



EuroHealthNet feedback to the European Commission’s Roadmap “2020 Strategic Foresight Report”

March 2020

EuroHealthNet notes of the EC Strategic Foresight exercise, aimed to identify strategic areas where “*policy, research and technological developments are most likely to drive societal, economic and environmental change*”. Being part of a larger ongoing exercise in the European Union¹, it’s aim is to help refocus the EU and support its Member States’ efforts towards “*future-proofing our policies*” to promote more effective response to emerging challenges and opportunities, better linking policies in different areas so they work towards common long-term objectives and re-engage with citizens on Europe’s future. EuroHealthNet welcomes the opportunity to input to the Commission’s strategic thinking by responding to the Roadmap on the subject².

Context

The geopolitical environment in which our response now takes place is significantly different from when both the context and the problem this initiative aims to address were written. While the EU has been emerging from multiple crises that have produced lasting social consequences (Brexit, migration, financial) and gearing toward addressing the climate crisis, it is clearly entering a non-cyclical but severe economic and social recession, anticipated to exceed that of 2007 onwards. The global and continental COVID-19 pandemic should have been better prepared for.

Health in the EU’s Strategic Foresight

It is exemplary in painfully exposing the existing and persisting problems of unsustainable healthcare systems, undervalued and underfunded public health measures (prevention and health promotion), and worsening socioeconomic determinants of health since 2008. This pandemic will have the heaviest impact on the lives of people living in deprivation, defined as ‘vulnerable’ groups or facing difficult socio-economic circumstances. This will include many who have habitually moved across EU State borders to exercise their rights and freedoms, but who will now face new restrictions and barriers to their social and economic wellbeing.

¹ initiated by the former Commission ‘Future of Europe’ debates and continued by the current Commission under ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’ concept

² <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/>



70% of Europe’s citizens want the EU do more for health – and “health” as correctly defined by the WHO as a state of wellbeing, not narrow medical or commercial interpretations. Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and prevention of future pandemics will require systemic changes. More than 50% are concerned with raising inequalities, and 98% of Europeans believe that good health is essential to go ahead in life (Eurobarometer 20017 and 2018). A quarter of European population, one in four children in the EU live in poverty or social exclusion. Unemployment rates – until the pandemic hit – have been declining, but not for all and everywhere. Today we are already talking about millions more of un- and underemployed, and in-work poverty is growing (ILO 2020). Strategic Foresight should respond to those needs.

Protecting health is the responsibility of all. Good health starts in communities. Early responses have shown the dynamism of community organisations and agencies, often organized in subnational environments, can act more rapidly and effectively than markets or institutions. That learning needs to be factored into Foresight planning. This has direct and indirect implications for organisation and structures of health, care and social systems, their sustainability, resilience and abilities to protect all at all times, crisis or stability.

Investments in prevention and health promotion

The EuroHealthNet Partnership of national and regional public health institutes and authorities has long called for the need to reorient our health systems towards prevention and promotion³, and providing healthcare professionals with the support and training that they need⁴. This transition, including reduction of chronic diseases and health inequalities, would help to transform secondary health care, social and services of general interest, leaving them more able to respond to crises.

Already, COVID-19 lessons indicate yet again the need to invest in prevention and health promotion, as well as in the wider health workforce, tackle avoidable health inequalities and boost health literacy, as indeed recommended in the EU Joint Report on Health Care and Long-Term Care Systems and Fiscal Sustainability⁵. EuroHealthNet’s Communications network is already identifying major problems for populations to understand health and safety information sufficiently well, showing why strategic consideration is needed for approaches involving early and

³ EuroHealthNet, The European Semester from a Health Equity Perspective, 2019

<https://eurohealthnet.eu/publication/european-semester-2019-health-equity-perspective>

⁴ EuroHealthNet, What role for health professionals to address health inequalities

<https://eurohealthnet.eu/media/news-releases/what-role-health-professionals-address-health-inequalities>

⁵ European Commission (2019). Joint Report on Health Care and Long-Term Care Systems and Fiscal Sustainability.

https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/joint-report-health-care-and-long-term-care-systems-and-fiscal-sustainability-country-documents-2019-update_en



adolescent education, lifelong-learning, and digital skills - through the life course and across all communities. EU Digital Skills and Education agenda will play an important role herein.

... and wider structural determinants of health

Solutions to addressing problems in the health system lie beyond it too: it is essential that social protection systems are proportionately universal and well-resourced, with equitable employment and income support provided and accessible across borders. Investing in these services has multiple benefits highly relevant for new paradigms to 2030, as indicated in EuroHealthNet's recent and ongoing work on innovative forms of investments and resources for health promotion and wellbeing. This includes suggestions on uses of strategic foresight planning at all levels, plus engagements with EU proposals for *ESF+*, Cohesion, Structural Reform Service and *InvestEU* programmes, which all need strategic review. So does the European Semester process. It is also unclear how this Foresight planning is to take forward plans for the implementation Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights – a social equity compass for the EU.

Timely quality evidence into policy-making

EuroHealthNet highlights a need for a hand-in-hand work on the evidence/indicators collection and health information side to underpin the forthcoming Report, and directly feed into all relevant activities under the Commission's annual workplan and processes. All emergency responses to current Covid-19 pandemic, its health, social and economic consequences will also have to be urgently fed with timely and adequate equity-relevant evidence. Therefore, this Foresight planning must be adjusted.

While the European Commission has earmarked funds to support research projects for diagnoses, treatment and vaccine of the disease, to create a stockpile of medical devices, the Response Investment Initiative will also provide a much-needed boost to overburdened healthcare systems, services and businesses. But if or when the initial crisis is overcome, we need long-term comprehensive strategies and sustained wider investment, aligned across all sectors including education, housing, food, environment, economic etc. These strategies should boost health promotion and disease prevention, make our health systems sustainable, and support good health for all. The Food 2030 initiatives and previous Foresight thinking on healthy and safe food systems need to be re-examined, not least in the context of a 'Farm to Fork' Strategy, 'Zero Pollution' initiative or 'Europe's Beating Cancer Plan', which now needs new impetus, and subsequent reforms to EU Common Agricultural Policies, which need redesign.

Therefore, the strategic priorities of the *HorizonEurope* Programme need to be inclusively adjusted and ensure coherence with the still valid draft goals of the Green Deal and Digital strategy. To that end, EuroHealthNet recommends the ideas, models and guidance of the INHERIT Consortium



Project (www.inherit.eu), particularly its Triple-Win concepts of strategically prioritised futures which are directly relevant for Strategic Foresight through and beyond 2030.

Post-2020 long-term Europe Strategy

The 2020 Strategic Foresight Report will frame the Commission's work planning with a focus on how resilience, when geared towards the achievement of the twin climate and digital transitions, can be a compass for policymaking. The EU should continue its sustainability path within the European Green Deal. However, the current crisis and its multiple societal impacts pose new problems and paradigms for the aims and objectives of the Green Deal and a 'Just Transition' therein. It will also impact significantly across the Sustainable Development Goals which frame universal decision's prioritisation, including key health, equity and wellbeing targets.

Notably, neither the most recent thinking around the 'Economy of Wellbeing' nor a replacement of the largely expired Europe2020 strategy are featured in this Roadmap. Both the European Parliament and the EPSCO Council have long called for a comprehensive long-term EU Strategy post-2020, in line with the commitments made on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It all despite extensive consultations in a context of the 'Future of Europe' debates, to which EuroHealthNet contributed⁶. The Europe 2020 Strategy which was launched in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial crisis was set to ensure better jobs and better lives for Europeans, mitigating negative impacts on citizens, to a mixed success. As we enter another financial crisis, a proactive, protective and people-centered strategy for the next 10 years is urgently sought after. However, to-date, the European Commission has not presented its long-term strategic thinking beyond launch of the European Green Deal and the EC President's 'Exit and Recovery' plans from the pandemic, which do not explicitly focus on addressing growing inequalities, poverty and social exclusion thereof.

⁶ <https://eurohealthnet.eu/media/news-releases/social-sustainability-and-economic-progress-its-time-new-narrative>