

Priority 1:

Keeping health as a top priority on the EU political agenda

Investing in health and wellbeing for all must be a priority. The effects of neglecting health became evident in the COVID-19 pandemic, one of several concurrent crises. The EU must commit to breaking policy silos, use systems-thinking in addressing the permacrisis, and increase actions on health across all policy areas. This should be embodied in a dedicated European Commission Vice-President on health and social rights and wellbeing.

Since 2020, health has been a priority on the EU political agenda. However, this was due to a pressing health crisis. It is important that health remains a priority, particularly considering the current and upcoming crises and challenges that our societies and the planet face. Health systems must be strong and resilient, and the health and wellbeing of people should be put at the forefront of EU policymaking.

Prioritising Health

Health needs to be the priority of the next European Parliament mandate and the next European Commission work programme:

- A **high level of protection** for human health should come first in developing new regulations.
- A **comprehensive European Health Strategy** should be developed and implemented by the EU, with the involvement of civil society. This Strategy should address not only immediate health concerns but also focus on long-term health resilience and the health of future generations. This Strategy needs to encompass physical and mental health promotion; investment in healthcare infrastructure, disease prevention, research and innovation; tackling the environmental triple-crisis of climate change, environmental pollution and biodiversity loss; and pandemic preparedness.
- A **Mental Health Strategy** should be developed as an integral part of the European Health Strategy, ensuring that resources are allocated for mental health services, awareness campaigns, and destigmatisation efforts. Access to mental health support, particularly for children and adolescents, as well as marginalised groups, should be prioritised and facilitated, especially in times of crisis. The Strategy needs to include a long-term action plan, with objectives, targets, indicators and mechanisms to monitor progress.
- Robust mechanisms to manage and mitigate potential **conflicts of interest** between policy decisions and industry stakeholders should be implemented, particularly when it comes to health. This should include the drafting of transparent guidelines for interactions, disclosures, and decision-making processes involving industry representatives to ensure that public health priorities are safeguarded and not compromised by undue influence.

A priority embodied by a European Commission Vice President

Prioritising health has to be reflected in the structure of the European Institutions:

- A **European Commission Vice-President on public health, social rights and wellbeing** should be appointed with a well-defined mandate. This Vice-President would contribute to the implementation of the Health in All Policies (HiAP) principle, focussing on all health determinants (social, environmental, economic, digital, commercial, political, etc.) creating synergies between the different policy areas, and the 'Leave no one behind' Sustainable Development Goals commitment.
- The Vice-President on public health, social rights and wellbeing's mandate could cover the portfolio of DG SANTE, as well as the non-discrimination policies under the responsibility of DG JUST (LGBTQI+, Roma, gender and racism), and DG EMPL (social rights and disability), for instance.
- The European Parliament's **subcommittee on health (SANT)** should be maintained as a permanent entity and given the status of Committee and a clear public health mandate. With the idea of fostering cross-sectoral policy developments, this committee's mandate could, for instance, include a focus on addressing the pressing health workforce crisis and link to the Global Health Strategy.
- The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (**ECDC**) and **EU Agencies** should extend their important efforts in other areas, such as tracking HPV vaccination in Europe. DG HERA should be fully operative to prevent healthcare crises, particularly regarding shortages of medicines.

Encouraging cross-sectoral policy development

Health is impacted by, and impacts on, several other policy areas: food, agriculture, environment, employment, budget, and more. To ensure that the full implications of health on our societies are understood and appreciated, silos between policy sectors need to be broken, and a holistic approach developed.

- The EU institutions should establish regular platforms for collaboration and information-sharing between different policy areas. This would promote a more complete understanding of how policies impact health and enable coordinated actions to prevent and manage simultaneous crises, therefore implementing a **Health-in-all-Policies approach**.
- The EU should seek policy coherence with **health as the driving principle**. Health should be an essential criterion to sustainability, in addition to economic, social and environmental criteria.
- The EU should further promote the concept of **One Health**, as no human can be healthy on an ill planet. In addition, climate and environmental considerations should be integrated in health policies, highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental health and human physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Pandemic preparedness

Health became number one item on the political agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future pandemics are expected, which is a strong argument for ensuring that health continues to remain a priority:

- Pandemic preparedness policies need to take into account that **(health) crises exacerbate inequities**. The most marginalised tend to face the most hardship in times of crisis. Pandemic preparedness should take them as the benchmark, through development of policies and responses that take into account their particular needs and ensure they are not left behind.
- Stronger **cross-border collaboration** should be fostered for sharing of information, joint procurement of medical supplies, and coordinated responses during health crises. This could also include early warning systems and monitoring on a global level, beyond EU borders.



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