

Inequalities in health and social rights are growing: EuroHealthNet calls on the EU to step up its ambitions to strengthen health and Social Europe in the State of the Union

President Ursula von der Leyen

European Commission

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Dear Madam President of the European Commission,

On behalf of **EuroHealthNet**, the European partnership for health, equity and wellbeing, I am writing to you ahead of the State of the Union address which you will deliver in September. EuroHealthNet is a network of national public health institutes and health authorities, regional and local health agencies, and research and practice organisations working together to promote health, prevent diseases and reduce health inequalities. As your address will outline strategic priorities for the European Union and its Institutions in the coming year, I would like to ask you to **propose ambitious actions to urgently tackle widening social inequalities in health**, growing poverty and disadvantage between and within EU countries to protect people and their communities.

We recognise your substantial efforts to implement the European Commission's political agenda since 2019, and your dedication in leading the Commission's work through difficult unforeseen circumstances. We heartily applaud you on the progress made to-date. Seizing the opportunity, however, **EuroHealthNet calls on your leadership to facilitate and encourage more strategic and integrated approaches to improve population health, by embedding considerations for equity, prevention, resilience and wellbeing in the systems, processes and policies driven by the EU.** The European Health Union, as ambitious and unprecedented as it is, is unlikely to deliver the systemic changes required to reduce inequalities in health as it is primarily oriented towards a "bio-medical approach" to health with insufficient consideration to determinants of health (e.g., socio-economic, environmental).

Throughout the year, we have reflected on the 'public health and health equity' state of play through dialogues with our members across Europe. We debated the lessons learnt from the pandemic (with their implications for sustainable and inclusive public health and health systems'), the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe, as well as the most recent 2022 Strategic Foresight Report's recommendations. In conclusion, while acknowledging the substantial progress made to-date, **EuroHealthNet would propose that the following**

realities and associated recommendations be reflected in your State of the Union address, the letters of intent to the Commissioners, and future annual programmes of work for your Commission:

1. **Health equity and social rights across the Union are under threat.** While steadily improving before the current health and security crises, social inequalities and population health – strongly linked to living and working conditions, and overall cost of living – have worsened dramaticallyⁱ. As a Union of solidarity and equality, we cannot leave anyone behind in recovery and resilience building efforts, or in the joint implementation of the green and digital transition. The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan must be reinforced and implemented, and funding must be made available to invest in people, communities, health, social inclusion, human capital, and person-centred systems and services. **Accelerated efforts and investments to protect vulnerable citizens across the lifecycle;** boost early years support; accelerate anti-poverty, nutrition and mental health actions; and strengthen integrated and health-promoting systems – including the upcoming European Care Strategy - could help to this avail. We support calls for an EU Civil Society Strategy, an EU Mental Health Strategy, and making 2023 a European Year for Mental Health.
2. **What doesn't get measured, doesn't get done.** Supporting recommendations from the 2022 Strategic Foresight Report, EuroHealthNet calls for substantive steps in **developing and implementing monitoring frameworks to measure societal progress beyond GDP**, looking at current and future generations, and reorienting the traditional view of economic progress towards a more equitable one evolving around wellbeing, resource efficiency, circularity, and resilience. To this end, **EuroHealthNet advocates for economies that deliver for all people fairly and are based on the Economy of Wellbeing narrativeⁱⁱⁱ** and similar emerging models of regenerative economies^{iv}. This entails a discussion on which wellbeing indicators would be most reflective of the health, social and environmental needs of the current and future generations. This would also call for a more systematic monitoring of social inequalities and vulnerabilities-linked health disparities, including within the EU states.
3. EU's contribution towards the **future Global Pandemic and Crises Preparedness and Emergency Management** must place equity and social justice centrally, consider gender^v, age and regional differences, and strongly align with emerging behavioural and cultural insights research, with its implications for adherence to and acceptance of new policies.

We stand ready to support you in delivery of the European Commission's Programme in 2023. EuroHealthNet Partnership and its members offer their expertise, good practice and knowledge exchange to facilitate discussion in the EU countries and with relevant policy, practice and research stakeholders. We wish you all the best in the coming period and in the implementation of your Commission's work next year.

Yours sincerely,



Caroline Costongs

Director, EuroHealthNet

About EuroHealthNet

EuroHealthNet is a not-for-profit partnership of organisations, institutes, and authorities working on public health, disease prevention, promoting health and wellbeing, and reducing inequalities. We aim to tackle health inequalities within and between European States through action on the social determinants of health.

For further information go to eurohealthnet.eu.

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Endnotes

ⁱ EuroHealthNet (2021), Public health foresight in light of COVID-19, <https://eurohealthnet.eu/publication/public-health-foresight-in-light-of-covid-19/>

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2022), Fifth round of the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey: Living in a new era of uncertainty, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

ⁱⁱⁱ EuroHealthNet (2022), An Economy of Wellbeing for Health Equity: fostering a transition towards healthier, more inclusive, and sustainable societies. Policy Precip, <https://eurohealthnet.eu/publication/an-economy-of-wellbeing-for-health-equity/>

^{iv} EuroHealthNet (2021), Recovery and Resilience Plans: drivers to promote health and wellbeing in the European Union? <https://eurohealthnet.eu/publication/recovery-and-resilience-plans-drivers-to-promote-health-and-wellbeing-in-the-european-union/>

^v Building back better: towards a gender-responsive international instrument for pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response, GENDRO statement, (June 2022), <https://eurohealthnet.eu/publication/building-back-better-towards-a-gender-responsive-international-instrument-for-pandemic-prevention-preparedness-and-response/>