



## Joint Statement by EuroHealthNet and EUPHA\*

71st Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe

*Provisional Agenda item 3 “COVID-19 lessons learned: getting ready for the next pandemic”*

Dear Chair, Mr President, Regional Director, honourable ministers, representatives, and distinguished delegates of the WHO European Region Member States,

Dear colleagues,

We welcome the opportunity to reflect on lessons learned from the ongoing pandemic. EuroHealthNet, the European Partnership for Health, Equity and Wellbeing, and EUPHA, the European Public Health Association, together with other NSA stakeholders\*, stress again the alarmingly unequal experiences of COVID-19. Much higher rates of infection and mortality are being observed amongst the most disadvantaged communities<sup>1</sup>, as a result of pre-existing infrastructural weaknesses, as well as the lack of specific attention given to protecting those with a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19.

It is evident that COVID-19 has heavily exacerbated existing health inequalities in our societies, and vice versa, proving it is not only a pandemic, but a syndemic. With our already under-resourced health ecosystems and the threats of the climate crisis already at our doorstep, catastrophic consequences lie ahead if we do not change our course of action to also include the needs of vulnerable groups. We have reached a critical stage where overlooking the persisting problem of health inequity is a part of the problem. As a strong community of European leaders, we need to address these health inequalities today, to ensure that we are resilient enough to withstand tomorrow’s inevitable pandemics.

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<sup>1</sup> Bambra, C. et al. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and health inequalities. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol.74(11). Available at: <https://jech.bmj.com/content/74/11/964>

As we move forward, it is imperative to apply health equity as a fundamental performance indicator. This will demonstrate whether we recover from the pandemic effectively, and foster resilience for future crises. We need to ‘build back fairer’<sup>2</sup>.

Specifically, we call for:

- Enabling universal access to quality health services
- Strengthening integrated, rights-based primary and community care across the life-course, focusing on childhood and the later years, while also supporting sustainable investments in social services;
- Including psycho-social and gender-equity considerations in crisis recovery and preparedness plans;
- Addressing digital and health literacy to ensure equitable access;
- Building resilience in health and social care, through for example, skills-building for health promotion and disease prevention and ensuring professionals are well-equipped for future crises;
- Gathering and using behavioural insights to understand the barriers to optimal health outcomes;
- Accelerating research and analysis of health data across all population groups for more targeted and inclusive health promotion and prevention.

We highlight again the important role that the civil society, social partners, and community groups play in the COVID-19 response. The insufficient recognition and utilisation of such organisations by governments throughout the pandemic has shown the need for more inclusive mechanisms and capacity-building for participatory action.

EuroHealthNet and EUPHA, together with their members and supporting NSA organisations reaffirm their commitment to health equity. We will continue working tirelessly for a better future that leaves no one behind. It is, therefore, with a sense of urgency, that we also call upon all our partners again to act on these health inequalities now and rebuild a health(y) ecosystem with equity at its core.

Thank you for your attention.

EuroHealthNet and EUPHA\*, Brussels, 8 September 2021

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<sup>2</sup>Marmot, M. et al. (2020) Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>

**\*Other supporting Non-State Actors include:**

- International Federation on Ageing (IFA)
- Humatem
- European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) (a member of the Public Services International [PSI])
- World Obesity Federation
- European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC)
- International Diabetes Federation European Region (IDF Europe)
- European Cancer Organisation
- European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations
- European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)
- European Forum for Primary Care (EFPC)