



## European Commission Green Paper on Ageing Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations

### *EuroHealthNet's consultation input*

EuroHealthNet is the European Partnership of national public health institutes, health promotion agencies, regional health authorities and related organisations. Our core mission is to tackle health inequalities and to improve and sustain health between and within European States through action on the underlying socioeconomic determinants of health. While welcoming the EU Institutions' intention to mainstream ageing policies across all EU policies, we believe that EU actions should strengthen a **greater focus on health inequalities and healthy life years**, as key indicators of whether the policies, practice and investments being made to *'foster solidarity and responsibility between generations'* are **truly benefiting the health of people and generating more well-being across states, societies and communities**.

We know three quarters of inequalities in health outcomes in older age are due to determining factors of the physical, social and economic environments in which people are born, grow, live, work and age.<sup>1</sup> The exponential rise in the epidemic of the non-communicable diseases (NCDs), driven by common underlying risk factors is largely responsible for poor health in older age. These result in accumulative negative impacts throughout the life-course, starting in early years. This is due to **structural determinants of health and health inequalities which underpin unequal distribution of good health at the population level and among different social groups**. These are the true *"causes of the causes"*: this is where policy and practice needs to impact to be effective.

Therefore, reiterating our previous calls on the EU institutions with regards to healthy ageing policies, EuroHealthNet recommends:

#### 1. Changes in how we understand and act towards healthy and active ageing.

Adopt a holistic and inter-sectoral, rights-based and people-centred approach to healthy and active ageing across the life-course. Preventive and health-enhancing services – beyond the traditional curative care - must be at core of such an approach; they need to be inclusive, affordable, and effective. This will require the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to community-based health co-creation, attention to gendered and regional impacts of structural determinants of health such as education, employment, social and financial protection.<sup>2</sup>

- A range of policies can contribute to increasing healthy life-expectancy while reducing health inequalities, including **greater efforts to prevent health problems starting early in life, ideally in the first 1000 days**. The best support for this critical period has been established as support to nutrition (including breastfeeding), quality early years education and care with a focus on cognitive, social and emotional development, parenting skills and family financial support, other 'work-life balance' practices and mothers' employment.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, World Report on Ageing and Health (Geneva, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2017), Preventing Ageing Unequally, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279087-en>.

- This should be accompanied by **promoting equal access to and integration of care for the whole population throughout the life span**. This means facilitating smooth transition through key life-stages, and better managing chronic health problems such as NCDs, mental health and cognitive decline when they occur to reduce their disabling effects.
- 2. Developing communities in ways that foster the abilities of people along the life-course.**

Focus on ensuring living environments that encourage and easily enable all children, adolescents and adults to adopt healthy lifestyles and behaviours (including in digital spheres), by putting a firm focus on the implementation of Article 168 of TFEU on *'health in all policies'*.
  - 3. Bring forward attention to the inter-sectoral workforce for ageing populations** especially in the long-term care, employment/productivity and flexible working arrangements of older populations with a particular focus on the psychosocial dimension of occupational health and safety strategies, closing the digital skills divide, and smooth transition into retirement.
  - 4. Rebalance the unequal distribution of power, means and resources for healthy and active ageing**

This is particularly important in the context of the digital transformation of health and social care delivery. Increasingly, in face of the rising challenges of NCDs and health inequalities, digital health solutions have been promoted as part of modern health systems and services. However, the lack of real understanding of underlying causes of chronic and NCDs conditions – structural inequalities in access to resources and skills – often undermines the effectiveness of e-health approaches. Health literacy and digital skills divides are prevalent in the EU, with around 40% of adults reporting little or no digital skills. This figure is higher among the older populations. The EU Pact for Skills, European Educational Area, and EU Digital Education Action Plan should urgently address those gaps.
  - 5. Systematically include health and health equity in assessments of disparities in ageing.**

Recognise large inequalities in ageing not only between regions but importantly between people with different social and economic statuses. An assessment of the effects on equity and different groups of people should be central to all future actions and proposals. Ensure that data linked to key indicators like life expectancy by age, self-reported health status, preventable mortality and morbidity, and access to quality child-care are disaggregated by socio-economic status, also at the regional and local levels.

### Playing our part

EuroHealthNet will follow up on these recommendations throughout 2021 and beyond with our members and partner organisations. We will seek to contribute to detailed consultative dialogues and strategic planning, specifically from a health equity and prevention-focused perspective. Within our 2021 thematic area in the EU EaSI Programme, EuroHealthNet will step up its work on digital skills, and capacities in rights-based and life-course approaches to health. We will seek to help the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Digital Education Action Plan and the Educational Area, the EU Pact for Skills, as well as effectively engage within various European strategies on e-health, healthy lifestyles, and health systems' organisation/financing reforms linked to the EU Semester and Building Back better via *NextGenerationEU* and the World Health Organisation European Programme of Work.