

EDITORIAL

Health is on the move: addressing the public health challenges of migration

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After my second nomination as WHO Regional Director for Europe at the 64th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, I highlighted the main priority of my second term: linking health to sustainable development. Health equity in the WHO European Region won't be achieved unless we work for the improvement of citizens' well-being in a more sustainable way. Along these lines, the importance of migration for the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development has been widely recognized at the international level. Nevertheless, migrants' full potential to contribute socially and economically to countries' development won't be achieved unless we address the public health aspects of migration. It is for this reason that a technical briefing on health and migration was organized at this year's Regional Committee, paving the way for a regional dialogue on the health of the 73 million migrants living in the WHO European Region.



Technical briefing on health and migration at the 64th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe © WHO/Europe

From an emergency focus to a comprehensive and systemic approach

The health sector has traditionally addressed migration from an emergency and humanitarian crisis point of view. In 2011, WHO/Europe launched the Public Health Aspects of Migration in Europe (PHAME) project under the umbrella of the European policy framework Health 2020. The PHAME project focused first on providing technical assistance to Mediterranean countries facing large influxes of undocumented migrants as a result of the political turmoil in the north of Africa and the Middle East.

However, the migration phenomenon poses short-, medium- and long-term health challenges that are different but all impact the 53 countries of the WHO European Region. During the three years since the beginning of the PHAME project, Member States across the Region have requested technical assistance to strengthen health systems' capacity and flexibility to adapt to migrants' changing health needs. While southern Mediterranean countries often deal with undocumented migration, northern European Member States are currently addressing the challenge of integrating refugees and asylum seekers, and the eastern European countries are receiving a growing number of economic migrants.

The complexity and political sensitivity linked to migration are common across the European Region. In this scenario, the main question is: what is the role of public health in transforming these challenges into an opportunity for improving health for all?

Strengthening evidence-informed migrant health policies through research and advocacy

Migrants and ethnic minorities represent a population usually living in a vulnerable situation that causes avoidable and unjust health inequalities. Migrants' poor health status prevents them from fully contributing socially, economically and politically to societies.

First, it is important to raise awareness about the need to address migrants' health matters in an equal and inclusive way. In this regard, I welcome the great collaboration between WHO/Europe and the University of Pécs in Hungary in the production of this quarterly newsletter that is contributing to bringing relevant stakeholders together and starting a cross-sectoral and region-wide dialogue on migrants' health.

Second, there is a growing demand by Member States to strengthen health information for decision-making in the field of migration and health. Responding to this need, the European Advisory Committee on Health Research is currently working on the development of Health Evidence Network reports to synthesize the best available evidence on the public health responses to migration and identify potential gaps in order to inform policy-makers.

Migration and health represents a challenging field for public health, given the great diversity of actors involved in the process and the political sensitivities related to this field. At the same time, however, the multisectoral nature of this area brings an opportunity for the health sector and governments to explore ways to transform migrants' diversity into greater health equality and sustainability in Europe.