

Highlights of the closing Press Point at the EHFG 2020

Health politics beyond COVID-19 – Time for a European Health Union!

Friday, 2 October 2020

Today's EHFG closing press point was themed "Health politics beyond COVID-19 – Time for a European Health Union!". Building on the lessons learnt from the pandemic, it dived into new concepts to rethink the role of the European Union in setting a strong health governance at the regional and global level.

Ilona Kickbusch, Founding Director Global Health Programme, Graduate Institute Geneva

In this press point Ilona Kickbusch outlined key steps for a successful formation of a European Health Union, and elaborated on the important relationship between the European Union and the World Health Organization amid the pandemic:

"As we discuss the European Health Union, there are actually two buzzwords: European Solidarity and European sovereignty. It's not just about building back better, but to actually build the European Health Union forward, along three very key pillars: the social determinants of health; timely, affordable access to high-quality healthcare for all Europeans; and strengthening of the existing European institutions. And of course there is also the idea to create a new centre, like the BARDA in the United States, for advanced biomedical research and development. Some say all these should be combined to create a really very strong European health agency with power."

"The European Health Union needs to be a democratic union for health. It needs to have of course the right interaction with Member States, and the Commission, Parliament and Council. But it also needs to include the voice of civil society, the voice of patients, the voice of young people. We would like to encourage people to discuss the European Health Union, support the manifesto, and take this issue to the conference on the future of Europe to get a treaty change for health."

"The European Union has become an absolutely essential partner of the WHO, both politically and financially. It has given substantial financial contributions to a whole number of the present response programmes, and the president of the Commission also initiated the whole range of fundraising for the ACT Accelerator. Also with the United States behaving as it is, and at present deciding to leave the WHO, the European Union has been a steadfast pillar and has been much more proactive than in the past to support the WHO."

Dr Sylvie Briand, Director of Global Infectious Hazards Preparedness Department, World Health Organization (WHO)

In this press point Dr Sylvie Briand highlighted the disruptive impact of 'infodemics' on the management of pandemics and talked about the role of the EU in re-shaping a new global health multilateralism:

"The pandemic has exposed the diversity of countries' responses but also their divide. It is not so easy to collaborate, even if the threat is global. It is very difficult to achieve anchored solidarity: it has happened with the COVAX Facility, so it works, but it is difficult. Solidarity is not something we can invent in the middle of a crisis. We need to build it before the crisis."

“Managing the ‘infodemic’ is key. We have seen a tsunami of info, good or bad, and this has led to confusion, not only in the population but also among decision makers. We have to improve the way we collaborate and anchor our preparedness in solidarity and cooperation”.

“Developing new health models in times of crisis can be challenging, as we often do it by only addressing the crisis itself. This is why we need to build strong mechanisms which will maintain enough flexibility to adapt to any kind of future health threats and address any kind of crisis.”

“The European Union has developed a strong experience of developing cross-country collaboration at the regional level and can use this expertise to contribute to the discussion on a new global health multilateralism.”

“One of the social impacts of this crisis has been increased generational and gender inequities. This is why we need health to be at the centre of the discussions with its social, physical and mental wellbeing components. We need to work together to find ways to better engage populations and empower them. We have seen a lot of creativity and innovation at the local level and we can leverage that experience at a bigger scale for the benefit of the European Union as a whole.”

Caroline Costongs, Director, EuroHealthNet

In this press point Caroline Costongs highlighted the syndemic of NCDs, health inequalities and Covid-19, as well as the need for a broader focus on psychosocial aspects on EU level:

“The severity of COVID-19 is magnified because of pre-existing non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and health inequalities. We can look at Covid-19 not only as a pandemic but also as a ‘syndemic’, meaning that the disease pattern of Covid-19 is being interfered by NCDs and health inequalities. In a way it is a disgrace that we have such high levels of NCDs. About 70% of the disease burden are due to NCDs that are preventable for a great extent, such as cancer.”

“If we want to build a European Health Union, we need to take a much broader approach. We cannot just be looking at the biomedical aspects of the pandemic but we also need to look at psychosocial aspects. A broad approach is something we feel that is very important and that is also what our members, the national institutes, are working on.”

“Mental health is hugely under-addressed by the European Union and the European Commission. They had their opportunities in the past but they didn’t go for a strong mental health strategy. Fortunately, the WHO, in its new European Programme of Work, identified mental health as one of their flagship areas. The WHO and the EU could work much closer together [in this aspect].”

“The Global Health Strategy of the European Commission is very old and not being renewed. The recovery funds are only for the 27 EU member states and are not for developing countries, so the Commission will need to see how to overcome this and how to move towards a stronger role in the global arena, as the German EU Presidency has argued for.”

“A European BARDA or the ECDC will not look into psychosocial insights and all sorts of related activities, but they are very important activities that the authorities and organizations in countries are working on and they could benefit so much more from a closer cooperation, and sharing information. This is where EuroHealthNet tries to take the lead to provide these opportunities for cooperation.”