

# Strengthening public health services and capacity: an action plan for Europe



*Promoting health and well-being  
now and for future generations*



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**Why does Europe need an action plan for strengthening public health services and capacity?** Societies and countries change over time, causing the public health issues to alter across different populations. The challenge for public health is to ensure that services adapt and respond to these changes and reflect the current and future public health threats and risks. Across the WHO European Region the main challenges facing public health – which are exacerbated by the economic crisis – include inequalities, globalization, ageing, migration and urbanization, environmental break-down and climate change. These factors all result in changes to living environments, lifestyles and disease patterns. Across the Region 86% of deaths are caused by chronic conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, mental disorders and diabetes. At the same time there are ongoing risks from emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases and health emergencies.

**What do we mean by public health?** Public health has been defined as the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts of society (Acheson, 1988; WHO, 2011b).

**The European Action Plan (EAP) for Strengthening Public Health Services and Capacity and Resolution for the sixty-second session of the WHO Regional Committee** form a key pillar of the overarching regional policy framework, Health 2020. They present ten essential public health operations (EPHOs) that countries can adapt and work on together, with WHO technical leadership and support, to assess and plan for stronger public health services and capacity.



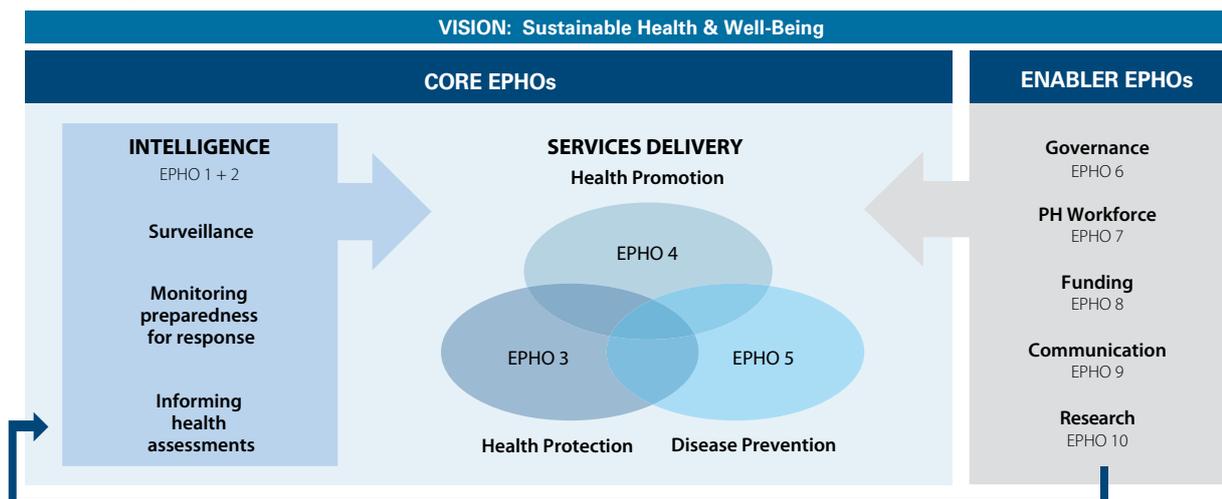
## *The 10 Essential Public Health Operations (EPHOs) 2012*

1. Surveillance of population health and well-being
2. Monitoring and response to health hazards and emergencies
3. Health protection, including environmental, occupational, food safety and others
4. Health promotion, including action to address social determinants and health inequity
5. Disease prevention, including early detection of illness
6. Assuring governance for health and well-being
7. Assuring a sufficient and competent public health workforce
8. Assuring sustainable organizational structures and financing
9. Advocacy, communication and social mobilization for health
10. Advancing public health research to inform policy and practice

**The overall vision** of the EAP is to promote greater health and well-being in a sustainable way, while aiming to strengthen integrated public health services and reduce inequalities.

The most effective and efficient method to deliver these operations is through an integrated approach, rather than in vertical programmes, so the EPHOs have been clustered into two groups of five: core EPHOs (requiring public health skills and expertise to deliver them) and enabler EPHOs. There is an additional cluster of public health intelligence EPHOs (1, 2 and 10) which are based on monitoring, surveillance and research. The main focus of service delivery – health promotion, health protection, and disease prevention (EPHOs 3, 4 and 5) is via public health services. The enablers (EPHOs 6–10) include strengthening governance, workforce development, financing, communication and research.

### Clustering of Essential Public Health Operations (EPHOs) to deliver public health services



The EAP and resolution build on a solid base of evidence, including a review of public health services and capacity in 41 of the 53 countries of the European Region; this study will facilitate future prioritization and planning. Two additional reviews accompany this: one on institutional models and funding structures and the other on policy and legislation instruments and tools that can both support the process and inform the delivery of the EPHOs. All reports and references can be found at <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/Health-systems/public-health-services> and they contain several key messages:

## Key messages

### Review of public health capacities and services in the European Region

- Strengthen the delivery of public health services by developing and integrating health promotion and disease prevention with robust health protection services.
- To support service delivery, the enablers for public health that especially need further development include governance, workforce development, financing and communication.

### Preliminary review of institutional models for delivering EPHOs in Europe

- An average of only 3% of health sector budgets is currently spent on prevention, yet balancing financing of treatment and prevention is a cost-effective way of improving overall health outcomes.
- Ensure sustainable financing of public health services for long-term efficiency in planning and delivery; methods can include financial incentives or taxes for public health purposes.

### Public health policy and legislation instruments and tools

- Advocate for effective legislative tools, such as the “best buy” interventions for noncommunicable diseases.
- Legal approaches are best balanced with intersectoral policies that create environments for healthy living. Strengthening governance will ensure effective implementation of laws and accountability arrangements for cross-sectoral working.



## *Everyone can play a role in promoting health and well-being now and for future generations*

**Governments** can work in partnership to develop and implement policy to influence the wider determinants of health, creating environments that are healthy to live in. They can safeguard sustainable and sufficient financing for public health services, and can help to strengthen governance systems to ensure that everyone is clear what they are responsible for and who they are accountable to; that organizations are enabled to deliver actions in a collaborative way; and that public health laws are renewed and enforced to guarantee effective health outcomes.

**All sectors** can participate in promoting well-being: education, housing, planning, agriculture, the police, nongovernmental organizations, the public and employment can all play an important role in shaping the environments we live in that affect the determinants of health. They can work to reduce inequalities and promote protective factors by ensuring a healthy start in life with settings that support health as we become older, building safe and resilient societies with sustainable and connected communities.

**Public health professionals** can help to achieve these changes by offering strong leadership that advocates the importance of strengthening public health services, communicated in a way that motivates action. They can also play a role in protecting and improving health and well-being by applying information and evidence intelligently to prioritize, plan and act collaboratively for better health for everyone.

**Health professionals**, including nurses and midwives, can work in collaboration with other sectors and advocate for healthy communities. They can provide tailored information in a way that enables people to improve their own health; this can be supported by creating healthy, sustainable hospitals and health care settings. They can vaccinate and detect diseases early, target services to people experiencing inequalities in health and use integrated and evidence-based care pathways.

**Research and training organizations** can adapt and summarize research findings for policy-makers and practitioners and develop evidence on cost-effective, integrated and sustainable approaches that have multiple outcomes. They can develop and deliver tailored training for the wider workforce, health professionals and public health.

**The WHO Regional Office for Europe** will take the lead on establishing governance structures to ensure the implementation of the EAP in line with Health2020 framework; to identify future public health challenges, as well as innovative and sustainable approaches; develop tools, guidance and approaches to support delivery of the EPHOs; work in partnership to support subregional and country-level capacity building in assessment, planning, legislation and policy formation; and provide technical support on strengthening public health services and capacities across the European Region.

**Our vision** is that together we can create public public health services and capacity that are fit for the challenges of the 21st century. To enable this to happen we need to transform the way we work, seeking “win win win” approaches that are cost-effective, that have multiple health and social outcomes, and that also benefit the environment, to ensure that we have a healthy world to live in now and for future generations.

Contact information:  
Dr Hans Kluge

Director, Division of Health Systems and Public Health  
Special Representative of the Regional Director on MDR-TB  
Tel: +45 39 17 13 96. E-mail: klugeh@who.int

World Health Organization  
Regional Office for Europe  
Scherfigsvej 8, DK-2100 Copenhagen Ø, Denmark  
Tel.: +45 39 17 17 17. Fax: +45 39 17 18 18  
E-mail: [contact@euro.who.int](mailto:contact@euro.who.int)  
Web site: [www.euro.who.int](http://www.euro.who.int)