



# **Study assessing the EU Health Policy Platform (SANTE/2023)**

**Executive summary**

**English**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This report covers the “Study assessing the EU Health Policy Platform (HPP)”. The aim of the study, which focused on the Platform’s activities between 2020 and mid-2022, was to provide robust evidence about the use and functioning of the HPP. The study followed a mixed-methods approach, combining extensive desk-based research with participatory surveys, interviews and consultations with moderators and users of the Platform, including EU, national and local health stakeholders. The study was complemented with nine thematic case studies that involved more targeted desk research and in-depth interviews. The findings confirmed the continued relevance of the Platform, both in terms of alignment with EU health policies and initiatives and addressing the needs of health stakeholders. The Platform has been most effective as a space for facilitating information exchange between health stakeholders, and with the European Commission (Commission) services (in particular with Directorate General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE)). Through the Joint Statements resulting from the work of the Thematic Networks, the HPP has also encouraged policy discussions and dialogue, and supported health-related actions beyond DG SANTE. Findings shed light on areas for improvement, including more promotion of the Platform to enhance its visibility, and the possibility of opening Agora and the newsletter to audiences beyond registered HPP users. The interactive features of the Platform could also be reinforced but this would require a comprehensive user experience (UX) audit.

## Executive summary

### *Policy context*

Online discussion platforms, such as the EU Health Policy Platform (HPP), have a key and growing role in achieving a stronger European Health Union. Launched by the European Commission's Directorate General of Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) in 2016, the HPP facilitates dialogue between health stakeholders, to share best practice, while also providing a channel for the European Commission (Commission) and stakeholders to exchange information on a more regular basis. The HPP is also a channel for consultation. The creation of the Platform was in line with the call in the EU's 2014-2020 Health Programme for health policy stakeholders to participate in Commission dialogue and interactions<sup>1</sup>.

### *Study objectives and scope*

The present study has assessed the EU Health Policy Platform as a whole, including the web tool (the core of the HPP), the various networks it hosts, the live webinars on key EU health initiatives that are organised through the Platform, and the seven annual editions of the EU Health Award held between 2015 and 2021 which were part of the Platform's remit. The study focused on the Platform's activities between 2020 and mid-2022. It was contracted by DG SANTE to a grouping led by Economisti Associati. The work was led by Tetra Tech International Development and supported by Wavestone. The study has provided DG SANTE with robust evidence about the use and functioning of the Health Policy Platform. Based on this assessment, the study team has made recommendations for improvements and identified additional features or services the Platform could offer.

### *Study design and methods*

In line with the European Commission's stakeholder consultation strategy, the study followed a mixed-methods approach, combining extensive desk-based research with the following consultation activities:

- HPP user consultation, featuring a comprehensive survey targeting all HPP users.
- Targeted consultations, including:
  - Targeted surveys for webinar participants and EU Health Award contestants;

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Recital 20 of Regulation 282/2014, Available at: Regulation (EU) No 282/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 on the establishment of a third Programme for the Union's action in the field of health (2014-2020) and repealing Decision No 1350/2007

- Targeted interviews with HPP moderators and users.
- Individual discussions<sup>2</sup> with Member States' representatives, health stakeholders, as well as Commission and EU agencies' representatives.
- Case studies involving additional consultations with relevant stakeholders.
- Validation workshop with stakeholders, held on 19 April 2023, involving onsite and virtual break-out sessions with attendees to the HPP Annual Meeting.

The consultation activities focused on gathering the views and experiences of stakeholders regarding the criteria in the Better Regulation Guidelines, namely relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence / complementarity, and EU added value. In addition, impact of the Platform, including of the EU Health Award and the Joint Statements, was included in the assessment.

### *Key evaluation findings and conclusions*

#### *Overall conclusion*

The findings confirmed the continued relevance of the Platform, both in terms of alignment with EU health policies and initiatives, and addressing the needs of health stakeholders. The Platform has been most effective as a space for facilitating information exchange between health stakeholders and with Commission services (in particular with DG SANTE). Through the Joint Statements resulting from the work of the Thematic Networks, the HPP has also encouraged policy discussions and dialogue, as well as supported health-related actions beyond DG SANTE. Findings shed light on areas for improvement, including measures to raise awareness of the Platform, and the possibility of opening Agora and the newsletter to audiences beyond the registered HPP users. The interactive features of the Platform could also be reinforced but this would require a comprehensive user experience (UX) audit.

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<sup>2</sup> These discussions were initially designed as panel sessions with different groups of stakeholders but given the low response rates from people contacted and the limited availability, individual discussions were organised.

## Relevance of the Platform

**At the general level, the study findings confirmed the continued relevance of the EU Health Policy Platform, both in terms of alignment with EU health policies and initiatives and in terms of addressing the needs of health stakeholders. The Platform is a relevant and valued tool with a unique offer and an important role in the EU health community.**

### ***Alignment of the Platform with EU health policies and initiatives.***

There is a clear alignment between HPP objectives and health topics with EU health policies and initiatives. In practice, the alignment is reflected in the different activities that take place in the framework of the Platform. Study findings were conclusive about the relevance of the topics covered by the Platform's networks, the online webinars and the production of Joint Statements. The EU Health Award (active from 2015 to 2021) was also appreciated by stakeholders. The Agora and bi-weekly newsletters are highly consulted and valued sources of information among HPP users.

***Relevance of the Platform to respond to users' needs.*** At the time of its inception the HPP was designed to respond to the need for exchange of information and knowledge, and to foster dialogue between policymakers and organised stakeholders in the area of health and EU health policies. The main rationale behind the Platform's creation was to take advantage of the benefits and efficiencies of the virtual world, ensuring broader representation of national, regional and local health stakeholders in the dialogue and increasing stakeholder ownership of EU health policy.

In practice, the Platform does well to meet the needs of health stakeholders for diverse, up-to-date and trustworthy information on EU health policy and health topics. Even though the majority of users also consider it as a relevant space for discussion and interaction with other health stakeholders and Commission policy-makers, the fairly limited features offered by the Platform have restricted opportunities for users to engage with one another and to work collaboratively. Hypothetical improvements to further strengthen stakeholder engagement, networking and policy advocacy included the possibility of working in shared documents directly on the Platform, previewing files without downloading them, and a direct messaging or chat function. Other inhibiting factors include the limited time that people dedicate to interacting with the Platform in comparison to other competing sources and channels of information (which have grown exponentially over the years) and the limited presence of Commission staff on the Platform and in its activities.

## Effectiveness of the Platform

**The successful evolution of the Platform in recent years confirms the need for such a community. The Platform has been most effective as a space for facilitating information exchanges between health stakeholders and with Commission services (in particular DG SANTE), for supporting the objectives and priorities under the EU4Health and previous health programmes and for responding to health crises. Policy discussions and dialogue and the support for health-related actions beyond DG SANTE have been more limited. The current language regime has been reported as appropriate.**

***Evolution of the Platform over the years.*** One of the most compelling arguments of the success of the Platform has been its dynamic growth over the years. Most importantly, the evolution shows that the growth in the number of registered users was closely accompanied by an expansion of the offer of activities, including increased Platform networks, online webinars and an expanded scope of the EU Health Award<sup>3</sup>. The expansion, which was accelerated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, brought challenges for the management of the Platform, including limited resources to respond to increased demand for participation in webinars and networks, and more users.

The study findings clearly showed that the Platform has a number of flagship activities and channels that are highly valued by its users, including the live webinars and bi-weekly newsletter. Findings were less favourable towards the results and benefits of the HPP networks, in particular the low levels of activity across many networks which were considered to diminish their effectiveness and potential impact.

***Effectiveness of the Platform as a space for facilitating information exchanges.*** The Platform has effectively fulfilled its role as a space for facilitating information exchanges between health stakeholders and Commission services. However, the extent to which these exchanges have evolved as discussions and policy debates is less evident. As highlighted above, the limited functionalities for networking and interacting within the Platform were considered to hamper the opportunities for dialogue, but study findings pointed to several adjustments that could be made with the available set-up and resources which could enhance the interactivity elements that are seen to be missing. These include encouraging more active participation of the users including Commission representatives on the Platform (webinars, posting

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<sup>3</sup> The EU Health Award was discontinued after its 2021 edition.

in Agora and the networks), as well as adjusting specific features of the format of the webinars and the activities of the networks.

***Effectiveness of the Platform in responding to health-related crises.*** The Platform has been very effective in responding to health-related crises over the years. The examples of the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation in Ukraine and neighbouring countries have confirmed that the capacity to react swiftly to crisis situations has been facilitated as a result of the existing health community on the Platform. Through its different channels and activities, the HPP offers the possibility to respond flexibly to specific crises and also emerges as a trustworthy source of information in crisis contexts.

***Support for actions under the Health Programmes and for other health related EU-funded actions.*** Study findings were conclusive about the important role of the Platform in supporting the implementation and dissemination of actions financed under the EU4Health and previous health programmes. However, there was limited evidence regarding the contribution of the HPP to the dissemination of information on health-related actions financed through other EU funding instruments. Consultations with representatives of other Commission services highlighted opportunities to further promote the Platform beyond DG SANTE and the Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA).

***Appropriateness of the Platform's linguistic regime.*** The study findings confirmed that the current linguistic regime of the Platform is considered appropriate by HPP users. The broad majority of respondents to the different study surveys felt comfortable reading, understanding and speaking in English. The hypothetical improvement to provide automated translation of posts and messages was not viewed as a priority by users.

#### *Efficiency of the Platform*

**The Platform has evolved substantially over the years, realising benefits for its users and providing efficiency of working in a virtual environment. However, it competes with a multitude of alternative, online channels (including digital and social media) with advanced networking functionalities. Any technical updates to the Platform would require additional investments (including in terms of financial and human resources) to be implemented over a longer time period. The lack of a monitoring framework hinders the formulation of recommendations for changes.**

***Cost and carbon footprint savings generated by the Platform.*** Online exchanges on the HPP have generated significant savings in terms of time, resources and carbon footprint. The online nature of the Platform



has also made it easier to set up new groups or organise meetings in direct response to topical issues or crises. Despite the advantages and savings identified, the outputs achieved remain limited due to the lack of advanced functionalities enabling users to engage and work collaboratively on the Platform.

***Adequacy of resources and of the monitoring framework.*** Even though the study findings confirmed that the financial resources are sufficient for running the HPP in its current form, more resources would be required to update the Platform further, if new technical functionalities were to be explored and implemented. While the discontinuation of the EU Health Award has freed up financial and human resources, the increasing demand placed on DG SANTE for managing the Platform and the work of the networks, combined with a decrease in the number of staff, raised concerns about the availability of human resources to organise, implement and follow up on the outcomes of the Platform's activities. The lack of an adequate monitoring framework and performance indicators for the Platform also makes it difficult to conclude on the efficiency question. Any new design and implementation of recommended changes should complement other channels and be accompanied with a monitoring framework and indicators following an evidence-based approach.

#### *Coherence of the Platform*

**There is scope to enhance collaboration and synergies with other Commission services and EU agencies working on topics with links to health. The study identified examples of successful collaboration within the HPP that could be replicated if the Platform reached out to relevant Commission services who could act as users and multipliers of the activities offered. Similarly, further promotion of the HPP at regional and local levels would make it possible to find alternative ways to engage with stakeholders at subnational level.**

***Synergies with the work of other Commission services and EU agencies.*** Study findings confirmed that there is potential for promoting synergies with policies and initiatives of other Commission services and EU agencies with implications for health. Where collaboration has taken place, in particular in the areas of environmental and research policy, this has been positive. A greater presence of other Directorates-General (DGs) on the Platform could help to expand the user base and the number of health topics (including adding new topics), as well as increase the relevance of the Platform for users who are already there. However, this would require significant internal communication and promotion of the HPP towards other Commission services.

**Contribution to the work of other health stakeholders.** Evidence collected confirmed broad consensus that the Platform's contribution to the work of other health stakeholders has been significant, which is closely linked to the view of Agora and the Platform's bi-weekly newsletter as main sources of information on EU public health topics. The challenge remains to find ways to increase the engagement of health stakeholders at the local and regional levels.

#### EU added value of the Platform

**Despite the limitations and the scope for improvement, it follows from the assessment of the Platform's EU added value that the HPP and its activities should continue to exist to consolidate its achievements and to address the continuous need for information and networking of health stakeholders in the area of EU health policy and health topics as these evolve.**

**Main added value of the Platform.** The main added value of the Platform lies in the provision of relevant information on EU health policy and health topics, and the promotion of the exchange of good practices and initiatives. The extent to which the HPP was perceived to add value to networking, collaboration, policy dialogue and interaction with the Commission was significantly lower. However, the study findings were conclusive that a hypothetical discontinuation of the Platform would negatively impact the health stakeholder community as the Platform was perceived as a unique channel.

**Added value of the Joint Statements.** The Joint Statements were positively assessed in relation to the benefits derived from the process of developing them, mainly linked to increased visibility, enhanced networking and the possibility for more direct interaction with the Commission. Findings were more critical regarding the promotion and follow-up of the outcomes of the Joint Statements, and the extent to which they were considered in the policy-making process. When faced with the hypothetical discontinuation of the Thematic Networks, there was consensus that this would negatively impact the possibility for health stakeholders to articulate common positions on EU health topics.

#### Impact of the Platform

**Findings for the Joint Statements – as well as the discontinued EU Health Award - evidenced a common challenge for the Platform to consolidate and promote the outputs of its activities. More efforts are needed to give the activities more visibility and to explore ways for them to contribute more meaningfully to shaping EU health policy.**

**Impact of the EU Health Award.** The main impact of the EU Health Award was the monetary support it provided to health actors (including NGOs, cities, and schools who participated in the different editions) to continue implementing awareness-raising activities on health priority projects. The EU Health Award also contributed to raising awareness of the Commission's health policies and priorities amongst some stakeholders. However, feedback from contestants suggests that the lack of visibility (beyond announcing the calls and the winners) was a missed opportunity. Additional activities such as using the winners as multipliers and promoting the best practices from the winning initiatives from previous editions would have increased the visibility and impact of the award.

**Impact on enhanced dialogue and transparency.** Even though engagement and discussions are not a frequent feature of the Platform, study findings confirmed that the HPP has been successful in building a broad community of health stakeholders who are well informed and able to access relevant events, publications and information. In practice, the HPP has met the needs of its users as a trusted aggregator, even though this role was not expressly stated as part of the Platform's original objectives. As such, it complements other channels because it provides curated information in one place. The role of health stakeholders in contributing to shaping EU health policy through the Platform's activities (i.e., the Thematic Networks and the Joint Statements) was unclear, but the study identified positive examples that could be showcased as best practice.

**Impact of the Joint Statements.** The study findings confirmed that the Joint Statements are effective tools to disseminate information and best practices to wide audiences, and that the process of developing them through the Thematic Networks provides a space to discuss and articulate common positions on health topics that are aligned with EU priorities. Despite the positive views, the impact of the Joint Statements on health policies at local, national and EU level has been perceived as limited, as a result of multiple factors already discussed above. Even though the Joint Statements are not binding on Commission, there was consensus that there could be scope to ensure a better link with specific policy initiatives to leverage their input.

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