The EU4Health Civil Society Alliance expresses concerns about restrictions on civil society's activities in the new mandate

As representatives from the EU4Health Civil Society Alliance, gathering more than 30 health civil society organisations (CSOs) across Europe, we wish to express our concerns about restrictions on funding that CSOs focusing on environmental and climate action, and benefitting from grants under the EU LIFE programme, are facing. Under new guidelines communicated at the end of 2024, funds from the LIFE operating grants can no longer be used to develop and implement policy and advocacy activities targeting EU policymakers. The programme provides EUR 15.5 million for grants to civil society, but has an overall budget of EUR 5.4 billion, including for nature conservation projects for 2021-2027[1]. Such developments could significantly limit the activities of CSOs in the EU and create a highly concerning precedent, with risks for other policy areas.

Despite their very limited budget, operating grants under EU funding programmes allow CSOs to take part in policy-making processes, bringing expertise and conveying the voice of the citizens, vulnerable groups, and communities they represent. CSOs are an essential part of a vibrant democratic civic space and ensure that every citizen's "right to participate in the democratic life of the Union"[2] is upheld in practice. CSOs witness and hear firsthand the impacts of policies on their communities. Meetings with the European institutions and constructive discussions on the content or results of specific policies help to bring the views of communities affected by legislation and go a long way towards bridging the gap between citizens and institutions. This is vital in the case of health, where patient groups across disease areas convey to policy makers the very specific needs and expectations of their communities. CSOs contribute to building trust in governments and institutions and to creating a more accountable, inclusive system. They help ensure that policy and regulatory decisions remain grounded in the EU's core values and principles.

Public support is vital to ensure CSOs can play their role in the policy-making process. This is not only due to the lack of other funding sources covering these types of activities, but it is a democratic imperative. Access to sustainable funding allows CSOs to remain independent and have a stronger impact. Excluding certain advocacy activities from EU funding would undermine the role of civil society, prevent multi-stakeholder approaches, and deepen imbalances in the representation of interests at European level[3].

More broadly, the EU4Health Civil Society Alliance is concerned about the shrinking civic space observed globally and within the EU, as well as excessive politicisation of the role of civil society in the public debate. CSOs should not be seen as unduly influencing a particular piece of legislation, but rather as a force for constructive proposals that reflect both the values of the communities they represent and the broader public interest. Decision-makers have the final say based on all the input they received;

[1] Politico
[2] Article 10(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)
[3] Guidance on funding for activities related to the development, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of Union legislation and policy

silencing CSOs would not depoliticise the debate, it would only weaken it, stripping it of diverse perspectives and critical insights.

We fear that the developments on the LIFE programme are a further step in this shrinking civic space and could lead to similar developments in other policy areas and funding programmes, including in health.

This adds to an already uncertain situation for health-focused CSOs. As of today, health CSOs still do not have information on the operating grants provided under the EU4Health programme for 2025, as the EU4Health Work Programme still has not been presented. This results in limitations to planning their activities, and overall, foreseeing for the future, and adds to previous concerns on the programme's future, following a disproportionate redeployment of EUR 1 billion from its budget in 2024.

It is crucial that the EU4Health programme is given adequate means to ensure that health is placed high on the agenda, learning the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, and supporting health systems in preparing for current and future health challenges. Indeed, a strong lesson from the pandemic was the need to ensure communities were engaged and included so that public health responses could be crafted in partnership, fostering greater trust and therefore adherence as drastic measures were introduced. Community participation is a necessary condition to facilitate public health measures at all times.

While we fully support calls for transparency and close monitoring of public spending, this should not be done at the expense of the crucial role that civil society plays. This is even more so as financial support to civil society only represents a small amount of the EU budget. Furthermore, civil society organisations are at the forefront of calls for transparency, and are already complying with strict reporting and transparency guidelines and procedures.

We therefore call on the EU to reconsider the limitations set on the LIFE programme and support a strong and vibrant civic space through sustainable public funding for CSOs, including policy and advocacy activities. Additionally, we ask for transparency and a clear timeline for the publication of the EU4Health 2025 Work Programme.

Signatories

1. European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)
2. European Patients' Forum (EPF)
3. Alzheimer Europe
4. EURORDIS Rare Diseases Europe
5. Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL)
6. Association of European Coeliac Societies (AOECS)
7. Digestive Cancers Europe
8. EUROCAM
9. EuroHealthNet
10. European Alcohol Policy Alliance (Eurocare)
11. European Central Council of Homeopaths (ECCH)

12. European Chronic Disease Alliance
13. European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Association (EFA)
14. European Federation of Neurological Associations (EFNA)
15. European Health Management Association (EHMA)
16. European Heart Network (EHN)
17. European Kidney Health Alliance (EKHA)
18. European Liver Patients' Association (ELPA)
19. European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention (ENSP)
20. European Public Health Association (EUPHA)
21. European Respiratory Society (ERS)
22. Fertility Europe
23. Health Action International (HAI)
24. International Diabetes Federation (Europe)
25. International Sport and Culture Association
26. International Federation of Anthroposophical Medical Associations (IVAA)
27. Mental Health Europe (MHE)
28. Psychedelic Access and Research European Alliance (PAREA)
29. Smoke Free Partnership
30. TB Europe Coalition (TBEC)
31. Wemos
32. CADUS
33. European Lung Foundation
34. European Traditional Chinese Medicine Association
35. France Assos Santé
36. Lungs Europe
37. Renaloo
38. SOS Hépatites
39. UNAPECLE

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European Heart Network
Fighting heart disease and stroke