



Research and Innovation – future of the European Research Area

EuroHealthNet's contribution to the European Commission's consultation

August 2020

The ERA 2015-2020 Roadmap raised the importance of “jointly addressing grand challenges.” The gravity of these challenges, like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk of digital divides and growing levels of socio-economic - and closely related - health inequalities have in recent years and months become all the more apparent. The EU must act as a role model globally of how democratic societies can work together to overcome these challenges and achieve ecological, social and economic transition; this hinges on bringing together Europe's best researchers to design, develop and test new approaches. EuroHealthNet strongly supports efforts to bolster progress towards an ERA that helps meet those needs. COVID-19 has demonstrated all too clearly the central role that public health plays in our societies, and of how economic growth depends on good health and wellbeing. The ERA should therefore also include and coordinate research in the area of public health, prevention and health promotion as a crucial factor in and indicator of the effectiveness of measures to transition to more sustainable and inclusive societies.

EuroHealthNet is pleased that the new roadmap recognises the EU Green Deal as a ‘new paradigm in strategic thinking’. This paradigm change should also be reflected in the ERA in the way joint research questions are formulated and research is conducted. Since many of the challenges afflicting societies are inter-related, it is important that issues are framed and addressed with reference to all the factors which bear upon them, and that researchers are encouraged and able to apply holistic, transdisciplinary approaches when seeking solutions. It can be all too easy for policy agendas to fall back into traditional ‘siloed’, ‘downstream’ approaches and for Research and Innovation (R&I) agendas to follow suit, limiting their potential to help deliver transformative change.

Public health is an important case in point. Strong public health outcomes are achieved when societies provide conditions for good health, particularly as chronic diseases now account for the largest share of morbidity and mortality across Europe and globally. R&I based on social models of health are more likely to contribute to improved public health outcomes across society rather than bio-medical models that focus too often on addressing the symptoms of unhealthy conditions and environments. While developing a vaccine against, and drugs to treat COVID-19 are now a top public health priority, it is also important to address the underlying causes of the pandemic and its spread, to avoid and mitigate the impacts of future crises. ‘Equity’ is also a key consideration: the inequalities in COVID-19 mortality rates reflect existing unequal experiences of chronic diseases and the social determinants of health. Investing in R&I to identify what can be done to reduce such inequities will generate significant returns across society through improved public health outcomes. A persistent emphasis on bio-medical approaches is likely to exacerbate inequities, particularly in the short term, generating further social costs.

EuroHealthNet recently coordinated and concluded INHERIT, an EC funded research project, that investigated promising inter-sectoral policies and practices that simultaneously reduce environmental degradation, protect and promote health and contribute to health equity. Further investments in such multisectoral research, to investigate what can be done to encourage and enable people to live, move and consume more sustainably is consistent with the paradigm change envisioned, and can lead to the positive feedback loops needed to achieve transformational change. EuroHealthNet urges that ERA be designed to encourage such approaches and that it mainstreams diversity to empower those that have not, traditionally, been able shape existing research frameworks and agendas to do so in ways that are more reflective of their values and concerns.