repositories, data publicly available upon reasonable request of the data provider and data not publicly available owing to restrictions by the data provider. Non-publicly available data were used under licence for the current study but might be available from the authors upon reasonable request and with permission of the data provider. A detailed table of data sources and availability can be found in Supplementary Section 2. The full list of input data sources and output of the analyses is publicly available in the Global Health Data Exchange (<http://ghdx.healthdata.org/record/ihme-data/global-anemia-prevalence-geospatial-estimates-2000-2019>) and can further be explored via customized data visualization tools (<https://vizhub.healthdata.org/lbd/anemia>).

Administrative boundaries were retrieved from the Database of Global Administrative Areas⁵⁰. Land cover was retrieved from the online Data Pool, courtesy of the NASA EOSDIS Land Processes Distributed Active Archive Center, USGS/Earth Resources Observation and Science Center⁴³. Lakes were retrieved from the Global Lakes and Wetlands Database⁴⁵, courtesy of the World Wildlife Fund and the Center for Environmental Systems Research at the University of Kassel⁴⁴. Populations were retrieved from WorldPop^{46,47}.

Code availability

This study follows the Guidelines for Accurate and Transparent Health Estimates Reporting (GATHER; Supplementary Table 1). All code used for these

analyses is publicly available at <http://ghdx.healthdata.org/record/ihme-data/global-anemia-prevalence-geospatial-estimates-2000-2019> and <https://github.com/ihmeuw/lbd/tree/anemia-lmic-2021>.

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Author contributions

S.I.H. and N.J.K. conceived and planned the study. S.B.E., A.L.A., D.L. and K.M.D. identified and obtained data for analysis. S.B.E., A.L.A., D.L. and K.M.D. extracted, processed and geo-positioned the data. D.K.K. carried out the statistical analyses with input from A.O.-Z. and A.L.A. A.O.-Z., N.J.H., M.L.C., M.A.C., J.E.M., A.D., L.P.W., J.D.V., K.E.W., R.C.R. and L.D.-L. provided input on the methods. D.K.K., L.E.S., I.L. and A.C. prepared the figures and tables. M.E.S. served as project manager for the study. D.K.K., L.E.S. and A.O.-Z. wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and all authors contributed to subsequent revisions. All authors provided intellectual input into aspects of this study, specifically as below. Managing the estimation or publications process: Damaris Kinyoki, Aaron Osgood-Zimmerman and Megan Schipp. Writing the first draft of the manuscript: Damaris Kinyoki, Aaron Osgood-Zimmerman, Lauren Schaeffer and Megan Schipp. Primary responsibility for this manuscript focused on applying analytical methods to produce estimates: Damaris Kinyoki, Aaron Osgood-Zimmerman and Natalia V. Bhattacharjee. Primary responsibility for this manuscript focused on seeking, cataloguing, extracting or cleaning data and designing or coding figures and tables: Lauren Schaeffer, Alice Lazzar-Atwood, Dan Lu, Samuel B. Ewald, Katie Donkers, Ian Letourneau and Michael Collison. Providing data or critical feedback on data sources: Damaris Kinyoki, Samuel B. Ewald, Ian Letourneau, Megan Schipp, Mitra Abbasifard, Hedayat Abbastabar, Foad Abd-Allah, Ahmed Abdelalim, Amir Abdoli, Hassan Abolhassani, Ahmed Abughassan, Abdelrahman Abushouk, Maryam Adabi, Oladimeji Adebayo, Victor Adekanmbi, Olatunji Adetokunboh, Daniel Adeyinka, Shailesh Advani, Sohail Ahmad, Tauseef Ahmad, Sepideh Ahmadi, Muktar Ahmed, Miloud Taki Eddine Aichour, Budi Aji, Oluwaseun Akinyemi, Addis Akliu, Chisom Akunna, Jacqueline Alcalde-Rabanal, Sheikh Alif, Hesam Alizade, Syed Aljunid, Amir Almasi-Hashiani, Nelson Alvis-Guzman, Saeed Amini, Nahla Anber, Tudorel Andrei, Masresha Anegago, Mina Anjomshoa, Fereshteh Ansari, Ernoiz Antriyandarti, Davood Anvari, Muhammad Aqeel, Jalal Arabloo, Morteza Arab-Zozani, Olatunde Aremu, Mulusew Asemahagn, Seyyed Shamsadin Athari, Seyyede Masoume Athari, Marcel Ausloos, Nefsu Awoke, Beatriz Paulina Ayala Quintanilla, Getinet Ayano, Yared Aynalem, Alaa Badawi, Mohammad Amin Bahrami, Palash Banik, Miguel Barboza, Sanjay Basu, Gholamreza Bazmandegan, Neeraj Bedi, Tariku Tesfaye Bekuma, Suraj Bhattarai, Boris Bikbov, Somayeh Bohlouli, Mahdi Bohlouli, Archith Boloor, Shiva Borzouei, Nicola Bragazzi, Dejana Braithwaite, Luis Cámera, Luis Cámera, Joao Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia, Carlos Castañeda-Orjuela, Franz Castro, Souranshu Chatterjee, Vijay Kumar Chattu, Simiao Chen, Vera Costa, Lalit Dandona, Rakhi Dandona, Rajat Das Gupta, Chitya Dash, Kairat Davletov, Kebede Deribe, Meghnath Dhimal, Govinda Dhungana, Mostafa Dianatinasab, Hoa Do, Leila Doshmangir, Andre Duraes, Maysaa El Sayed Zaki, Rajesh Elayedath, Teshome Elema, Babak Eshradi, Khalil Eskandari, Emerito Jose Faraon, Mohammad Fareed, Farshad Farzadfar, Abidemi Fasanmi, Berhanu Feleke, Takeshi Fukumoto, Mohamed Gad, Abhay Gaidhane, Reta Gayesa, Birhan Gebregiorgis, Leake Gebremeskel, Yilma Geramo, Lemma Getacher, Keyghobad Ghadiri, Fatemeh Ghaffarifar, Ahmad Ghashghaee, Nermin Ghith, Ayman Grada, Nachiket Gudi, Arvin Haj-Mirzaian, Ahmed Hasaballah, Syed Shahzad Hasan, Abdiwahab Hashi, Soheil Hassanipour, Hadi Hassankhani, Mohamed Hegazy, Reza Heidari-Soureshjani, Claudiu Herteliu, Praveen Hoogar, Mehdi Hosseinzadeh, Mowafa Househ, Syed Hussain, Usman Iqbal, Sheikh Mohammed Shariful Islam, Vardhmaan Jain, Mihajlo Jakovljevic, Amir Jalali, Tahereh Javaheri, Oommen John, Kimberly Johnson, Jost Jonas, Farahnaz Joukar, Jacek Jozwiak, Zubair Kabir, Leila Kalanekesh, Rohollah Kalhor, Ashwin Kamath, Zahra Kamiab, Umsh Kapil, Salah Eddin Karimi, Ayele Semachew Kasa, Gbenga Kayode, Bayew Kelkay, Nauman Khalid, Maseer Khan, Md. Nuruzzaman Khan, Khaled Khatib, Amir Khater, Mona Khater, Abdullah Khoja, Jagdish Khubchandani, Neda Kianipour, Young-Eun Kim, Yun Jin Kim, Adnan Kisa, Sezer Kisa, Soewarta Kosen, Parvaiz Koul, Kewal Krishan, Barthelemy Kuate Defo, G. Anil Kumar, Pushpendra Kumar, Om Kurmi, Dian Kusuma, Deepesh Lad, Dharmesh Lal, Huiung Lan Nguyen, Anders Larsson, Savita Lasrado, Savita Lasrado, Kate Legrand, Chi Linh Hoang, Xuefeng Liu, Jaifred Christian Lopez, Hassan Magdy Abd El Razek, Muhammed Magdy Abd El Razek, D. R. Mahadeshwara Prasad, Narayan Mahotra, Shokofeh Maleki, Reza Malekzadeh, Deborah Malta, Deborah Malta,

Fariborz Mansour-Ghanaei, Borhan Mansouri, Francisco Martins-Melo, Benjamin Mayala, Medhin Mehari, Man Mohan Mehndiratta, Entezar Mehrabi Nasab, Mulugeta Melku, Walter Mendoza, Ritesh Menezes, Endalkachew Mengesha, Meresa Mengesha, Workua Metekiya, Erkin Mirrakhimov, Hamed Mirzaei, Babak Moazen, Masoud Moghadaszadeh, Dara Mohammad, Naser Mohammad Gholi Mezerji, Abdollah Mohammadian-Hafshejani, Ammas Mohammed, Hayat Mohammed, Salahuddin Mohammed, Shafiu Mohammed, Ali Mokdad, Masoud Moradi, Maziar Moradi-Lakeh, Seyyed Meysam Mousavi, Getaneh Mulu, Mehnaz Munir, Ghulam Mustafa, Mehdi Naderi, Ahamarshan Nagarajan, Shankar Prasad Nagaraju, Bruno Nascimento, Javad Nazari, Ionut Negoii, Ruxandra Negoii, Georges Nguefack-Tsague, Josephine Ngunjiri, Cuong Nguyen, Yeshambel Nigatu, Amin Reza Nikpoor, Chukwudi Nnaji, Vuong Nong, Jean Jacques Noubiap, Bogdan Oancea, Felix Ogbo, Andrew Olagunju, Bolajoko Olusanya, Jacob Olusanya, Ahmed Omar Bali, Obinna Onwujekwe, Mayowa Owolabi, Mahesh P A, Jagadish Rao Padubidri, Keyvan Pakshir, Adrian Pana, Songhomitra Panda-Jonas, Anamika Pandey, Seithikurippu Pandi-Perumal, Deepak Kumar Pasupula, Urvis Patel, Ashish Pathak, Jeevan Pereira, Julia Pescarini, Brandon Pickering, Khem Pokhrel, Maarten Postma, Hadi Pourjafar, Sergio Prada, Hai Quang Pham, Zahiruddin Quazi Syed, Navid Rabiee, Fakher Rahim, Amir Masoud Rahmani, Aashish Rajesh, Kiana Ramezanzadeh, Chhabi Ranabhat, Sowmya J. Rao, Lal Rawal, Reza Rawassizadeh, Bhageerathy Reshmi, Nima Rezaei, Seyed Mohammad Riahi, Jennifer Rickard, Leonardo Roever, Godfrey Rweggerera, Siamak Sabour, Ehsan Sadeghi, Rajesh Sagar, S. Mohammad Sajadi, Nasir Salam, Milena Santric-Milicevic, Sivan Saraswathy, Arash Sarveezad, Brijesh Sathian, Deepak Saxena, David Schwebel, Debarka Sengupta, Subramanian Senthilkumaran, Sadaf Sepanlou, Allen Seylani, Feng Sha, Omid Shafaat, Saeed Shahabi, Masood Shaikh, Mohammed Shaka, Mohammadbagher Shamsi, Morteza Shamsizadeh, Mohammed Shannawaz, Amrollah Sharifi, Adithi Shetty, B. Suresh Shetty, Wondimeneh Shiferaw, Jae Il Shin, Soraya Siabani, Valentin Skryabin, Anna Skryabina, Mohammad Reza Sobhiyeh, Amin Soheili, Emma Spurlock, Emma Spurlock, Chandrashekhar Sreeramareddy, Agus Sudaryanto, Rafael Tabarés-Seisdedos, Amir Taherkhani, Zemenu Tamir, Animut Tamiru, Hirut Teame, Nihal Thomas, Asres Tilahun, Marcos Tovani-Palone, Khanh Tran, Bach Tran Xuan, Rajnish Tripathi, Phuong Truong, Riaz Uddin, Anayat Ullah, Bhaskaran Unnikrishnan, Era Upadhyay, Alireza Vakilian, Pascual Valdez, Pascual Ruben Valdez, Yasser Vasseghian, Bay Vo, Yohannes Wado, Yasir Waheed, Yafeng Wang, Girmay Weldesamuel, Taweevat Wiangkham, Charles Wiysonge, Ali Yadollahpour, Mingyou Yang, Sanni Yaya, Alex Yeshaneh, Yordanos Yeshitila, Mekdes Yilma, Melissa Young, Abdilahi Yousuf, Chuanhua Yu, Syed Saoud Zaidi, Josefina Zakzuk, Mohammad Zamani, Alireza Zangeneh, Mikhail Zastrozhin, Anastasia Zastrozhina Dejene Zewdie and Arash Ziapour. Providing methods or computational machinery: Damaris Kinyoki, Aaron Osgood-Zimmerman, Muktar Ahmed, Hesam Alizade, Amir Almasi-Hashiani, Nahla Anber, Masresha Anegago, Davood Anvari, Mulusew Asemahagn, Nefsu Awoke, Yared Aynalem, Mohammad Amin Bahrami, Natalia V. Bhattacharjee, Somayeh Bohlouli, Shiva Borzouei, Farah Daoud, Mostafa Dianatinasab, Lucas Earl, Khalil Eskandari, Reza Heidari-Soureshjani, Nathaniel Henry, Mowafa Househ, Amir Khater, Neda Kianipour, Young-Eun Kim, Adnan Kisa, Borhan Mansouri, Fereshteh Mehri, Masoud Moghadaszadeh, Salahuddin Mohammed, Ali Mokdad, Mohsen Naghavi, Rajan Nikbakhsh, Chhabi Ranabhat, Seyed Mohammad Riahi, Alyssa Sbarra, Allen Seylani, Omid Shafaat, Emma Spurlock, Hirut Teame, Rajnish Tripathi, Era Upadhyay, Yasser Vasseghian, Syed Saoud Zaidi, Mikhail Zastrozhin, Anastasia Zastrozhina and Arash Ziapour. Providing critical feedback on methods or results: Damaris Kinyoki, Lauren Schaeffer, Ian Letourneau, Megan Schipp, Amanuel Abajobir, Nooshin Abbasi, Sima Abbasi, Sherief Abd-Elasalim, Ibrahim Abdollahpour, Aidin Abedi, Bijou Abraham, Lucas Abreu, Michael Abrigo, Eman Abu-Gharibeh, Manfred Accrombessi, Adeyinka Adegbosin, Davoud Adham, Pradyumna Agasthi, Mohammad Aghaali, Keivan Ahmadi, Ziyad Al-Aly, Turki Alanzi, Aynalem Alemu, Biresaw Alemu, Robert Alhassan, Vahid Alipour, Hesham Al-Mekhlafi, Rajaa Al-Raddadi, Fatemeh Amiri, Dickson Amugsi, Robert Ancuceanu, Fereshteh Ansari, Alireza Ansari-Moghaddam, Zelalem Anteneh, Habtamu Areri, Al Artaman, Mengistu Ashebir, Maha Atout, Martin Ayanore, Muluken Ayza, Abbas Azadmehr, Darshan B. Tesleem Babalola, Ashish Badiye, Mohan Bairwa, Adhanom Baraki, Huda Basaleem, Mohsen Bayati, Bayisa Baye, Michelle Bell, Abadi Berhe, Kidanemariam Berhe, Kidanemariam Berhie, Dinesh Bhandari, Nikha Bhardwaj, Pankaj Bhardwaj, Kritika Bhattacharyya, Zulfiqar Bhutta, Ali Bijani, Antonio Biondi, Minyichil Birhanu, Andre Brunoni, Sharath Burugina Nagaraja, Zahid Butt, Florentino Luciano Caetano Dos Santos, Rosario Cárdenas, Muge Cevik, Wagaye Chanie, Jaykaran Charan, Ken Chin, Mohiuddin Ahsanul Kabir Chowdhury, Beriuhun Dachew, Henok Dagne, Saad Dahlawi, Haijiang Dai, Hancheng Dai, Jai Das, Claudio Davila-Cervantes, Jan-Walter De Neve, Farah Deeba, Assefa Desalew, Getenet Dessie, Sagnik Dey, Daniel Diaz, Shirin Djalalinia, Fariba Dorostkar, Bereket Duko, Hisham Edinur, Iman El Sayed, Hala Elhabashy, Aisha Elsharkawy, Yasser El-Sherbiny, Daniel Endalew, Sharareh Eskandarieh, Ibtihal Fadhil, Pawan Faris, Medhat Farwati, Nazir Fattahi, Valery Feigin, Seyed-Mohammad Fereshtehnejad, Nataliya Foigt, Artem Fomenkov, Masoud Foroutan, Joel Francis, Richard Franklin, Biniyam Geberemariam, Hadush Gebremariam, Gebreamlak Gebremeskel, Assefa Ayalew Gebreslassie, Hailey Gesesew, Bradford Gessner, Mansour Ghafourifard, Mahsa Ghajarzadeh, Farhad Ghamari, Syed Amir Gilani, Tiffany Gill, Myron Godinho, Philimon Gona, Davide Guido, Rashid Guled, Yuming Guo, Rachita Gupta, Randah Hamadeh, Demelash Woldeyohannes Handiso, Asif Hanif, Arief Hargono, Md. Mehdi Hasan, Maryam Hashemian, Shoab Hassan, Khezar Hayat, Fatemeh Heydarpour, Souzan Heydarpour, Hagos Hidir, Ramesh Holla, Sung Hwi Hong, Seyyed Nasrollah Hosseini, Mihaela Hostiu, Sorin Hostiu, Peter Hotez, Tanvir

Huda, Dawit Huluko, Bing-Fang Hwang, Olayinka Ilesanmi, Irena Ilic, Milena Ilic, Leeberk Inbaraj, M. Mofizul Islam, Chidozie Iwu, Chinwe Iwu, Farhad Jadidi-Niaragh, Mohammad Jahani, Farzad Jalilian, Ravi Jha, Jitendra Jonnagaddala, Ankur Joshi, Ali Kabir, Tanvir Kahlon, Tanuj Kanchan, Neeti Kapoor, Behzad Karami Matin, Gebremicheal Kasahun, Gebrehiwot Kassa, Zemenu Kassa, Getinet Kassahun, Ali Kazemi Karyani, Tibebeleslassie Keflie, Peter Keiyoro, Maryam Keramati, Daniel Ketema, Mohammad Khammarnia, Junaid Khan, Ruth Kimokoti, Tufa Kolola, Ali Koolivand, Ai Koyanagi, Vijay Krishnamoorthy, Vaman Kulkarni, Manasi Kumar, Nithin Kumar, Faris Lami, Matthew Laurens, Avula Laxmaiah, Shaun Lee, Sonia Lewycka, Bingyu Li, Shanshan Li, Daiane Machado, Shilpashree Madhava Kunjathur, Phetole Mahasha, Mina Maheri, Abdullah Mamun, Mohammad Ali Mansournia, Md. Dilshad Manzar, Carlos Marrugo Arnedo, Anthony Masaka, Kala Mehta, Wahengbam Meitei, Teferi Mekonnen, Gebrekiros Meles, Abera Mersha, Tomasz Miazgowski, Irmina Maria Michalek, Gk Mini, Andreea Mirica, Maryam Mirzaei, Mehdi Mirzaei-Alavijeh, Sanjeev Misra, Yusef Mohammad, Reza Mohammadpourhodki, Jemal Mohammed, Mohammad Mohseni Bandepi, Alex Molassiotis, Rahmatollah Moradzadeh, Simin Mouodi, Amin Mousavi Khaneghah, Moses Muriithi, Gvs Murthy, Ashraf Nabhan, Mehdi Naderi, Gurudatta Naik, Mukhammad David Naimzada, Vinay Nangia, Jobert Richie Nansseu, Atta Abbas Naqvi, Rawlance Ndejjo, Henok Netsere, Diep Nguyen, Vincent Nwatah, Tafadzwa Nyahanda, Onome Oghenetege, In-Hwan Oh, Daniel Okello, Abidemi Omonisi, Alberto Ortiz, Eduardo Ortiz-Panozo, Nikita Otstavnov, Stanislav Otstavnov, Abhijit Pakhare, Helena Pangaribuan, Sangram Patel, George Patton, Saeed Piroozpanah, Meghdad Pirsahab, Faheem Pottoo, Hadis Pourchamani, Hadi Pourjafar, Hossein Poustchi, Dimas Pribadi, Ata Rafiee, Muhammad Aziz Rahman, Rajesh Kumar Rai, Pradhun Ram, Satish Rao, Prateek Rastogi, Priya Rathi, Lemma Regassa, Robert Reiner, Omid Reza Hosseini, Aziz Rezapour, Ana Isabel Ribeiro, Hirbo Roba, Susan Rumisha, Sahar Saeedi Moghaddam, Mohammad Ali Sahraian, Marwa Salem, Hossein Samadi Kafil, Itamar Santos, Nizal Sarrafzadegan, Benn Sartorius, Thirunavukkarasu Sathish, Anbissa Senbeta, Mohammad Shahbaz, Izza Shahid, Ali Shalash, Mehran Shams-Beyranvand, Kiomars Sharafi, Abbas Shekhtaheri, Ranjitha Shetty, Mika Shigematsu, Rahman Shiri, Reza Shirkoohi, Velizar Shivarov, Sudeep Siddappa Malleshappa, Tariq Jamal Siddiqi, Negussie Sidome, Balbir Singh, Yitagesu Sintayehu, Valentin Skryabin, Anna Skryabina, Shahin Soltani, Muluken Sorrie, Mu'awiyah Sufiyan, Biruk Taddete, Eyayou Tadesse, Md. Tareque, Abdelghani Tbakhi, Yonas Tefera, Arash Tehrani-Banihashemi, Yohannes Tekalegn, Merhawi Tekle, Berhane Teklehaimanot, Getayeneh Tesema, Takele Tiki, Maria Titova, Jaya Tripathy, Chukwuma Umeokonkwo, Chigozie Uneke, Muhammad Shariq Usman, Marco Vacante, Madhur Verma, Francesco Violante, Yuan-Pang Wang, Nuwan Wickramasinghe, Tewodros Wonde, Ai-Min Wu, Chenkai Wu, Yang Xie, Tomohide Yamada, Vahid Yazdi-Feyzabadi, Paul Yip, Zabihollah Yousefi, Taraneh Yousefinezhadi, Yong Yu, Shamsa Zafar, Sojib Bin Zaman, Maryam Zamanian, Alireza Zandifari, Mikhail Zastrozhin, Anastasia Zastrozhina, Kaleab Zewdie, Yunquan Zhang, Cong Zhu, Natalia V Bhattacharjee, Nathaniel Henry, Mohsen Naghavi, Rajan Nibbakhsh, Alyssa Sbarra, Hedayat Abbastabar, Foad Abd-Allah, Ahmed Abdelalim, Hassan Abolhassani, Ahmed Abualhasan, Abdelrahman Abushouk, Oladimeji Adebayo, Victor Adekanmbi, Olatunji Adetokunboh, Daniel Adeyinka, Shailesh Advani, Sohail Ahmad, Miloud Taki Eddine Aichour, Budi Aji, Oluwaseun Akinyemi, Addis Akililu, Chisom Akunna, Jacqueline Alcalde-Rabanal, Sheikh Alif, Syed Aljunid, Nelson Alvis-Guzman, Saeed Amini, Mina Anjomshoa, Muhammad Aqeel, Jalal Arabloo, Morteza Arab-Zozani, Olatunde Aremu, Seyyed Shamsadin Athari, Seyyede Masoume Athari, Marcel Ausloos, Beatriz Paulina Ayala Quintanilla, Getinet Ayano, Alaa Badawi, Palash Banik, Miguel Barboza, Sanjay Basu, Tariku Tesfaye Bekuma, Suraj Bhattarai, Luis Bikbov, Mahdi Bohluli, Archith Boloor, Nicola Bragazzi, Dejana Braithwaite, Luis Cámera, Joao Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia, Carlos Castañeda-Orjuela, Franz Castro, Souranshu Chatterjee, Vijay Kumar Chattu, Simiao Chen, Lalit Dandona, Rakhi Dandona, Rajat Das Gupta, Aditya Dash, Kairat Davletov, Kebede Deribe, Meghnath Dhimall, Hoa Do, Leila Doshmangir, Maysaa El Sayed Zaki, Rajesh Elayedath, Teshome Elema, Emerito Jose Faraon, Mohammad Fareed, Farshad Farzadfar, Abidemi Fasanmi, Berhanu Feleke, Takeshi Fukumoto, Mohamed Gad, Abhay Gaidhane, Reta Gayesa, Birhan Gebregiorgis, Leake Gebremeskel, Yilma Geramo, Lemma Getacher, Ahmad Ghashghaee, Nermin Ghith, Ayman Grada, Nachiket Gudi, Ahmed Hasaballah, Syed Shahzad Hasan, Abdiwahab Hashi, Soheil Hassanipour, Mohamed Hegazy, Claudiu Herteliu, Praveen Hoogar, Mehdi Hosseinzadeh, Syed Hussain, Usman Iqbal, Sheikh Mohammed Shariful Islam, Vardhmaan Jain, Mihajlo Jakovljevic, Tahereh Javaheri, Oommen John, Jost Jonas, Farahnaz Joukar, Jacek Jozwiak, Zubair Kabir, Leila Kalankesh, Rohollah Kalhor, Ashwin Kamath, Salah Eddin Karimi, Ayele Semachew Kasa, Gbenga Kayode, Bayew Kelkay, Nauman Khalid, Maseer Khan, Md. Nuruzzaman Khan, Khaled Khatib, Mona Khater, Abdullah Khoja, Jagdish Khubchandani, Yun Jin Kim, Sezer Kisa, Kewal Krishan, Barthelemy Kuate Defo, G Anil Kumar, Pushpendra Kumar, Om Kurmi, Dian Kusuma, Deepesh Lad, Dharmesh Lal, Huong Lan Nguyen, Anders Larsson, Savita Lasardo, Savita Lasrado, Kate Legrand, Chi Linh Hoang, Xuefeng Liu, Jaifred Christian Lopez, Hassan Magdy Abd El Razek, Muhammed Magdy Abd El Razek, Reza Malekzadeh, Deborah Malta, Fariborz Mansour-Ghanaei, Francisco Martins-Melo, Benjamin Mayala, Medhin Mehari, Entezar Mehrabi Nasab, Mulugeta Melku, Walter Mendoza, Ritesh Menezes, Endalkachew Mengesha, Workua Metekiya, Erkin Mirrakhimov, Hamed Mirzaei, Babak Moazen, Dara Mohammad, Naser Mohammad Gholi Mezerji, Abdollah Mohammadian-Hafshejani, Ammas Mohammed, Shafiu Mohammed, Maziar Moradi-Lakeh, Seyyed Meysam Mousavi, Getaneh Mulu, Mehnaz Munir, Gulam Mustafa, Ahamarshan Nagarajan, Shankar Prasad Nagaraju, Bruno Nascimento, Javad

Nazari, Ionut Negoii, Ruxandra Negoii, Georges Nguefack-Tsague, Josephine Ngunjiri, Cuong Nguyen, Yeshambel Nigatu, Amin Reza Nikpoor, Chukwudi Nnaji, Vuong Nong, Jean Jacques Noubiap, Bogdan Oancea, Felix Ogbo, Andrew Olagunju, Bolajoko Olusanya, Jacob Olusanya, Ahmed Omar Bali, Obinna Onwujekwe, Mayowa Owolabi, Mahesh P A, Jagadish Rao Padubidri, Adrian Pana, Songhomitra Panda-Jonas, Anamika Pandey, Deepak Kumar Pasupula, Urvis Patel, Ashish Pathak, Julia Pescarini, Maarten Postma, Hadi Pourjafar, Sergio Prada, Hai Quang Pham, Zahiruddin Quazi Syed, Fakher Rahim, Amir Masoud Rahmani, Aashish Rajesh, Sowmya J Rao, Lal Rawal, Reza Rawassizadeh, Bhageerathy Reshmi, Nima Rezaei, Jennifer Rickard, Leonard Roeber, Godfrey Rwegerera, Siamak Sabour, Ehsan Sadeghi, Rajesh Sagar, S. Mohammad Sajadi, Nasir Salam, Milena Santric-Milicevic, Sivan Saraswathy, Arash Sarveazad, Brijesh Sathian, Deepak Saxena, David Schwebel, Sadaf Sepanlou, Feng Sha, Saeed Shahabi, Masood Shaikh, Mohammed Shaka, Mohammed Shannawaz, Amrollah Sharifi, Jae Il Shin, Soraya Siabani, Amin Soheili, Emma Spurlock, Chandrashekar Sreeramareddy, Agus Sudaryanto, Rafael Tabarés-Seisdedos, Animut Tamiru, Nihal Thomas, Asres Tilahun, Marcos Tovani-Palone, Khanh Tran, Bach Tran Xuan, Phuong Truong, Riaz Uddin, Anayat Ullah, Bhaskaran Unnikrishnan, Pascual Valdez, Bay Vo, Yohannes Wado, Yasir Waheed, Girmay Welde Samuel, Tawewat Wiangkham, Charles Wiyosong, Ali Yadollahpour, Sanni Yaya, Yordanos Yeshitila, Mekdes Yilma, Melissa Young, Abdilahi Yusuf, Chuanhua Yu, Josefina Zakzuk, Dejene Zewdie, Muktar Ahmed, Hesam Alizade, Amir Almasi-Hashiani, Nahla Anber, Masresha Anegago, Davood Anvari, Mulusew Asemahagn, Nefsu Awoke, Yared Aynalem, Mohammad Amin Bahrami, Somayeh Bohlouli, Shiva Borzouei, Mostafa Dianatinasab, Khalil Eskandari, Mowafa Househ, Amir Khater, Neda Kianipour, Young-Eun Kim, Adnan Kisa, Borhan Mansouri, Masoud Moghadasszadeh, Salahuddin Mohammed, Ali Mokdad, Chhabhi Ranabhat, Seyed Mohammad Riahi, Allen Seylani, Omid Shafaat, Hirut Tseme, Rajnish Tripathi, Era Upadhyay, Yasser Vasseghian, Syed Saoud Zaidi, Arash Ziapour and Simon I. Hay. Drafting the work or revising is critically for important intellectual content: Damaris Kinyoki, Lauren Schaeffer, Samuel B Ewald, Katie Donkers, Megan Schipp, Amanuel Abajobir, Mohsen Abbasi-Kangevari, Sherief Abd-Elalsam, Hassan Abolhassani, Lucas Abreu, Ahmed Abualhasan, Eman Abu-Gharbieh, Abdelrahman Abushouk, Oladimeji Adebayo, Victor Adekanmbi, Olatunji Adetokunboh, Daniel Adeyinka, Shailesh Advani, Pradyumna Agasthi, Mohammad Aghaali, Sohail Ahmad, Sepideh Ahmadi, Muktar Ahmed, Miloud Taki Eddine Aichour, Budi Aji, Oluwaseun Akinyemi, Jacqueline Alcalde-Rabanal, Robert Alhassan, Hesam Alizade, Saeed Amini, Dickson Amugsi, Nahla Anber, Robert Anuceanu, Zelalem Anteneh, Raziqee Anwer, Muhammad Aqeel, Jalal Arabloo, Morteza Arab-Zozani, Olatunde Aremu, Afsaneh Arzani, Malke Asaad, Mehran Asadi-Aliabadi, Ali Asadi-Pooya, Mohammad Asghari Jafarabadi, Zerihun Ataro, Maha Atout, Marcel Ausloos, Nefsu Awoke, Beatriz Paulina Ayala Quintanilla, Martin Ayano, Darshan B. 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Competing interests

This study was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Co-authors employed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided feedback on initial maps and drafts of this manuscript. Otherwise, the funders of the study had no role in study design, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation or writing of the final report. The corresponding author had full access to all the data in the study and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication. R.A. received consultancy/speaker fees from UCB, Sandoz, Abbvie, Zentiva, Teva, Laropharm, CEGEDIM,

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Additional information

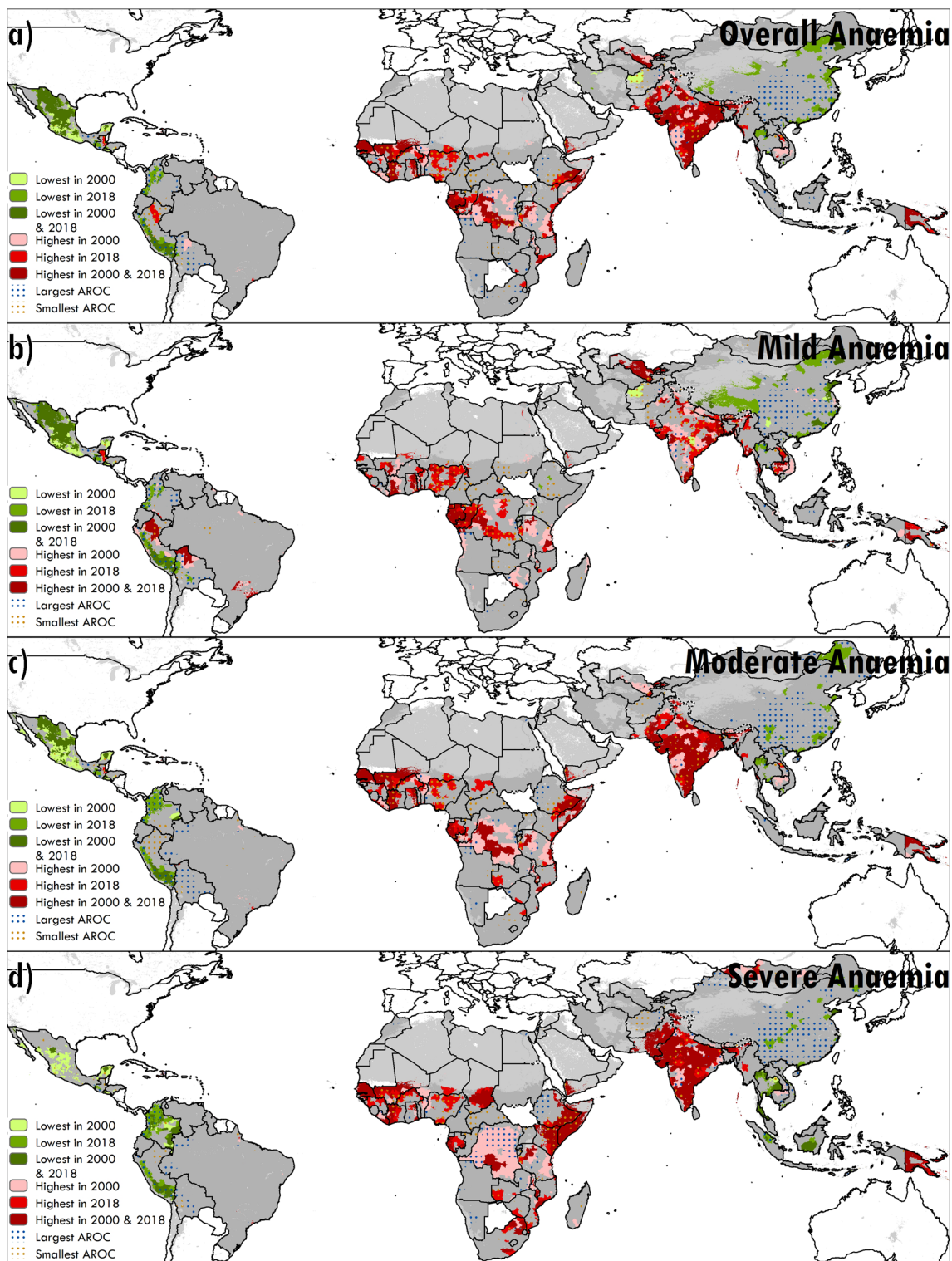
Extended data is available for this paper at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-021-01498-0>.

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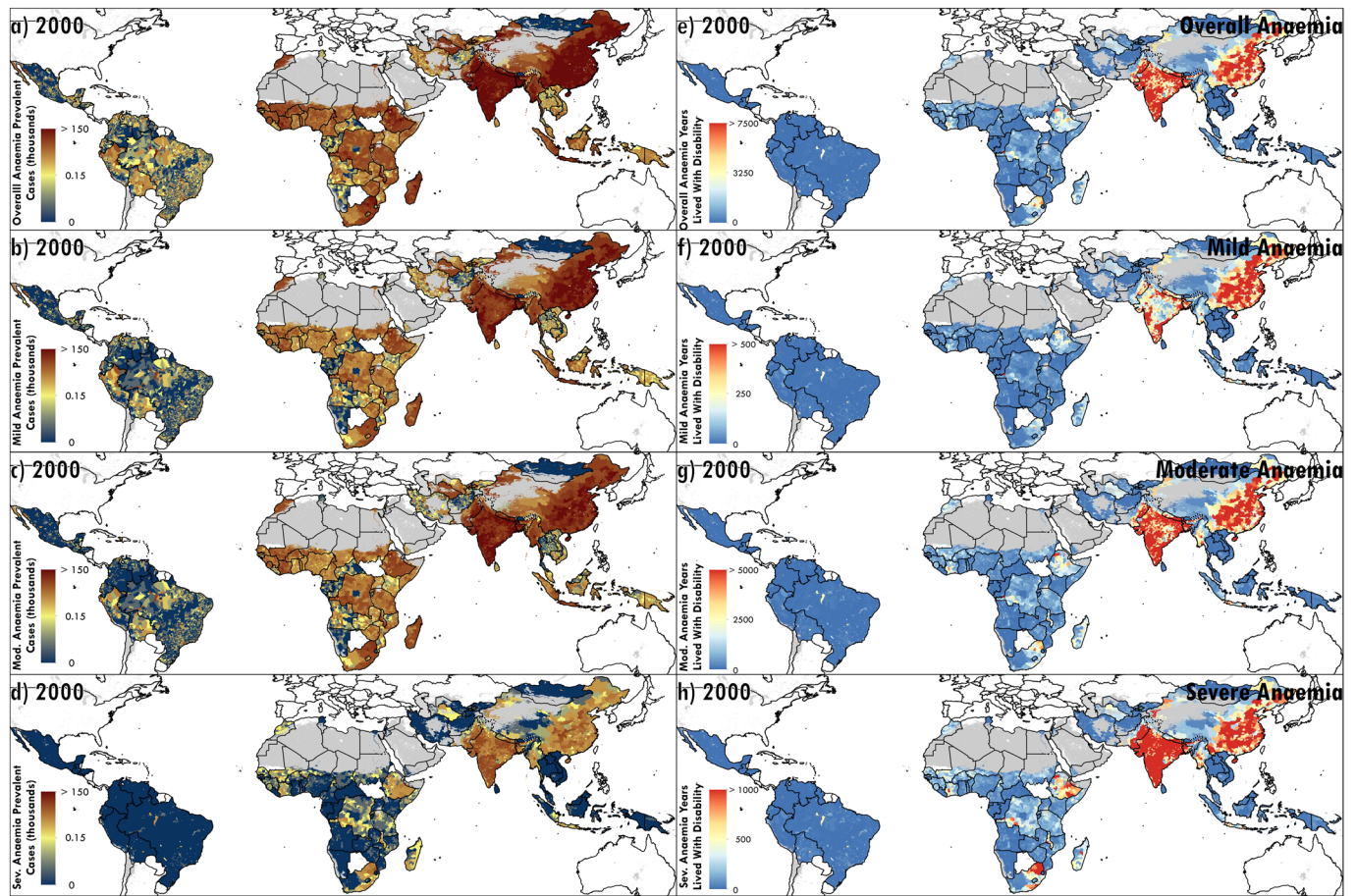
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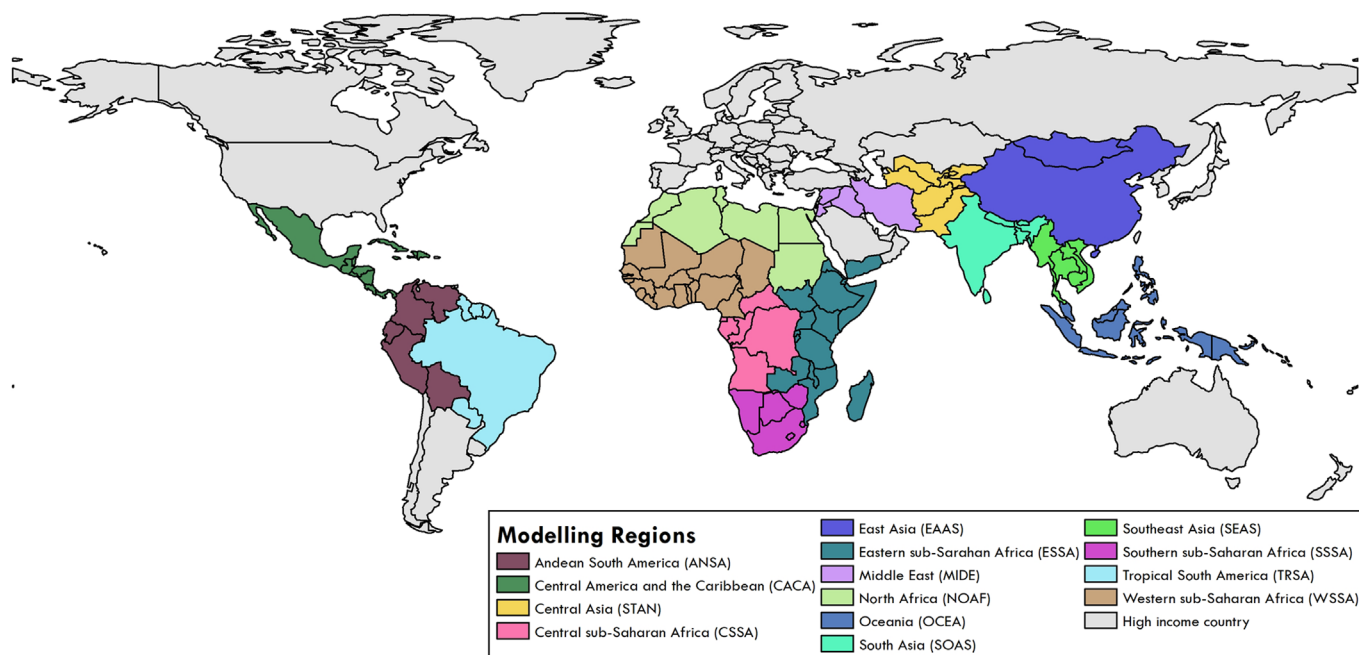
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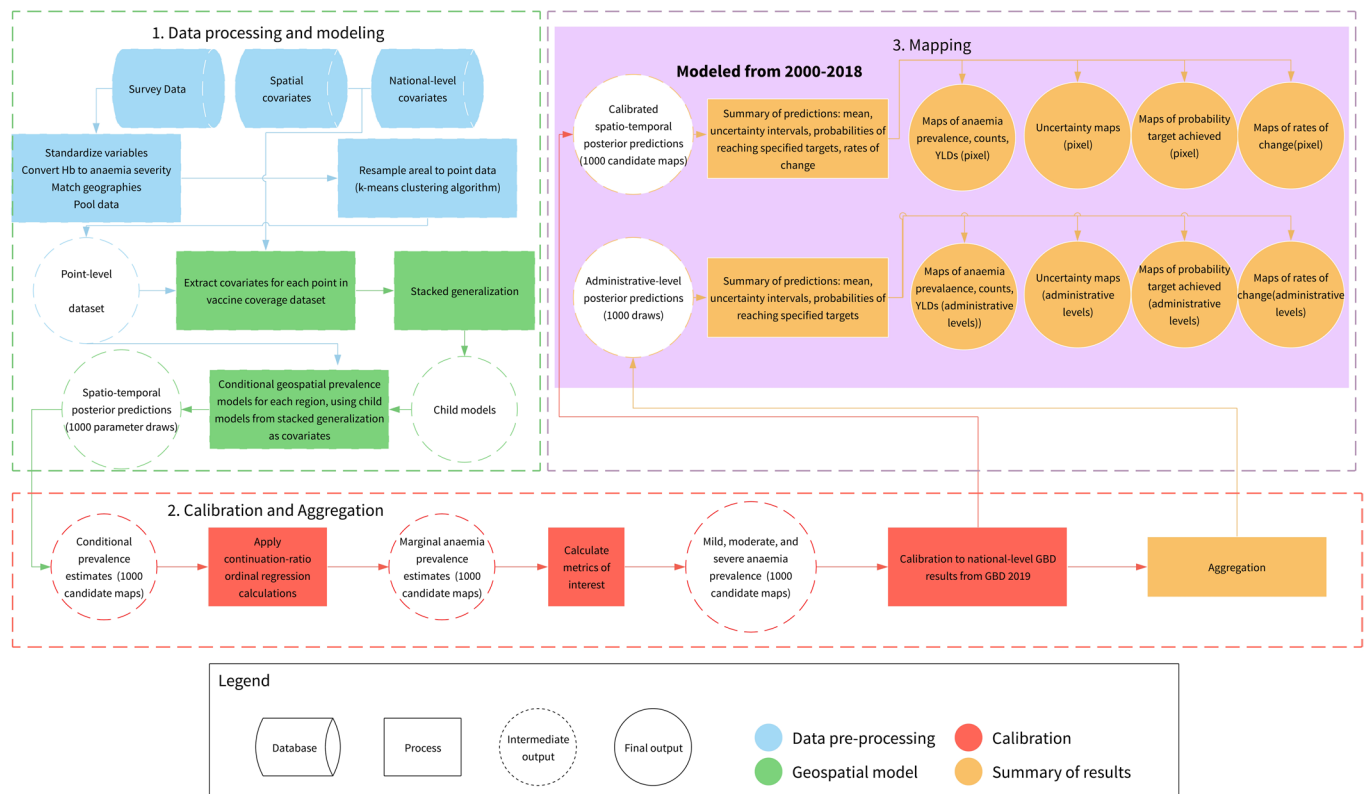
Extended Data Fig. 1 | Highest- and lowest-performing second administrative-level units stratified by anaemia severity in women of reproductive age across LMICs (2000–2018). **a–d**, Overlapping population-weighted highest and lowest deciles of prevalence and weighted annualised rates of change (AROC) by severity at the second administrative level between 2000 and 2018 for overall (**a**), mild (**b**), moderate (**c**), and severe anaemia (**d**) among WRA. Maps reflect administrative boundaries, land cover, lakes, and population; grey-coloured grid cells had fewer than ten people per 1 × 1-km grid cell and were classified as “barren or sparsely vegetated”, while white-coloured grid cells were not included in this analysis^{42–47}.



Extended Data Fig. 2 | Counts and years lived with disability (YLDs) by anaemia severity among WRA in 2000. **a–d**, Number of WRA across 82 LMICs with overall (**a**), mild (**b**), moderate (**c**), and severe anaemia (**d**) in 2000 by second administrative-level units. **e–h**, Number of years lived with disability (YLDs) among women of reproductive age (WRA) attributable to overall (**e**), mild (**f**), moderate (**g**), and severe anaemia (**h**) in 2000 by second administrative-level units. Maps reflect administrative boundaries, land cover, lakes, and population; grey-coloured grid cells had fewer than ten people per 1×1 -km grid cell and were classified as “barren or sparsely vegetated”, while white-coloured grid cells were not included in this analysis^{42–47}.



Extended Data Fig. 3 | Modelling regions. Modelling regions⁴⁸ were based on geographic and Socio-demographic Index (SDI) regions from the Global Burden of Disease¹⁸, defined as Andean South America, Central America and the Caribbean, Central sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), East Asia, Eastern SSA, Middle East, North Africa, Oceania, Southeast Asia, South Asia, South SSA, Central Asia, Tropical South America, and Western SSA. Regions in grey (Stage 3) were not included in our models due to high-middle and high SDI. Only 82 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) were included in this study.



Extended Data Fig. 4 | Modeling process flow diagram. The geospatial modelling process consists of three main sections. First, all available survey data that can be referenced to a coordinate/point (for example, survey cluster) or small polygon (administrative) unit are compiled, Hb measurements are converted to anaemia severity, data matched to polygons are resampled into pseudo-points, covariates are merged onto the point-level dataset, a series of conditional geospatial model is fit using stacked generalization child models as main effects is fit for each geographic region, and 1000 posterior predictions are sampled from the fitted model. Second, the 1000 parameter draws are projected into 1000 5x5km pixel conditional prevalence candidate maps, converted into marginal anaemia severity prevalence maps, calibrated to GBD 2019 estimates, and aggregated to administrative levels. Lastly, the 1000 calibrated pixel and aggregated draws are summarized into estimates of anaemia prevalence, counts, YLDs, and the associated uncertainty, probabilities of meeting targets, and rates of change. See the Methods for more details.

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The findings of this study are supported by data that are available in public online repositories, data that are publicly available on request from the data provider, and data that are not publicly available due to restrictions by the data provider and which were used under license for the current study. Details on data sources can be found on the GHDx website including information about the data provider and links to where the data can be accessed or requested (where available). We have also provided maps of the data included in our models in Supplementary Figures 1–5. Outputs of these analyses can be explored at various spatial levels (national, administrative, and 5 × 5-km levels) through our customized visualisation tool (<http://ghdx.healthdata.org/record/ihme-data/global-anemia-prevalence-geospatial-estimates-2000-2019>) and at <https://github.com/ihmeuw/lbd/tree/anemia-lmic-2021>.

Administrative boundaries were retrieved from the Global Administrative Unit Layers (GAUL) dataset, implemented by the FAO within the CountrySTAT and

Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS) projects. Land cover was retrieved from the online Data Pool, courtesy of the NASA EOSDIS Land Processes Distributed Active Archive Center, USGS/Earth Resources Observation and Science Center, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Lakes were retrieved from the Global Lakes and Wetlands Database, courtesy of the World Wildlife Fund and the Center for Environmental Systems Research, University of Kassel. Populations were retrieved from WorldPop.

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Sample size	Sample size was calculated as the number of unique data source-location pairs with survey responses in order to estimate prevalence of Anemia among women of reproductive age group (15-49 years). This sample size is reported in the methods section: "Included across our models were 218 geo-referenced household surveys from 2000 to 2018 representing over 3 million WRA. Each individual woman's record was associated with a cluster, a group of neighbouring households, or a "community" that acted as a primary sampling unit in the survey design. The 218 surveys with haemoglobin, pregnancy, smoking, and elevation data included geographic coordinates or precise place names for each cluster within that survey." This is an observational study with no hypothesis testing and the sample size was not pre-specified. We evaluate the overall performance of our modelling strategy, given the available data, as part of a validation exercise as described in the 'Model validation' section of the methods, and as reported in the Supplementary Information (Supplementary Section 6.0).
Data exclusions	Select data sources were excluded for the following reasons: missing survey weights for areal data, missing sex or age variable, incomplete sampling (e.g., only women aged 20–24 years measured), or untrustworthy data (as determined by the survey administrator or by inspection). Data availability plots for anaemia by country, data type, and year can be found in Supplementary Figures 1–5. A list of low- and middle-income countries excluded from the model due to lack of available data can be found in Supplementary Table 3.
Replication	This is an observational study using many years of survey and report data and in principle could be replicated. Due to the time required to extract, process, and geo-locate all data, as well as to run the statistical models, we have not undertaken an explicit replication analysis.
Randomization	Randomization was not relevant to this study. This analysis is an observational mapping study and there were no experimental groups.
Blinding	Blinding was not relevant to this study, as it was an observational study using survey and report data.

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