



Response to the draft WHO European Programme of Work, 2020-2025

United action for better health in Europe

EuroHealthNet welcomes the [draft WHO European Programme of Work \(EPW\) 2020-2025](#), which, overall, is a good overview of strategic approaches to how the WHO Regional Office for Europe can help Member States' health authorities rise to the challenge of meeting citizens' health expectations. It identifies the main need, the main health sector situations and responses, and some channels which can be enhanced in the WHO context if taken up. It offers an accurate description of both the needs and challenges of advancing the joint commitment to work together to identify and tackle key barriers and seize new opportunities in health, adopt new ways of working, build on existing successful collaborations, and jointly align support around countries' national health plans and strategies to help "*unite for better health in Europe*". EuroHealthNet members (national public health agencies, regional health authorities and centres of excellence) should be at the heart of that and it needs to reach wider audiences.

Strengthening health promotion

EuroHealthNet's response is very much in line with our [REJUVENATE Framework for Action](#) to achieve the Agenda2030, where we emphasise on promoting health in a rapidly changing world, integrated and sustainable policy making, building and applying new knowledge, and reorienting health systems. All mechanisms should champion the importance of strengthening health promotion, preventative services and public health measures. We need to transform struggling curative services into health promoting health and linked-up systems, which are proactive to emerging challenges and resilient to shocks and crises.

The COVID-19 accelerated work in a relatively new area, namely on behavioural sciences and insights. While an important approach and as such since long at heart of health promotion, behaviour change may not be accessible, available or affordable for all. For many people, behaving in healthy ways or making a healthy choice is a luxury. Many groups have no choice. We need to create opportunities and enhance the capability of people and communities to improve health, while addressing the commercial determinants of health.

For this reason, we welcome a focal position of the draft EPW given to a "*leaving no one behind*" principle. Progress on improving life expectancy and other objective measures of health outcomes have started faltering, showing reversing effect in some cases and regions. Health inequalities were rising even before the ongoing pandemic. We need a committed approach at all levels, including political levels, to address health and wellbeing of socially and medically vulnerable population groups. The concept of vulnerability needs redefining to catch up with changing socio-economic realities. We need the WHO's support to encourage more ambitious action on the social, economic, environmental determinants of health (SEEDs); digital factors are also increasingly considered for attention. If implemented in accordance with its vision, the Programme can better address the needs of groups that are vulnerable in the context of unjust inequalities in distribution of opportunities (money, power and resources) and outcomes related to demographic change and socio-economic gradients (life-course, gender, regional gaps). Guided by its experience gained over last two decades, EuroHealthNet is keen to help implementing those parts of the EPW most relevant to this avail.



Investing in the social side of health crisis preparedness

The scale of investments needed is huge. In an immediate wake-up action at EU level, we have seen a large mobilisation for funds toward crisis containment and preparedness. This has mainly been to address acute needs of health professionals and hospitals, and to increase medical capacity – vastly reinforcing a predominant bio-medical approach to health. Financing crisis containment and preparedness through a psycho-social approach that promotes resilience, community and integrated social support have been considered to a much lesser extent. To this end, the recently launched e-guide on [Financing Health-Promoting Services](#) developed by EuroHealthNet (in the context of the WHO Coalition of Partners) offers guidance and tools for investments in these upstream approaches. We welcome the draft EPW's inclusion of “*financial protection*” under its work on Universal Health Coverage (UHC), but it could also be reflected better in a section on health promotion and wellbeing. EuroHealthNet will be keen to support the implementation of proposals to bridge the health and social care and systems gap, the divide between primary health care and public health functions of health promotion and disease prevention, invigorate health equity impact assessments of adjustments and recovery programmes, support reprioritisation of government budgets to fund the health and social sector resilience against implications of economic crises. One of such further improvements could be in public health workforce and competences, re- and upskilling for health promotion, disease prevention and cross-sector task-shifting and digital and digital health literacy.

Working better together toward ambitious outcomes by 2025

The next five years will be the time when we should scale up health promotion as a vital approach to address the pandemic, post-crisis recovery, including from socio-economic perspective and linking up with social protection systems' responses and policies. We welcome the EPW's reinforced emphasis on leadership capabilities of national health authorities – under a strategic direction from WHO Europe in collaboration with relevant international institutions, including at EU level, particularly in the immediate and post-COVID-19 recovery context, health and social services' disinvestments, the economic fallout's negative impacts on health determinants, climate change emergency and environmental deterioration.

The post-pandemic recovery will need to drive sustainable change in health systems, as well as societally and economically. This needs to happen in the next decade, before 2030; the period this draft EPW covers will be critical to set up adequate follow-up mechanisms. Ideally, a new European Economy will be an Economy of Wellbeing to support us all to “*build back better*”.

Brussels, 16 July 2020

EuroHealthNet