



Better late than never: 1 scenario out of 3 promises adequate response to improve people's health and well-being

EU4Health reaction to European Commission Reflection Paper: Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030

Members of the EU4Health Campaign welcome the European Commission's [Reflection Paper: Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030](#), but regret that this political debate is three and a half years overdue and just before the mandate of the current Commission comes to an end. By now, we should have been well-beyond the phase of reflection and well-into the process of discussing a concrete implementation plan with measurable goals and targets, a timeline, appropriate governance structures, adequate financing, effective policy measures and an accountable and robust monitoring scheme.

Underfunded and overburdened healthcare services, under resourced evidence-based prevention programmes, insufficient and/or inadequate investment in the health workforce and infrastructure, unaffordability of healthcare and high medicines prices, inaccessibility of health services for many, financial hardship, increased health inequalities, inefficiencies and waste in the health system, the burden of healthcare-associated infections and antimicrobial resistance, increasing levels of vaccine hesitancy, cuts in social protection measures and persistent multi-dimensional barriers to healthcare access are all challenges faced by patients and citizens in the European Union (EU). These are detrimental to prevention, timely access to quality and safe care for all, good health outcomes and sustainable healthcare systems.

At the same time, more than half a million people under the age of 65 die of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the EU each year, with vast consequences for people's well-being and EU's economy.¹ While many NCDs, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, cancers and diabetes are to a large degree preventable,² the Reflection Paper mentions prevention policies only in passing and fails to realise the full extent of synergies and co-benefits that can be achieved within the proposed "cross-cutting policy agenda". For instance, adopting clean air policies that tackle exposure to harmful levels of toxic substances found both indoors and outdoors, including stricter tobacco control policies; addressing the harmful use of alcohol is an integral part of the transition towards healthy diets from sustainable food systems; a carbon-neutral and low air-polluting mobility sector should be designed to enhance opportunities for physical activity; achieving social justice and reducing health inequalities go hand-in-hand; pricing incentives and fiscal policies can also be effectively used

¹ OECD/EU (2016) Health at a Glance: Europe 2016 – State of Health in the EU Cycle

² WHO Regional Office for Europe (2016) Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in the WHO European Region 2016–2025

to improve health through the reduction of preventable diseases, while increasing revenues that could be made available for healthcare services. As long as these and other health synergies are not an integral part of the debate, the EU's agenda will fall short of fully achieving the aspirations of the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The UN SDGs pledge to leave no one behind, with a vision of a “just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met” and “a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all”³. This pledge has even more significance given that the paper makes continuous reference to the fact that SDG 10 on reducing inequalities has regressed. Moreover, the reflection paper rightly states that “We simply cannot succeed with the sustainability transition at the expense of groups of people, communities, sectors or regions”. For these reasons, EU4Health considers the first scenario outlined – ‘An overarching EU SDG Strategy to guide all the actions of the EU and its member states’ – to be the only viable option.

In stating that “the SDGs, as signed by 193 states, offer the best and most modern global and comprehensive framework to base our work on”, the paper clearly identifies scenario 1 (‘An overarching EU SDG Strategy to guide all the actions of the EU and its Member States’) as the best option to inspire and determine the EU Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 and the priority setting of the next President of the European Commission.

Scenario 1 is also the only option that supports Member States, in their commitment to the 2030 Agenda. An overarching EU SDG strategy can support national governments to establish national frameworks for the achievement of the goals, as required per the SDG pledge.

The members of the EU4Health campaign encourage a quick follow up and an ambitious political debate in preparation of a more concrete implementation plan.

A bold, robust, ambitious and urgent political response to the social dimensions of sustainable development is required to achieve sustainable and patient-centred universal access to health and related care and a reduction of increasing health inequalities, at a time of even greater demand for healthcare and social support as a consequence of Europe's ageing population. Another SDG health target is to “reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being”. The EU will not meet this target in the absence of ambitious, accountable action. The [European Commission's Reflection Paper on the Social Dimension of Europe](#) notes that half a million premature deaths could be avoided, not only by better prevention but also by more timely and effective healthcare.

A scenario 1 outcome would mean the definition of SDG implementation targets; an overarching EU SDG implementation strategy; comprehensive national SDG strategies; inter sectoral action; comprehensive and time-bound deliverables and a mechanism of reporting and monitoring of SDG progress in the context of the European Semester - actions that the members of the EU4Health campaign have been advocating for since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. For example, advancing

³ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

public health for sustainable development in the WHO European Region is being called for by civil society organisations.⁴

Ensuring the future sustainability of health systems is fundamental to the attainment of most of the sustainable development goals and targets in particular those related to reduced inequalities, gender equality and elimination of poverty. Health therefore must be regarded as a cross-cutting dimension of the 2030 Agenda and should be addressed as such. This dimension should however not remain implicit but be a fully-fledged part of the EU's response to meeting the SDGs.

Background

In September 2015, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were adopted by world leaders. The European Commission and EU Member States have committed themselves to achieving the global goals that aim to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring well-being for all and thus leaving no-one behind.

As part of the debate on the future of Europe, launched on 1 March 2017 with the [European Commission's White Paper](#), the Commission, published a [Reflection Paper: Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030](#), on 30 January 2019.

⁴ <http://www.euro.who.int/en/about-us/governance/regional-committee-for-europe/68th-session/statements-from-nsas/joint-statement-euph-efpc-iutox-efnma-studiorum-emsa-aspher-iapo-psi-iahpc-cotec-ipsf-wfot-epha-5c>