

# PROMOTING HEALTH EQUITY THROUGH SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

## POLICY PRÉCIS

### The situation

Policy-makers are generally aware of the added value of citizens' active involvement in evidence-informed policymaking for health.<sup>1,2</sup> Rising social and political unrest demonstrates the need to ensure everyone is heard and that people feel listened to. While engaging with the public is not new, there continue to be debates to understand the best way to involve people in decision-making processes.

**Social participation** empowers people, communities, and civil society through inclusive participation in decision-making processes that affect health across the policy cycle and at all levels of the system.<sup>3</sup>

**Citizen engagement** is an active, deliberative process conducted by decision-makers to inform effective policymaking. It focuses on "recognising the views, perspectives and knowledge of a diverse group of people living within a particular region or country, as part of policy discussions".<sup>4</sup> In this document, the word 'citizen' covers all those living within a country without regard to nationality or legal status.

When done well, health policymakers can help empower citizens and shape responsive, effective, and equitable policies that improve everyone's physical and mental health and wellbeing. Co-developing policies and practices with communities makes them more likely to reflect real needs, gain community endorsement, and be sustainable in the long term. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasises that the use of social participation in health decision-making is not just important for universal health coverage. It also reduces health inequalities, improves the efficiency of health interventions, and improves transparency in health-related decisions, thereby building trust and fostering resilience.<sup>5</sup>

Gathering citizens' views on public health services is a moral imperative, given the fact that it is the public who are both users and funders of these services.<sup>6</sup>

However, designing and delivering successful, equitable citizen engagement and social participation is challenging, particularly in times of polarisation and digitisation, and requires dedicated approaches, mechanisms and resources.

### Challenges in citizen engagement

Mobilising citizens to take part in participatory processes is complex and time-consuming. Engaging hard-to-reach individuals and delivering truly inclusive processes is particularly difficult.<sup>7</sup> Not everyone has equal access to information and opportunities for participation, and a limited trust in government has hampered efforts to engage citizens.<sup>8</sup> From a citizen's perspective, participatory processes may not always meet expectations and can maintain unequal power relations and exclusions.

Decision-makers sometimes struggle to implement meaningful participation - participation that goes beyond a tokenistic consultation - which only appears to support more vulnerable groups.<sup>9</sup> They also disagree around the practical interpretation of 'participation', the circumstances in which it is required, and the role and responsibilities of health authorities.

Assessing the success of participation activities can be difficult due to unclear goals, challenges in evaluating democratically driven suggestions, understanding participant satisfaction, and inadequate measurement tools.



## Engaging equitably

According to the WHO<sup>10</sup>, three key principles can help to drive and evaluate social participation in health:

**Inclusivity:** Who participates, and how are they chosen?

**Intensity:** How do people participate?

**Influence:** How are the discussions and decisions translated into policies and actions?

In each of these, decision-makers can take steps to promote equity.<sup>11</sup>

- For example, to achieve **inclusivity**, venues need to be accessible, and the selection of participants should reflect the variety of values and socioeconomic determinants.<sup>12</sup> People of trust from targeted communities can help with outreach. Giving everyone a voice helps address the unequal distribution of power, promotes equity, and helps build accountability.
- To ensure **intensity**, methods that encourage active participation and healthy discussions and that help to capture everyone's input should be used. Providing high-quality, clear information in an appropriate format is important.
- To respect the principle of **influence**, outcomes and expectations for the participation process should be clear from the start and participants should receive feedback about the expected outcome of the discussions.

Equitable engagement needs to be carefully planned and prepared from outset to outcome, considering constraints such as budget and time. Acknowledging that every context is different and understanding the specifics of each process is extremely important to structure successful engagement. For example, in countries with limited trust in institutions, it may be more appropriate to initiate engagement at a local rather than national level. Engagement processes should be tailored to the stages of policymaking to ensure relevance, with citizen panels contributing to agenda-setting and citizen juries helping to select policies.<sup>13</sup>

Policymakers must develop structured and systematic mechanisms to engage with civil society. This is particularly important for gathering perspectives from vulnerable groups who are difficult to engage with but are represented by civil society advocates. **Civil society often plays an intermediary role, bridging the gap between governments and hard-to-reach population groups.** They facilitate the exchange of information and insights in both directions.<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, these measures, as stated above, will help to reach an outcome that satisfies the initial plan and that uses, as best as it can, the knowledge offered by all individuals involved.

## How EU and international policies shape social participation and citizen engagement in Europe

At the European Union (EU) level:

- [The European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPSR\)](#)<sup>15</sup> outlines **20 key principles for advancing a strong, inclusive and opportunity-driven social European Union**.<sup>16</sup> Principle 8 on 'social dialogue and involvement of workers' presents social dialogue as an essential part of good health, as it can improve working and living conditions. [EuroHealthNet's Flashcard Tool](#)<sup>17</sup> helps public health professionals and policymakers implement the EPSR.<sup>18</sup>
- The European Commission regularly seeks inputs through mechanisms such as [public consultations](#),<sup>19</sup> events, and stakeholder meetings. These offer opportunities for citizens and civil society to contribute to EU law-making as it evolves, from the preparation phase through to proposals for new legislation and evaluations of existing ones.
- The [European Citizens' Initiative \(ECI\)](#)<sup>20</sup> provides a way for citizens to have a direct say in EU decision-making. Through ECIs, EU citizens can propose legislative changes and new laws. Once an ECI reaches 1 million signatures, it must be addressed by the European Commission. Some of its success stories can be found on the European Citizen's Initiative Forum.<sup>21</sup>
- The [Conference on the Future of Europe \(2021-2022\)](#)<sup>22</sup> was a citizen-led series of debates and discussions that let people across Europe share their ideas and shape Europe's common future. It **engaged citizens through a digital platform, citizens' panels, and EU-wide events**,<sup>23</sup> resulting in 49 proposals covering nine topic areas submitted to the EU institutions. On health, proposals included measures for a comprehensive approach to health and more sustainable lifestyles. They also included making health and healthcare a shared competency between the EU and Member States, which would require changing the EU Treaties.<sup>24</sup> The European Commission is committed to further embedding citizen engagement in its policymaking. For instance, it has stepped up its frequency of citizens' panels on topics such as food waste, learning mobility, and tackling hatred in society.<sup>25</sup>

- On health specifically, several EU-level initiatives, such as [Europe's Beating Cancer Plan](#)<sup>26</sup>, [the Healthier Together](#)<sup>27</sup> initiative against non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and the [EU Mental Health initiative](#),<sup>28</sup> promote stakeholder involvement via **online platforms, collaborative networks, and events**. All these initiatives fall under the umbrella of the [EU Health Policy Platform](#),<sup>29</sup> which enables social participation.
- The [EU Youth Strategy](#) (2019-2027)<sup>30</sup> outlines core action areas for **youth empowerment** and participation in EU policymaking, while working on joined-up implementation across sectors. The strategy strives to “improve policy decisions with regard to their impact on young people across all sectors”.<sup>31</sup> The new European Commissioner for ‘Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture, and Sport’, will create the President’s Youth Advisory Board.
- **Horizon Europe**<sup>32</sup> fosters **collaboration** and improves the impact of research and innovation on EU policies. Co-design, citizen engagement, and citizen science are increasingly at the heart of funded projects.<sup>33</sup> [The Health CASCADE](#)<sup>34</sup> project, for example, aims to develop evidence-based guiding principles, tools, and technologies to make co-creation an effective tool to address complex public health problems.

#### At the international level:

- In May 2024, WHO adopted a [resolution to implement, strengthen, and sustain regular and meaningful social participation in decision-making processes for health](#).<sup>35</sup> The resolution highlights the key role of social participation in fostering mutual respect and trust while making health systems more responsive, equitable, and resilient.
- WHO offers technical guidance for **fostering participatory governance, social participation and accountability** to accelerate progress towards health, equity and wellbeing:
  - The [‘Voice, agency, empowerment – handbook on social participation for universal health coverage’](#) (2021)<sup>36</sup>
  - The [‘Toolkit on social participation’](#)<sup>37</sup> offers methods and techniques to ensure the social participation of Roma populations and other social groups in policies and programmes to improve their health (2021)
  - A technical brief on [‘Institutionalizing social participation to accelerate progress towards universal health coverage and health security’](#) (2023)<sup>38</sup>

- The [‘WHO framework for meaningful engagement of people living with non-communicable diseases, and mental health and neurological conditions’](#) (2023)<sup>39</sup>
- Policy lessons for [making social participation central to health system governance](#)<sup>40</sup> and [institutionalizing social participation in health policy for better performing health systems](#)<sup>41</sup> (2024)
- In 2022, the OECD published [‘Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes’](#).<sup>42</sup> These outline different methods to involve citizens and offer illustrative examples and practical guidance through all stages of the participation process, from design to evaluation.

## Making it happen in European States

### Portugal

The Portuguese National Health Council, established in 2017, serves as a national social participation mechanism. This independent advisory body brings together civil society organisations, regional health authorities, academia, and professional associations. It provides non-binding recommendations on health policies to the Ministry of Health and the Parliament to increase transparency and accountability by incorporating user voices in shaping health planning and policymaking.<sup>43</sup>

### Slovenia

Slovenia has improved health promotion centres at health care centres (2017–2020) to play a coordinating role in tying together many stakeholders, including civil society organisations, in an effort to reduce health disparities at the community level. Health professionals can better identify and address the health needs of vulnerable populations and provide equal access to health care (including preventive services) by involving and reaching out to individuals who trust them and offering help to those in need.<sup>44</sup>

### Tuscany (Italy)

The Citizen Council for Health in Tuscany promotes meaningful citizen involvement in designing and developing social and health services. It gathers input from citizens, local health authorities, and university hospitals. Since 2018, over 1000 citizens have participated in working groups exploring topics such as waiting lists, clinical risks, and training. Looking forward, Tuscany Region aims to involve more citizens and increase direct citizen participation of youth.<sup>45</sup>

# Pathways to Progress

Since advancing health equity requires listening to the voices of those directly impacted, EuroHealthNet recommends policymakers, public health authorities, and agencies at all levels to:



- **Acknowledge that democratic principles and values are the foundations of EU Member States and at the heart of participatory processes.** These principles help equalise power imbalances and provide information to groups that otherwise go unheard.
- **Ensure regular participatory processes to foster dialogue between citizens and EU and (sub)national stakeholders.** Use collaborative approaches such as health committees, citizen panels, and design thinking to foster co-learning and decision-making. Focus on user-centred perspectives and ensure that participation directly influences decision-making. **Decentralise engagement** as necessary to encourage participation at regional and local levels.
- **Engage people in a way that promotes inclusivity from the outset.** Ensure everyone has the necessary information, tools, and capacity to meaningfully engage. This includes practical aspects such as childcare, transport, or language. **Utilise local resources and community leaders** to build trust and interest while prioritising the generation of stakeholder meaning and context-specific knowledge.

- **Promote structured engagement with civil society actors and community groups by creating mechanisms** that allow their input into policy planning and decision-making. Equip these actors with the capacities and resources needed to help shape health policy.
- **Share and demonstrate the tangible outcomes and achievements** of participatory activities, highlighting how citizen and stakeholder involvement contributes to delivering improved health, equity and wellbeing.
- **Build capacity among health authorities and policymakers to engage with citizens in a polarised world.** Boost knowledge, skills and confidence to facilitate inclusive and collaborative engagements. Allocate **sufficient funding and resources** to support the implementation of participatory processes.



Learn about health inequalities and how to address them at [www.health-inequalities.eu](http://www.health-inequalities.eu)  
Access the full reference list at [www.eurohealthnet.eu](http://www.eurohealthnet.eu)

EuroHealthNet is a partnership of public 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 and references visit our website.



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Contact  
Phone + 32.2.235.03.20  
Email [info@eurohealthnet.eu](mailto:info@eurohealthnet.eu)

Rue Royale 146  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium



@EuroHealthNet

EuroHealthNet  
European partnership for health, equity & wellbeing

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