

What does the “European Health Union” mean for health promoting agencies?

Background information for EuroHealthNet Policy and Strategic Meeting, 24 February 2021

What has happened?

The COVID-19 syndemic pandemic crisis is showing critical limitations of current structures, services, and approaches to health at the EU level, where EU Member States are primarily responsible but diseases clearly cross borders. EU Member States initially implemented widely diverging measures. During 2020 common actions such as procurement were gradually agreed, while calls increased for a more harmonised response. European Commission (EC) President von der Leyen announced an initiative for a new ‘**European Health Union**’ (EHU) in the *State of the Union* address in September. This is now developing in three major phases:

Phase One: Initial Regulatory updates now in the legislative process

The EC has proposed initial significant regulatory measures aimed to strengthen cooperation and coordination towards a European Health Union. In November, the EC [proposed initiatives](#) focused on **crisis preparedness and response measures**, including:

- **Reinforcing the role of the [European Medicines Agency \(EMA\)](#)** to monitor, anticipate and mitigate potential shortages of medicines and medical devices in times of crises and/or emergency situations. The initiatives also involve **creating an EU-wide stockpile of key medicines and equipment** to address supply chain dependencies and seek self-sufficiency.
- **Strengthening coordination at EU-level via a pan-European integrated surveillance system**, using artificial intelligence and the **establishment of a new [European agency \(HERA\)](#)** based on US models, for biomedical advanced research and development.
- **Reinforcing the role of the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control \(ECDC\)](#)**, requiring EU Member States to **submit health data on health and care system situations**, allowing ECDC to make **policy recommendations** and establish a cross border **EU Task Force** for emergency local responses.
- **A new [pharmaceutical strategy](#)** to modernise regulatory frameworks, support research and technologies plus address sustainability of medicines and antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

Phase Two: Major Programme Initiatives launched

Following a year of negotiation with the EU Institutions in the context of the EU Multi Annual Financial Framework 2021-27 and its new *EU4Health* Programme (*please see separate briefing paper*), the EC has launched a comprehensive [Europe Beating Cancer Plan](#). It is framed around four key action areas:

- 1. Prevention**
- 2. Early Detection**
- 3. Diagnosis and Treatments**
- 4. Improving quality of life for cancer patients and survivors**



There are 10 flagship initiatives and multiple supporting actions in the Plan. It will be implemented using a wide range of Commission funding instruments, with a **total of €4 billion** being earmarked, including from the *EU4Health programme*, *Horizon Europe* and the *Digital Europe programme*. 20% of those EU4Health funds will be focused on “Prevention”. Meanwhile other measures across the EU Programme and Policy range are also anticipated to support the EHU.

Phase Three: The Conference on the Future of Europe and possible Treaty changes

Current actions fall within current EU competencies (*set out primarily in Article 168(7) of the EU Treaty*), as well as revisions of socio-economic governance in the European Semester (*please see our separate briefing*). The evolution of the EU’s role in health, and whether these competencies should be expanded, will be an important topic at the imminent **Conference on the Future of Europe**. This is expected to be launched in May and to bring forward recommendations to the EU Institutions in 2022. Debate is not exclusively about internal EU policies: the **Global Health Summit**, also scheduled later this year in Italy, is aimed to support worldwide reflection on how to strengthen global health security.

Relevance for Members and the EuroHealthNet Partnership: health promotion and disease prevention, addressing health equity and social determinants of health

- Clearly the initial Regulatory proposals will impact directly on national and regional Institutes of Public Health and responsible agencies. Already EuroHealthNet is being asked for its position by representatives in the EU Institutions, who will make the decisions.
- The new *Beating Cancer Plan* is the largest single focussed health initiative the EU has ever launched. Its focus on prevention, research and health systems strengthening will suggest significant opportunities for EuroHealthNet and its members to engage.
- Discussions about extending EU competences for health, an Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights, and “Economies of wellbeing” are highly likely to be prominent in the **Conference on the Future of the EU**. They are already being discussed in EU Institutions.

The EuroHealthNet Executive Board is finalising the Strategic Development Plan, to be adopted at the EuroHealthNet General Council in June. All the above new factors are being actively considered. Therefore, we need to know the strategic position of members on a potential European Health Union, and how we should engage collectively and as member agencies from now onwards.

Guiding questions:

1. What is the view of your agency about the new proposals to initiate a European Health Union? How will they benefit your work or cause difficulties? How are you engaged with your national governments in discussions about their adoption and implementation?
2. What do you think about the more extensive measures being proposed for a greater EU role in pan European public health? What should be prioritised – or avoided - to help your work?
3. To what extent has the need to address COVID-19 crises led to an appreciation of the need for greater cooperation in health between countries? Is there support for a stronger European Health Union and health or social rights? How should EuroHealthNet engage in these debates, and how could your agency contribute?