

Reducing health inequalities at the local level: what can the EU do?

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Not much, since EU cannot legislate in the areas of social, health and urban policy?

- In fact, there is a complex interaction between the EU and local levels
- There are a very wide range of factors affect the conditions of daily life, which EU institutions can influence directly and indirectly.

Article 174 TFEU: EU to 'develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion'.

The EU has considerable power to shape overarching narratives and priorities, that also affect the local level:

- EU built on the idea that common markets generate growth, which can then be redistributed by Member States (**social market economies**)
- Inherent to this is the idea that **growth must take priority, irrespective of how it is achieved.** “In reality, current approaches to growth are leading to ecological catastrophe, driving up inequalities and **disrupting** labour markets, political life, as well as **communities and traditional sources of shared meaning.**”
- “There is a need to grow the economy in ways that make the world fairer, greener, less dependent on disruptive technologies and **more respectful of place.**””

[Daniel Susskind: We must change the nature of Growth. www.imf.org.](http://www.imf.org)

Progress was being made at EU level to shift the narrative, but political winds have turned, as a result of EU-level elections (local-level sentiments)

The EU develop legislation in many areas, that have a direct impact on living conditions at local level, e.g.,:

Environment/climate/(clean)energy: e.g., EU directive that requires that [certain public and private projects undergo assessments of their environmental effects](#) before they are approved; zoning laws to that ensure that development plans align with EU priorities on sustainability, climate, biodiversity and smart growth); directives on sustainable water management, air quality, [energy performance of buildings directive](#). Such directives set minimum standards for emissions, safety and public procurement.

Inclusive and accessible policies for vulnerable groups. e.g., [Racial Equality Directive](#), [Employment Equality Directive](#), [European Accessibility Act](#)

Working conditions: e.g., [Directive on Minimum Wages](#); [EU Working Time Directive](#) ; [Work-life balance directive](#)

Health and safety at work: e.g., [Framework Directive on the safety and health of workers](#); [Directive on carcinogens or mutagens at work](#)

(National governments transpose such laws, while local authorities are responsible for their practical implementation)

The EU can also catalyse action in other important areas, through common frameworks, strategies, action plans, etc. e.g:

European Pillar of Social Rights: framework to promote fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. It sets out 20 key principles and rights related to **equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion**.

EU Child Guarantee (2021): initiative to break cycles of poverty and social exclusion by ensuring children in need have access to essential services (education, healthcare, adequate nutrition, decent housing).

Social Economy Action Plan (2021): strategic framework designed to empower social economy enterprises and organisations across Europe

Path to a Digital Decade (2022): a policy programme that sets targets for the EU and its member states to achieve by the end of the decade, to achieve digital transformation in an inclusive way.

Mental Health Initiative (2023) –Comprehensive strategy to elevate mental health to the same level as physical health.

Upcoming:

Urban Agenda: strengthened to provide a vision for the future of cities, looking at issues such as housing, climate action, digitalisation, mobility, social inclusion and equality. It should also harness the potential of cities as innovation, growth and competitiveness engines

The European Affordable Housing Plan: aims to address the escalating housing crisis by enhancing the availability, affordability, and sustainability of housing across member states., including transforming neighborhoods into socially inclusive spaces.

First ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

Funding, as leverage for reform:

European Social Fund (ESF+) (99.2 billion EUR from 2021-2027): EU's main financial instrument for investing in people, aiming to support employment, education, social inclusion, and poverty reduction across member states.

ERDF (226.05 billion EUR from 2021-2027): Infrastructure and territorial development that can support e.g., health infrastructure, ICT in health, and built environment changes (e.g., promoting walkable cities or healthy food access);

The **URBACT IV programme** (€108 million) falls under ERDF and aims to ensure sustainable, inclusive, and integrated urban policies, through knowledge sharing, capacity building, and local action planning,

Cohesion Fund (48 billion EUR from 2021-2027) Only available to Member States with GNI per capita < 90% of the EU average. Best suited for projects with health co-benefits (e.g. improving air and water quality, reducing noise pollution)Eligibility

Resilience and Recovery Funds (723.8 billion EUR from 2021-2027) -mitigating the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, fostering sustainable recovery, with a focus on initiatives that accelerate the green and digital transition.

Just Transition Fund (19.3 billion EUR from 2021-2027): aim to support regions and communities most affected by the transition towards a climate-neutral economy, ensuring that the shift is fair and inclusive.

Horizon Europe (€95.5 billion) Research and innovation

Governance tools

EC [Better Regulation Initiative](#) aims to ensure that EU regulations are evidence-based, made in a transparent and inclusive way, and are as simple and targeted as possible to reduce unnecessary burdens.

The EC's Better Regulation Unit undertakes integrated economic, social and environmental impact assessments of all newly proposed legislation.

BUT: tools used and experts involved have an economic focus.

The OECD considers EU's efforts in this area as "best practice".

In [a report](#) (2022) it also states however that: **"policy-makers tend to focus on costs when developing regulation, rather than benefits, which can result in regulation that is not in the best interests of the community. In addition, stronger efforts are needed to involve stakeholders, citizens, businesses, NGO's and others, who have direct experience regarding the actual impacts of rules.**

Data and Benchmarking:

EC also plays a critical role in **standardising data collection procedures**, including administrative data to ensure accurate, comparable and timely information on e.g., distributional impacts, for policy purposes.

Comparison as a catalyst for action, e.g., [EPSR Social Scoreboard](#)

Participate to help EU ensure available resources are spent in ways that lead to better, more equitably distributed health in cities?

The EC has issued an [open call for evidence](#) on how to ensure that the interests and needs of cities are reflected in future EU-level initiatives, and on how to ensure that available resources focus on what is needed most, and reach all potential beneficiaries.

More information is available in this [background document](#).

The call is open until 26 May.

What to know more?

➤ Upcoming Report on “*Social Inequalities in Health in the EU*”

To be launched
in European Parliament and via
online Conference with
Professor Sir Michael Marmot,
end Sept 2025

Contents:

- Analysis of quantitative data from the European Social Survey, on trends in self reported (mental) health across socio-economic groups and in levels of health inequalities, in participating countries
+ key underlying factors driving these trends
+ Social Scoreboard data, disaggregated by socio-economic status
- Overview of what is happening at EU-level, to reduce social inequalities in health
- Case studies of national-level actions to reduce health inequalities
- Recommendations

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Thank you

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