

Introducing our Policy Précis series

PROMOTING HEALTH BY MAKING THE LINKS: EQUITY, WELLBEING AND SUSTAINABILITY

EuroHealthNet is a not for profit organisation networking public bodies working in the fields of health promotion, public health, disease prevention and health determinants – the factors behind good or ill health. We comprise national, regional, municipal and local bodies working on policy, research and implementation approaches which contribute to improving health, wellbeing and equity within all the countries that are members of or associated with the European Union.

Since our formation from 1996, we have realised that to achieve the objectives of our members and advance our cause we need to build effective partnerships that extend way beyond health systems – and understand the needs of other important causes. We believe the institutions, process, policies and programmes of the EU offer major opportunities to do that. We also recognise that some of those processes cause problems, challenges and disadvantages for our objectives and the cause of helping to improve the health of people and their conditions of daily life: the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. You can read more about our work via our “family” of websites:

- www.eurohealthnet.eu (our health promotion and public health priorities)
- www.health-inequalities.eu (action for health equity and determinants in the EU)
- www.health-gradient.eu (research on social determinants through early and family life)
- www.equitychannel.net (connecting global campaigns for health, wellbeing and equity)

It is to that last mentioned element of our work, the Equity Channel, which we have turned to help us introduce this new approach that we call our “Policy Précis” series. To mark the start of a new European Commission from 2010, we have begun analysing the key policy areas where we believe that progress can be made – even if they may not immediately seem to be relevant for health. We cannot do this alone: this is part of our appeal to all who care about health for all in the modern world to work better together. That includes people from business, civil society, politics and policy, media, local communities and international organisations alike – all are welcome to make the link.

Of course we have our views and need to offer some guidance from our perspective. So our Policy Précis series will, in concise portions, introduce what we see as the current situation, offer potential pathways to progress, indicate current knowledge, and suggest next steps. We welcome alternative ideas and additional knowledge – if you join us you can influence our work directly; if you prefer a partnership approach we can offer innovative methods, free and without obligation, that can connect us all for fair health. Let us now set out our overall perspective:

Since 1948 the World Health Organisation (WHO) – and the gathering of governments in the World Health Assembly including all EU states – has defined health as “a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

Since the original EU Treaty was amended from 1992 onwards, there has been a legal role – a “competence’ for public health. That is why EuroHealthNet has an office in Brussels close to the heart of decision making. But that role is defined rather narrowly and is often interpreted with some difficulty in terms of health systems. What is unequivocal, from the latest version of the EU Treaty from 2009, is that “The aim of the EU shall be to promote peace, its values and the wellbeing of its peoples”.

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That is a clear, fundamental and welcome statement. It has an obvious resonance with the WHO definition of health. No longer should there be any dispute about the EU having a role to promote health and wellbeing. It is now a question of how that can best be measured and achieved. We have some clear guidance on that, and a growing wealth of knowledge and evidence, not only from our own work but from the leading authorities in Europe and the world:

- ▶ From 1986 onwards we have had a succession of worldwide Charters agreed by the WHO, governments and experts on the values, principles and approaches needed to promote health successfully.
- ▶ In 2005 the health ministers of the EU reached agreement with leadership from the Finnish EU Presidency that approaches based on ‘Health in all EU policies’ should be carried out.
- ▶ By 2008 the European Commission had set out its strategy for doing that, called “Together for Health”, with support from the European Parliament and EU health ministers.
- ▶ In 2008 the World Health Organisation published a report of the major study it had commissioned into the social and economic factors affecting health, called “Closing the gap in a generation – health equity through action on the social determinants of health”.
- ▶ By the end of 2009, the World Health Assembly had resolved to take forward learning from that report, and the European Commission had adopted its approach in “Solidarity for Health – measures to address health and social inequalities”, following several initiatives by countries during their EU Presidencies.

So we have enough evidence and knowledge to act. The Treaty of the European Union contains numerous references to the social, economic and environmental priorities in its internal and external responsibilities which are highlighted in those agreements and strategies. We call on all in power to carry them out. We are particularly keen that the overarching EU priorities, contained within the so-called Lisbon Strategy from 2000 and in future to be bracketed as the Europe 2020 agenda, should give proper attention to health via wellbeing, equity and sustainability measures.

There is much we can do in partnership to influence positive changes and avoid harmful mistakes in relevant legislation. We have set out some examples in our first Policy Précis publications, which are intended to build into a useful practical dossier for all who are interested.

But there is so much more to be done beyond institutional processes: by the cooperating, communicating, benchmarking, measuring, learning, exchanging, understanding, training, improving, advocating and updating processes which are part of modern international partnerships and networks. We can all help.

This is a dynamic process, online and between people and bodies, part of a growing movement, leading and supporting wherever it can. We hope you will find it useful and both contribute and benefit, for we believe improving health and equity for all is a moral and economic imperative.

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