



# Proceedings of the Webinar

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## Healthier together *EU non-communicable diseases initiative*

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22 June 2022

The European Commission presented the Healthier together – EU NCD Initiative which aims to improve citizens' health and well-being by reducing the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The Initiative proposes actions to tackle the leading causes of non-communicable diseases across five main areas: diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, mental health and neurological disorders, as well as their main contributing factors. The Initiative is supported by the EU4Health Programme. The event was attended by close to 600 participants.

## Opening remarks

Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, opened the event, *“Non-communicable diseases represent 80% of the disease burden in the EU, placing considerable pressure on our healthcare systems. Healthier together -Initiative is an important step to continue tackling them in a systematic and comprehensive way. By forging this path to better prevention, detection and treatment together with Member States and stakeholders, we are continuing to build the foundations of our strong European Health Union, whilst delivering on our key initiatives in the area of health, such as the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.”*

The Commissioner for Health and Food Safety emphasised, *“the Healthier Together Initiative aims at reducing health inequalities through all strands and all actions, namely by welcoming participating countries to promote Health in All Policies, such as social, employment and education ones. Special attention is paid to vulnerable groups, such as children and adolescents, people living in deprived areas and migrants and refugees.”*

A powerful testimony from a patient in the Netherlands set the scene for the importance of helping patients suffering from NCDs. The testimonial was followed by an explanation from professor of internal medicine of the best practice 'Reverse Diabetes 2 Now'.

## Presentation of the EU NCD Initiative

**John F. Ryan, Acting Deputy Director-General of DG SANTE**, presented the Healthier Together – EU NCD Initiative<sup>1</sup>. The Healthier Together Initiative will support actions during 2022-2027 to help Member States reach the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 targets and the World Health Organization 2025 targets on NCDs. Due to the inter-connection of NCDs and the rise in multi-morbidity, an integrated approach is essential to ensure Health in All Policies. The development of the Initiative has been innovative in its co-creation with Member States, also considering significant and widespread input from stakeholders. DG SANTE consulted other health-related Commission services<sup>2</sup>, as well as the World Health Organization, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Investment Bank. The Initiative identifies ambitious actions, such as best practices, best buys, research results, and innovative ideas and maps legal and financial tools to carry out such actions.

Adjunct Professor and Ministerial Adviser, **Dr Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, the Finnish member of the Steering Group on Promotion and Prevention Sub-group**, shared experiences from

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1 [https://ec.europa.eu/health/non-communicable-diseases/healthier-together-eu-non-communicable-diseases-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/health/non-communicable-diseases/healthier-together-eu-non-communicable-diseases-initiative_en)

2 Directorates-General consulted included Climate Action (CLIMA), Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (EMPL), Environment (ENV), Mobility and Transport (MOVE), Reform (REFORM), Research and Innovation (RTD), and Health and Food Safety (SANTE).

a Member State perspective. Professor Dr Sarlio-Lähteenkorva explained that the role of the Member States had been to provide input and priorities to the ongoing work over the last months which had evolved into a comprehensive and ambitious actions. She stressed that the transparent co-creation process was very smooth and efficient. Professor Dr Sarlio-Lähteenkorva spoke of the importance of the integrated approach, i.e. Health in All Policies. Attention needs to be directed upstream to reduce the burden of NCDs, also considering a multisectoral approach. She emphasised involvement of Member States, supported by stakeholders, to address implementation of the Initiative and to address exchange of expertise and knowledge. Professor Dr Sarlio-Lähteenkorva commented on the use of digital tools to break down silos and increase transparency. After congratulating the Commission on the Initiative and the hard work to reach this point, she informed that several actors had contributed to the initiative also at the national level.

**Nathalie Berger, Director for Support to Member State reforms** within Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support presented how they could support and contribute to the implementation of the EU NCD Initiative. The support by DG REFORM is primarily provided through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) Ms Berger stressed the importance of catalysing and sharing peer exchange on multiple levels – local, regional, national – to help Member States participate in multi-country activities. She complemented this with concrete examples of support provided, for example to tackle mental health in Denmark and support involving multiple Member States in implementing colorectal cancer screening. Ms Berger concluded by pointing to the 2023 flagship project of Youth FIRST: Supporting children and youth wellbeing, education, training, social protection and labour prospects. This Flagship Technical Support Project, in the context of 2022 being Year of the Youth, aims at helping Member States to design policies that improve children's and young people's wellbeing, education, training/skills, social services, as well as access to finance and financial literacy.

**Birgit Beger, CEO of the European Heart Network**, informed that the European Heart Network is a Brussels-based alliance of foundations and associations dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke and representing patients' interest throughout Europe. Ms Beger commended the Commission on the intersectoral approach, which ultimately helps Member States reach Sustainable Development Goals. She stressed that implementation needs to be transparent and consistent and involve stakeholders. Ms Beger explained that the European Heart Network advocates a European Cardiovascular Health Plan. It could provide opportunities for reduction of premature and preventable deaths, tackling inequalities, paving the way for healthier living for all, and more resilient healthcare systems.

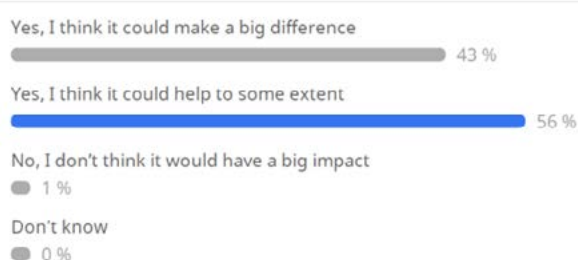
In response, the **World Health Organization** stated its strong support for the EU NCD Initiative and added that the WHO has access to best practices on the five strands of the EU NCD Initiative and is keen to support Member States to accelerate their progress on NCDs.

**Jakub Dvoracek, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health of Czechia**, made a keynote speech. He thanked the Commission and pointed to the detrimental effect of COVID-19 on screening for non-communicable diseases. He then gave an overview of related priorities and events during the upcoming Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union, including a programme of scientific conferences, which will cover non-communicable diseases and link to the implementation of the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. Equality of access resonates in Czechia, where they have deployed new technologies, such as diagnostic tools, to address this; their experience will be shared. In addition, Czechia is putting focus on the use of primary and secondary data in healthcare and on mental health.

## Online polls

Online polls conducted throughout the event showed the broad support from Member States and stakeholders, see the figures below. The first poll asked, “Do you think that the EU NCD Initiative can help address some of the challenges related to non-communicable diseases?”, to which 99% of respondents were positive. The second poll asked, “Do you think your country or organisation can help implement the EU NCD Initiative?”, to which 90% were willing to help. The final poll asked, “Did or will this Initiative help you to become familiar with possible legal or financial tools that could support the implementation of actions?”, to which 74% were positive.

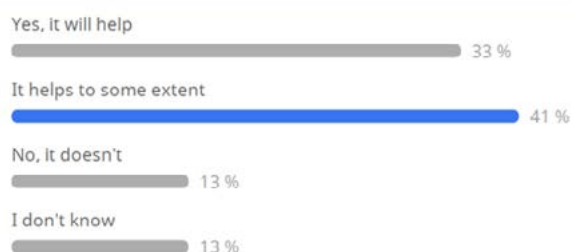
### 1. Do you think that the NCD initiative can help address some of the challenges related to non-communicable diseases?



### 2. Do you think your country or organisation can help implement the NCD Initiative?



### 3. Did or will this initiative help you to become familiar with possible legal or financial tools that could support the implementation of actions?



Additional inputs and comments among others covered topics such as implementation and governance, levels of investment and health in all policies. Further information regarding these and related topics is available at the Commission website<sup>3</sup>.

## Panel discussion

**Dr Sara Cerdas, Member of the European Parliament**, spoke of the importance of preventative measures and to reduce exposure to harmful factors. She added that science should be the guide, as it is hard to legislate on risk factors. The main focus should be on policies tailored to different national needs including the involvement of patients. Dr Cerdas recognised the need for better coordinated action for both public health protection and the provision of adequate healthcare services. She considered health literacy to be very important, with citizens making individual choices and participating in community debate in issues that deal with health. Dr Cerdas then

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/health/non-communicable-diseases/healthier-together-eu-non-communicable-diseases-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/health/non-communicable-diseases/healthier-together-eu-non-communicable-diseases-initiative_en)

commended the Commission for the European Health Data Space proposal in its addressing digitisation related to health literacy, but noted that care needed to be taken to include older people. She concluded by stressing the need for health education programmes, for example, vaccination programmes, and the need to work with governments, to use ambassadors and influencers, and to identify countries with best practice.

**Alice Chapman-Hatchett, President of the European Public Health Alliance**, represented civil society stakeholders. Ms Chapman-Hatchett considered that the main risk factors need to be addressed, also across borders, including harmful and 'unhealthy commodities', such as tobacco, alcohol, ultra-processed food and beverages, gambling, and fossil fuels; to this list, she added polluted air. Health determinants and NCD risk factors are areas of interest, especially for an EU legislative process, as voluntary initiatives do not suffice. She continued by pointing to commercial determinants outside the health sector, on which the public needs to be educated more in order to be able to make informed choices. Ms Chapman-Hatchett concluded by welcoming the joined-up approach within the EU NCD Initiative, with strong, clear, targeted prevention policies.

**Anne Calteux, Head of Representation of the Commission in Luxembourg**, explained that the recent pandemic was a wake-up call, especially regarding youth, who can become seriously ill either directly from the virus or through anxiety triggering mental health issues. This has been compounded by anxieties regarding the future, for example the effect of the war in Ukraine. This is complemented by European youth being increasingly engaged, for example, in peace, the environment and wellbeing. From a policy-making perspective it is essential to ensure that young people take ownership of their health. Small steps when young make a big difference in overall health. School and sports play important roles, especially in development of responsibility and prevention of NCDs. Policy can be developed to target the lower socioeconomic groups to become active and engaged citizens and empowered young people; however, their needs and opinions should be considered.

## Closing remarks

The final presentation was made by **Sandra Gallina, Director-General of DG SANTE**. She spoke of a new era in efforts to prevent and control NCDs in EU countries at a time when health systems are under pressure like never before. She commented, ***“Our economic success depends on having a happy healthy population. With Healthier Together, the EU NCD Initiative, we want to propose ways of preventing and treating non communicable diseases using every means available”***. The Commission is putting more financial support, better governance and more brain power at the disposal of EU countries and stakeholders. Regular meetings will be organised to receive feedback from Member States and stakeholders and finetune the implementation process, thus building on knowledge and experience already in Europe and disseminating and replicating what works in Europe. The EU NCD Initiative is an ambitious approach, built on co-creation, and commands a budget of EUR 156 million for 2022 under the EU4Health Programme. The next step is about action.

**John F. Ryan, Acting Deputy Director-General of DG SANTE**, thanked participants and Member States for their strong engagement and interest. He pointed to best practices<sup>4</sup>, where a robust framework has been established to evaluate the best practices through a proven methodology. He concluded the meeting by urging Member States and stakeholders to maintain the same level of engagement, for example, to participate in Joint Actions, and to use the identified legal and financial tools. Ultimately, the aim is to raise the bar and lower the prevalence of NCDs across Europe.

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4 <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/dyna/bp-portal/index.cfm>