EPHA's priorities to strengthen public health across the EU ahead of the 2024 European elections

The newly elected MEPs will have both the opportunity to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Europe, and the responsibility to anticipate, avoid and prepare for health crises.

Ahead of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) has identified five key priorities to keep health high on the political agenda, advance health for everyone, and promote more resilient and equitable public health systems across the EU. These priorities are in line with the best available evidence and in unison with the expectations of EU citizens, who ask for far more attention to health in the EU.

- **Defend health receiving the priority it deserves.** The effect of neglecting health became evident in the COVID-19 pandemic, only one of the currently pressing crises. The EU must commit to breaking policy silos, using systems-thinking in addressing permacrises, and increasing actions on health across all policy areas. This should be embodied in a dedicated European Commission Vice-President on health and social rights.

- **Secure an ambitious budget for health.** Delivering ambitious EU objectives at the EU and global levels requires health be viewed as an investment rather than a cost. Investing in health systems and addressing health workforce shortages across the EU, and in parallel investing in disease prevention and health promotion policies, is the only way to secure social cohesion, equity, wellbeing and productivity across the EU.

- **Promote health equity, social justice and social rights.** Access to health is unequal in Europe, which is in stark contrast to the EU's pledge to be "a Union of Equality". This requires inequalities in health access be addressed, especially for marginalised groups. The next Parliament should commit to:

  - *combatting intersectional health inequalities*, poverty, social exclusion, discrimination and racism to ensure equitable health outcomes;

  - *ensuring equal access to medicines*, supporting tools, supplies and technologies, and healthcare across the EU and globally, especially by securing transparency and accountability in the implementation of the EU Pharmaceutical Strategy and the EU Global Health Strategy;

  - *promoting digital health literacy and digital skills*, by inclusive representation of patients and healthcare professionals in discussions on digital health tools and promoting ethical use of health data and AI in healthcare. This implies facilitating epidemiology data collection, and cross-country secure data sharing in line with the European Health Data Space.

- **Actively engage civil society in health policymaking.** Among its activities and roles, civil society plays a watchdog role and secures the transparency and democracy of the process of European policy making. It is also critical in supporting the most vulnerable in critical times, as once more illustrated during the COVID-19 and Ukraine crises. It is the EU's responsibility to safeguard inclusive and transparent policymaking processes that provide civil society with a real seat at the table, including in co-creation of policies, programmes and services. To do so systematically, a Civil Society Strategy that will secure adequate and sustainable funding for civil society of all sectors, including through multiannual frameworks for operating grants, is vital.

- **Secure the EU's resilience and robustness amidst the permacrisis.** The EU must keep building its capabilities to react to the perfect storm of pandemic(s), wars, climate and ecological breakdowns, only "spiced" up with the growing cost of living, food security concerns, and energy crisis. An important element should be the promotion of research and innovation in health. Furthermore, to secure people's ability to operate in such adverse circumstances, the EU must:

  - *Prioritise health over commercial interests to tackle and prevent non-communicable diseases (NCDs).* This requires creating healthy environments (i.e., food environments, physical environment) and making healthy choices easy and affordable. To combat the biggest burden of ill health, NCDs other than cancer, the EU needs similar targeted efforts across all NCDs, as those provided for the Beating Cancer Plan. Four industry sectors, alcohol, tobacco, ultra-processed food and fossil fuels account for at least a third of global deaths[1]. In particular there is a need for statutory measures to control the marketing and availability of these unhealthy products.

  - *Make sustainable food systems and food environments a political priority*, through dedicated regulation to reinforce the EU's common food policy. The EU budget should support resilient and sustainable food production and all levels of governance (local, national, European, global) should be engaged and included.

  - *Lead in the global fight against the anti-microbial resistance (AMR)*, and actively collaborate with all involved sectors (One Health approach). AMR has been identified by the WHO as one of the leading global public health threats. The EU and its Member States should allocate the necessary resources and action to scale up prevention and address the increasing burden of AMR in the EU and globally.

  - *Effectively approach climate change and health at all levels.* Phasing out fossil fuels is necessary to improve public health and air quality. The EU and Member States should ambitiously lead climate mitigation and adaptation changes for a just and green transition. Additionally, the EU should do more to implement the Sustainable Development Goals agenda.

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