

3 December 2020

Public health in Europe after COVID-19 : Working in partnership with civil society

Event Report

**Moderated Policy Dialogue in the frame of the
EPHA 2020 Annual General Assembly**



About the European Public Health Alliance

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) is a change agent – Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. We are a dynamic member-led organisation, made up of public health civil society, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups working together to improve health and strengthen the voice of public health in Europe.



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Introduction

On Thursday 3 December 2020, the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) hosted an online discussion on working in partnership with civil society in the implementation of the European Union's EU4Health Programme 2021-2027 and the WHO European Programme of Work 2021-2025, in the frame of the EPHA 2020 Annual General Assembly.

Following keynote speeches by European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides and Dr Hans Kluge, Regional Director for Europe of the World Health Organization, a policy dialogue took place between Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat (WHO Europe Director of the Division of Country Health Policies and Systems) and Philippe Roux, Head of Unit for health Information and Integration in all Policies, DG for Health and Food Safety, European Commission, who answered questions from EPHA members. The discussion was moderated by EPHA President, Freek Spinnewijn.

Keynote speeches

Stella Kyriakides, EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety



"EPHA is one of the strongest advocates of our work, and has been fundamental to the original 'EU4Health' alliance of health civil society groups who called for health to be the top priority of the Commission."

"Commissioner Kyriakides began by acknowledging the contribution of civil society to the legislative process and their ability to understand the challenges and needs on the ground, to deliver better health outcomes for all Europeans.

Although health was already high on the the President von der Leyen's agenda, Commissioner Kyriakides described the ways in which the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had not only highlighted weaknesses in the EU's preparedness mechanisms, delivery of treatment and care, the pharmaceutical supply chain, and the availability of medicines; but also had accelerated innovation, shown the value of solidarity and European coordination, and facilitated the first steps towards a genuine Health Union in Europe, echoing the calls of European citizens for more Europe in the area of health.

Commissioner Kyriakides then outlined the plans to increase the responsibilities, powers and resources for the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Medicines Agency, as well as the creation of HERA, a new European Health Emergency Authority which will work to prevent and prepare for possible new crises and will focus on therapies, vaccines and technologies.

The recently presented Pharmaceutical Strategy, she added, will put patients at the centre of the development and supply of medicines. Europe's Beating Cancer Plan to be launched at the beginning of 2021 and the European health data space, will be important steps on way to the creation of a European Health Union, which she invited EPHA members to be part of.

The remainder of her speech focused on the new EU4Health programme, acknowledging civil society's role in achieving a historic budget of 5.1 billion euro, which will be used to build capacity, supplies and facilities; implement innovative approaches, reinforce the EU's preparedness for pandemics, as well as identifying best practice, exchanging information and skills, and supporting networks and outreach based on a "Health in all policies" approach and the use of the new Recovery and Resilience Facility to help Member States plan and invest in health reforms.

Commissioner Kyriakides concluded with a call to take forward the lessons learned, invest more, and establish a long-term approach to support resilient and sustainable health systems in all Member States, that deliver to everyone in Europe.

"I invite you to support Member States as they implement and monitor the different actions under the EU4Health programme, to help them and us in building a genuine and stronger European Health Union."

Video message by Dr Hans Kluge, Regional Director for Europe, World Health Organization

Dr Kluge opened his message by reminding the participants, with over 18.7 million cases and 415,000 tragic deaths, that Europe was once again at the epicentre of COVID-19 during the second wave

He then outlined the three important lessons from the pandemic:

1. The need for strong health systems
2. The reciprocal relationship between health and the economy
3. That solidarity is our way through this crisis

For health systems to have an ability to respond to future shocks, they needed to be built upon a strong base of primary healthcare services accessible to all, which is prioritised in WHO Europe's Programme of Work (EPW), their agenda for health for the next five years, adopted by all 53 WHO members in Europe.

"You are vital partners in ensuring its realisation in the interests of all our citizens."

He added that health services need to operate on a "dual track" service delivery where essential services are provided in parallel to services focused on pandemic response. He highlighted the need to compensate for vital care, such as missed treatment and delayed diagnosis of cancer and non-communicable diseases, disrupted by COVID-19.

Mental health and digital health are two of the the four flagship initiatives prioritised in the EPW as ways to build resilience and innovation



in European health systems and to support Europe's health workforce.

Dr Kluge then emphasised the connection between health and economic development, which the pandemic had thrown into sharp relief. He outlined the role of the recently convened **Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development**, chaired by former Italian Prime Minister, Mario Monti, which has been tasked with making recommendations for strong future health systems.

The final part of his message was a plea for solidarity, coordination and collective action in the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines, to ensure that Europe's health systems are prepared and access to vaccines is equitable.

He concluded by reiterating the need to work in partnership:

"There is a way through this crisis if we trust each other and work together. By using all the possibilities and instruments we have; making use of science, solutions and solidarity, we can deliver health and prosperity to the people we serve, leaving no country, no person, behind."

Highlights from the policy dialogue

Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat (WHO/Europe Director of the Division of Country Health Policies and Systems)



Dr Azzopardi-Muscat outlined the issues being faced across Europe as countries try to control the pandemic, while continuing to respond to other health needs. She also highlighted the challenges ahead for governments - of the need to support our health workforce, experiencing mental health pressures after being on the frontline of COVID-19 for almost a year; and of the need to tackle other psycho-social issues which have arisen, such as obesity or increased alcohol consumption - while dealing with the financial costs of the pandemic.

"There is a huge agenda in front of us. The WHO and the EU are both trying to do their level best, alone we are too small. Together with partners like yourself and others, we are very grateful for your advocacy and practical support, which is going to be needed much more than ever"

EPHA President, Freek Spinnewijn kicked off the discussion.

Cooperation between civil society and policymakers

Regarding the most effective cooperation between organisations like EPHA and WHO, Dr Azzopardi-Muscat highlighted the four WHO flagship priorities in the WHO European Programme of Work, outlining the specific contribution of EPHA and its members could make:



- 1. Immunisation:** help build trust and work on vaccine hesitancy, especially towards hard-to-reach groups
- 2. Mental health:** help policy-makers understand the different ways people's mental health have been affected by the pandemic, and help in reaching out to everyone affected
- 3. Digital health:** Rapid, unprecedented innovation has been taking place. More has to be done to understand and evaluate what has worked and not worked; what are the limitations, where human involvement cannot be replaced; and what other innovations might be possible.
- 4. Behavioural and Cultural Insight:** Support to help people's concerns and how they receive, understand and engage with public health messages.

She also highlighted the Oslo Medicines Initiative on Access to Medicines, inviting EPHA to participate in the upcoming consultations.



Philippe Roux, Head of Unit for health Information and Integration in all Policies, DG for Health and Food Safety, European Commission, stated that Cooperation across the Commission has never been so important and discussions are currently ongoing within DG Health about governance of the EU4Health programme and the best approach. Links are also being created between the different programmes relevant for health on budget allocation and governance..

Dr Azzopardi-Muscat highlighted the "misinformation pandemic" which had also grown up alongside the spread of COVID19. Communicating clearly and effectively is crucial, and she stressed the need to reach young people who are using radio and tv less and less. Civil society groups who work with young people have a crucial role to helping to reach out to them. She also highlighted the importance of national-specific campaigns, especially when communicating nuanced and complex public health messages.

Tackling health inequalities and ensuring "no-one is left behind"

Dr Azzopardi-Muscat highlighted the need to make this the underlying principle, according to the policy issue being tackled. In some countries, certain groups are often invisible, because of the lack of data and statistics, especially in Eastern Europe.

Mr Roux stressed the importance of making this health inequalities a policy priority. He mentioned a number of initiatives put in place by the Commission to tackle inequalities, such as the Anti-Racism plan, the Gender Equality Strategy, and targeted approaches for Roma, LGBTI and disabled people.

Access to healthcare by vulnerable groups is at the heart of the formulation of EU health policies. It is crucial to invest in the right initiatives and to build strong cooperation with EU Member States, to ensure they focus on tackling health inequalities too.

All the new financial instruments include measures to ensure health inequalities are taken into account, he added.

COVID-19 lessons and cancer treatment

Mr Roux highlighted the interactions which are being established between the EU Pharmaceutical Strategy and the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan; and the need to ensure effective and affordable pharmaceutical products, and that these plans support each other. The tools which have been developed to fight COVID-19 will be applied in other settings, he added.

Dr Azzopardi-Muscat sounded a note of warning, however, adding that it is important to look at what has worked and what didn't, and to examine then what can be used for the future in terms of collaboration.

She highlighted how innovations in the response to COVID-19 could lead to progress in other policy areas - for example, the introduction of digital COVID19 certificates, taking account the issues of accessibility and privacy could open the door to the feasibility of digital childhood vaccinations, which so far it had not proved possible to implement. While there will certainly be positive lessons to be learnt, it is more complicated than just "copy-paste."

COVID-19 and solidarity

Dr Azzopardi-Muscat highlighted the global WHO Independent Panel review which will gather WHO members' experiences of the pandemic. At European level, a Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development has been convened to rethink policy priorities in the light of what we have learned over the last few months. It aims to go far beyond public health measures to control infectious diseases, and think more critically about health systems funding and support, looking at the deficiencies in our economies, societies and health systems which have been unmasked by the pandemic.

Mr Roux responded that the European Commission has a long history of evaluating its initiatives and programmes- he also highlighted the Commission practice of undertaking impact assessments before implementing any new programmes. The Steering Group with Member States also aims to look at what works and doesn't work and to promote good practices across the EU. Moreover, the Commission is carrying out "early-learning" exercises to find out where things can be improved.

He also highlighted the systematic assessment of scientific opinions, the consultations on the "Have Your Say" platform which enables the public and other stakeholders to give feedback on Commission initiatives; and the Health Policy Platform. regardless of whether something is successful or not, the intention to listen, learn from mistakes and do better is clear.

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Increased EU collaboration on health and working in partnership

Mr Roux contended that health was now being seen as a political priority, with the President of the European Commission also acknowledging its importance, which has not always been the case. His new unit, focusing on "Health in All Policies," is now working with many services across the Commission to provide the health dimension in different policy areas. The indications are that this is something we are moving towards.

Dr Azzopardi-Muscat highlighted the second objective in the WHO European Programme of Work: "Empowering health leadership." This is about working together to see how we can achieve health aims such as controlling disease transmission with minimal disruptions to life.

How we work with other sectors is really important she added. For example, how do we balance the need to travel with other risks and benefits? It is important to take a balanced approach to health focusing on three different aspects: Universal health coverage; Protecting people; Improving health and well-being. We have to learn how to adapt to new circumstances to protect livelihoods as well as lives.

Commissioner Kyriakides has been keen to ensure the widest possible consultation, as has been happening with the development of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, targeting specific groups where necessary. On the issue of contact-tracing apps for example, the Commission has been keen to work with all stakeholders to find the best solution. The Commission will continue to work with civil society, hopefully even more closely in the future, through such tools as the Health Policy Platform.

it is time to "refresh, reboot and go on." What has emerged from the pandemic response is knowing how to bridge the gap between knowing what needs to be done, and implementing it on the ground. The WHO Europe office has been working alongside the national authorities and being agile, responsive and open to go where they are needed is key.

Dr Azzopardi-Muscat, WHO European Office

She added that this is often the most effective window of opportunity for progress. To have a sustainable impact, national health authorities are encouraged to bring together all the relevant partners including civil society. As we emerge from the pandemic, everyone is thinking how we can move forward and European organisations not only have an important role to shape the thinking and advocacy at European level, but also to strengthen, build and support capacity at national level, especially in Eastern Europe, where there are few civil society organisations with which WHO can engage. This would be a lasting legacy, if such a network could be built, she concluded.

Mr Roux replied there will be a full-time adviser to work with stakeholders, so this will significantly increase the capacity to reach out. He added, however, it is important that the civil society voice is not only heard, but is also listened to – this adds further complexity to the policy-making process and there is still some way to go.

Resources

[Speech by Commissioner Kyriakides to the European Public Health Alliance General Assembly 2020](#)

[Video Message by Dr Hans Kluge, Regional Director for Europe, World Health Organization](#)



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