

Health 2020: supporting action across government and society for health and well-being

Health 2020 is the new European health policy framework. It aims to: “significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality”.

Why Health 2020?

Health and well-being improvements are significant, but not everywhere nor equally

While the WHO European Region as a whole has seen important improvements in people’s health over the last few decades, these improvements have not been experienced everywhere and equally by all. There is, for example, a 16-year difference in life expectancy at birth between countries with the lowest and highest levels, a 42-fold difference in maternal mortality between countries, and major differences in life expectancy between social groups within all countries in the Region.

Changing health contexts demand new approaches

Evidence and experience across the European Region reveal that effectively addressing these health inequities in the context of its changing landscape (see Box 1) requires a broad re-think of current mechanisms, processes, relationships and institutional arrangements across all sectors and society as a whole. National as well as local health policy-makers often lack the authority and instruments to lead a coherent integrated approach to these key challenges. Present structures and processes are not adequate in this new environment and need revisiting.

Box 1. Opportunities and challenges of the 21st century health landscape

Interdependence, connectivity, and technological and medical innovation have created extraordinary new opportunities to improve health and health care. At the same time, new risks to health have emerged, many of which cross national borders. Key global drivers include: globalization, marketization, widening inequities in wealth and health, increasing population migration, growing urbanization, increasing environmental pollution and climate change, and changes in the way people seek and obtain information. The European Region is seeing a profound demographic shift with decreased fertility rates and a rise in the old-age dependency ratio; inward migration; the international migration of health professionals often leading to staff shortages in areas of the Region where they are most needed; and the changing nature of work and recently growing unemployment.

Potential contributions of health to economic productivity and recovery are being missed

Across the Region significant investment opportunities in health promotion and disease prevention are being missed that could aid economic recovery. Evidence points to significant cost savings from health promotion and disease prevention that address (expensive) cross-government challenges in the fields of ageing, the noncommunicable disease epidemic, migration and inequities (see Box 2). Health 2020 addresses the Region-wide need to make a strong economic case for health and to establish well-being as a barometer of development.

Box 2. Prevention works

Evidence from Poland shows that changes in diet and smoking reduce chronic heart disease and overall premature mortality rates. The most cost-effective tobacco control policy is raising taxes. A 10% price increase could result in 0.6 to 1.8 million fewer premature deaths in the countries of eastern Europe and central Asia. The tangible benefits of increasing taxes on alcohol in England were estimated to include reductions of €83 million in health and welfare costs and €405 million in labour and productivity losses, and the cost of implementation was less than €0.10 per person (€3.7 million total). The savings to the health service from reduced hospital admissions related to alcohol were an estimated €65 million in the first year, and €18 million crime-related costs were saved.

Social solidarity and universal access are under threat

European citizens expect both protection from health risks and access to high quality health care. Health has become a factor of democratic rights, social stability and state legitimacy. The structural asymmetry between market forces and social rights and protection as European welfare states are being restructured highlights the need for constant vigilance and the active promotion of values- and rights-based public health policies. Health 2020 provides a platform for championing and protecting these rights and values.

How was Health 2020 developed?

The Health 2020 development process has interwoven three streams of developmental activities over the last two years: gathering of evidence, documentation of experience and stakeholder/peer review. To ensure that all its recommendations were evidence-based, the WHO Regional Office for Europe actively worked with hundreds of public health, economic and other experts from a wide variety of academic disciplines across the European Region and beyond to gather information and identify what works in addressing today's health challenges. Newly commissioned studies on actions to address inequities, the social determinants of health and governance approaches further informed the development of this evidence-based framework. This extensive process has made Health 2020 a unique distillate of the best public health policy evidence available. The process has also systematically catalysed a multi-level communication platform through which policy-makers and public health advocates can share practical experiences from across the Region. Finally, sequential drafts have been edited, translated, tested and reviewed by thousands of stakeholders across the 53 countries of the WHO European Region and beyond throughout the two-year consultation and development process.

What is the Health 2020 approach?

Acknowledging the interconnectedness of local, national, regional and global health actors, actions and challenges, the Health 2020 process works to create unity in the European public health community through the active promotion and adoption of a common values- and evidence-based, outcome-focused, Region-wide policy framework. While there are a wide variety of approaches to get to agreed common goals and targets (see Box 3), the framework strategy aims to provide a clear mapping of options and trade-offs that public health practitioners and advocates can choose in crafting their way forward.

Box 3. Health 2020 targets

1. Reduce premature mortality in the European Region by 2020
2. Increase life expectancy in the European Region
3. Reduce inequalities in health in the European Region
4. Enhance the well-being of the European Region population
5. Ensure universal coverage and the right to the highest attainable level of health
6. Set national goals and targets related to health in Member States

Health 2020 identifies two strategic objectives and four priority areas for action to guide policy approaches. They are drawn from an extensive review of public health evidence, a comprehensive peer-review process and the experience of Member States and the WHO Regional Office for Europe working together.

Strategic objective 1: Improving health for all and reducing health inequalities

Implementing whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches

To ensure an integrated approach to health and development for all, the policy focuses on new forms of governance for health. In our increasingly complex environment, health has become the business not only of government but of a vast range of stakeholders from purchasers of health care services, professional organizations, educational institutions, donors, industry, advocacy groups, citizens and patients.

Tackling inequities and the social determinants of health

Health 2020 presents new European evidence on effective interventions that address inequalities in the distribution of power, influence, goods and services, as well as in early life, living and working conditions, and access to good quality health care, schools and education, all of which underpin the health divide between and within countries.

Strategic objective 2: Improving leadership and participatory governance for health

Innovation, leadership and capacity for health and development

Innovation and leadership for health and health equity are at the core of Health 2020. These can come from many stakeholders as they take on new responsibility and accountability for population health. Health 2020 identifies ways in which new collaborative leadership can bring many partners together and mobilize broad-based political and cultural support for equitable,

sustainable and accountable approaches to health development, and effectively challenge groups whose activities are detrimental to the public's health.

Citizens' empowerment

Health 2020 identifies citizens' and patients' empowerment as key elements for improving health outcomes, health systems' performance and satisfaction. These elements can advocate for healthier policies in all sectors, reduce the use of health services and health care costs, bring better communication between patient and health professionals as well as a better adherence to treatment regimens, and eventually lead to better life expectancy, more control over disease, increased self-esteem, greater inclusion in society and improved quality of life.

Four priority action areas

Priority 1: Invest in a life-course approach and empower people

Supporting good health and its social determinants throughout the life-course leads to increased healthy life expectancy, which can yield important economic, societal and individual benefits. Children with a good start in life learn better and have more productive lives. Adults with control over their lives have greater capacity for economic and social participation and for living healthier lives. Healthy older people can continue to contribute actively to society. Healthy and active ageing, which starts at birth, is a policy priority as well as a major research priority.

Priority 2: Tackle Europe's major health challenges

Health 2020 focuses on a set of effective integrated strategies and interventions to address major health challenges across the European Region from both noncommunicable and communicable diseases. Both areas require determined public health action and health care system interventions. Evidence points to the need to underpin these interventions with actions on equity, social determinants of health, empowerment and supportive environments.

Priority 3: Strengthen people-centred health systems, public health capacity and emergency preparedness, surveillance and response

Strengthening health systems is high on the agenda of countries throughout the European Region, with new approaches and innovations for better health and health equity. Improving the delivery of public health and health care services, generating key health system inputs such as human resources and medicines of high quality, strengthening health funding arrangements and enhancing governance are all key focus areas of Health 2020.

Priority 4: Create supportive environments and resilient communities

People's health chances are closely linked to the conditions in which they are born, grow, work and age. Resilient and empowered communities respond proactively to new or adverse situations, prepare for economic, social and environmental change and cope better with crisis and hardship. Communities that remain disadvantaged and disempowered have disproportionately poor outcomes, in terms of both health and other social determinants. A systematic assessment of the health effects of a rapidly changing environment is essential, especially in the areas of technology, work, energy production and urbanization, and must be followed by action to ensure positive benefits to health.

Making it happen

The role of the WHO Regional Office for Europe is to offer leadership, in its constitutional role to act as the coordinating authority on international health work at the regional level. It can act as a tireless champion and advocate for health and well-being, for new and innovative thinking, and for effective policy, strategy and intervention approaches. Finally, it can support Member States in their assessments and technical improvements and by providing relevant health information and other support.

Improving overall governance for health, at national, regional and local levels

Under national constitutions, local governments and regions are often responsible for public health and health service delivery. In many countries, they have been innovators for health. Many mayors and city parliaments have taken the health agenda forward through “health in all policies” approaches and new public health acts. Good health requires a combination of governance approaches – hierarchical, dispersed and participatory – to benefit health and well-being for everyone. Such governance will anticipate change, foster innovation and be oriented towards investment in the promotion of health and the prevention of disease.

Engaging and valuing contributions across sectors

Policy-makers across all sectors can contribute to health, whether within government or outside. Different policy areas cover the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, such as food, water, transport, housing, migration, employment, environment and education. Taking a whole-of-government approach offers all ministries and their wider stakeholders very real benefits. Effective collaboration can mean investments are targeted at what works best and is most effective. The focus can be on identifying common benefits that achieve both health and other sector goals. Actions can be identified that engage and support other sectors contributing to these goals.

Extending the ethical contributions of civil society and the business community

The diversity of civil society institutions and bodies across the Region is a vibrant and dynamic asset to both individual countries’ and regional efforts. They also commonly have established links with the business sector, from small-scale local businesses to much larger companies, which often provide funding and other support in differing ways. There is real potential here to further enhance collaboration and partnerships, guided by appropriate values and ethical considerations, while always maintaining the ability to highlight and challenge any practices and approaches that undermine or damage health.

For further information, contact:

Ina Parvanova
Regional Communications Adviser
WHO/Europe
Tel.: +45 39 17 12 31, +45 21 19 43 74
(mobile)
E-mail: tpr@euro.who.int

Liuba Negru
Media Relations Officer
WHO/Europe
Tel.: +45 39 17 13 44, +45 20 45 92 74
(mobile)
E-mail: lne@euro.who.int