

Definition of topics

Public health as a priority

The Encyclopedia of Public Health defines public health as “an empiric and multidisciplinary field whose goal is to assure conditions in which people can be healthy. While medicine mainly focuses on treating illness in separate individuals, it is the central goal of public health activities to increase health at the population level”.¹ Putting public health as a political priority therefore means ensuring that policies foster good health and wellbeing among all individuals. This includes addressing not only immediate health concerns but also focusing on long-term health resilience and the health of future generations through relevant policies and a targeted budget. It includes actions going from physical and mental health promotion to investments in healthcare infrastructure, disease prevention, research and innovation, or to tackling climate change, for instance.

Therefore, as part of our analytical framework we have considered elements aligning with this concept. We included mentions and proposals related to public health and wellbeing, prevention, health promotion, a Health-in-all-Policies vision, and the health budget. Alignment with some main international commitments was also taken into account².

Institutional elements

EU institutions, civil society and international organisations have a role to play in public health. Institutional changes at the EU level can support and enhance this role.

Therefore, in our analytical framework, we included mentions and proposals related to the role of the European Commission, the European Parliament’s subcommittee on health (SANT), the European Health Union, the role of civil society, and the role of the EU in health international organisations.

Sustainable food systems

Access to affordable and healthy food is essential for good health and preventing non-communicable diseases. Therefore, food systems and food options need to become healthier and more sustainable. This implies making healthier and sustainable food choices the most accessible and affordable ones, as well as lowering the impact of food production on the planet.

Our analytical framework therefore incorporates elements aligning with this concept. These include mentions and proposals regarding the EU’s Sustainable Food Systems Framework, Green Deal (from a food perspective), Farm to Fork Strategy, food and alcohol labelling, dietary patterns, agriculture, healthy food, food security. Alignment with some main international commitments was also taken into account³.

Non-communicable diseases

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the 21st century's foremost health issue, responsible for the vast majority of premature deaths and diseases in Europe. They are also known as chronic diseases. They are the "result of a combination of genetic, physiological, environmental and behavioural factors" as described by the World Health Organization⁴. NCDs mainly include cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes, which account for over 80% of all premature NCD deaths. Considering the current challenge of the EU's ageing population, the impact of NCDs is only expected to grow, both in human and financial terms. Targeted action is therefore crucial to prevent and reduce the burden of NCDs.

Therefore, our analytical framework includes mentions and proposals related to NCDs, NCD prevention, risk factors, commercial determinants of health, cancer, Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, smoke-free environments. Furthermore, alignment with some targets of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan was also considered⁵.

Mental health

Mental health is an integral part of health and wellbeing and is more than the absence of mental disorders. It is influenced by individual, social and structural determinants⁶. A 2018 report found that about 84 million people (one in six people) across the EU were affected by a mental health issue in 2016⁷. Furthermore, the report estimated the total cost of mental ill-health to be over €600 billion across the EU. The current context of polycrisis is placing additional pressure on people's mental health, especially vulnerable individuals. Indeed, issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis and the rising cost of living all have a serious, further impact on mental health. It is therefore essential to develop and implement a comprehensive approach to mental health, which puts it at the same level of physical health.

In our analytical framework, we considered mentions and proposals related to mental health, child and youth mental health, suicide prevention and an EU strategy on mental health. One target from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was also taken into account⁸.

Health equity

The degree of our parents, the colour of our skin, and the neighbourhood we grow up all affect our opportunities to be in good health. They are examples of the conditions that shape the world in which we are born, grow, live, work, and age; the social, economic, environmental, and commercial determinants of health. Indeed, health equity is reached when every individual can attain their full potential for health and wellbeing⁹.

Within our analytical framework, we considered several elements that are linked to equity and health. These include mentions and proposals on equity, discrimination, racism, gender equality, inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups in policy, social and economic determinants of health, the just transition, equality data and energy poverty. Alignment with some main international commitments was also considered¹⁰.

Access to care

Access to health care and access to medicines for all should be a priority of the EU, particularly in the context of shortages of both medicines and health workers. Access to care can be a source of inequities. It is therefore essential for the EU to promote equal access to care, address shortages of medicines, and cooperate with all levels of governance to do so.

Therefore, our analytical framework includes mentions and proposals related to access to care, medicines shortages, the EU pharmaceutical package. A couple of main international commitments were also taken into account¹¹.

Digital transformation

The use of digital tools and services in healthcare can improve access, quality and efficiency of healthcare services, while reducing costs and increasing patient satisfaction. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital transformation in healthcare has been accelerated, for instance with telemedicine consultations and apps that facilitate administrative functions, provide health information, and enable patient-healthcare provider dialogue. Further recent policy developments at the European level also aim to harness the power of patient health data and artificial intelligence in healthcare. However, for individuals to benefit from this digital transition, inequalities in the distribution of digital skills and literacy need to be addressed. Currently, 42% of EU residents lack basic digital skills, with a higher share of those residing in Eastern member states.

Therefore, our analytical framework includes mentions and measures related to digital inclusion, the digital divide, the EU AI Act, the European Health Data Space, reimbursement/coverage of telemedicine and the use of digital health tools, digital skills of the health workforce, digital health literacy, data protection, eHealth and the digitalisation of health systems.

Environment and health

Our health is tightly linked to the quality of our environment. It is estimated that the environment accounts for 20% of all deaths in the WHO European Region¹². Air pollution is the main environmental health risk factor, with around 400 000 premature deaths in the EU each year¹³. Environmental degradation therefore poses a serious threat to our health and wellbeing.

Our analytical framework includes mentions and measures related to air quality, the Ambient Air Quality Directives (AAQD), pollution, electrifying fleet, multimodal services, sustainable aviation, the Farm to Fork Strategy, a One Health approach. Alignment with some main international commitments was also considered¹⁴.

Climate change adaptation and mitigation

Climate change and its related impacts on the planet have been significantly affecting the health and wellbeing of people across the EU and globally. Impacts on health include “death and illness from increasingly frequent extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, storms and floods, the disruption of food systems, increases in zoonoses and food-, water- and vector-borne diseases, and mental health issues”¹⁵. In addition, climate change is responsible for affecting many social determinants of health. Furthermore, vulnerable and marginalised people are disproportionately impacted by the current situation.

Our analytical framework includes mentions and measures related to climate change and marginalised groups, energy transition, just transition, the Paris Agreement, the Green Deal, Fit for 55. Alignment with some main international commitments was also considered¹⁶.

Commitment to global and multilateral initiatives

Many global and multilateral initiatives have set goals and targets that will have a positive impact on public health. Commitment to their implementation is therefore crucial.

In our analytical framework, we included mentions of the Global Health Strategy, Pandemic Agreement, COP, Paris Agreement, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and potential future health threats. One priority from the Global Health Strategy was also considered¹⁷.

Health crisis preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us the importance of preventing and preparing for health crises. As future pandemics are expected, it is therefore crucial to gather intelligence and build response capacities, as well as to take part in cross-border collaboration.

In our analytical framework, we included mentions and measures related to crisis preparedness, the recovery of health systems following the COVID-19 pandemic, the poly/multi crisis context, EU civil protection mechanisms and RescEU.

Resilience of health systems

Especially in times of crisis, resilient health systems are essential to ensure effective prevention, preparedness, detection, response and recovery from health threats, while continuing to ensure quality essential and routine services. Therefore, adequate funding of health systems is crucial.

In our analytical framework, we included mentions and proposals related to funding and investments in health systems, the concept of Economy of Wellbeing.

Health workforce

A healthy and robust health workforce is a determining factor for resilient health systems. However, many challenges have been affecting health and care professionals, which have been only worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and are expected to grow in the context of an ageing population and an increasing demand for care.

Therefore, in our analytical framework, we included mentions and measures related to the healthcare workforce, healthcare workforce shortages, healthcare workforce training and skills, work conditions of the healthcare workforce, medical deserts, free movement of healthcare workers.

Antimicrobial resistance

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is currently one of the top public health threats, responsible for millions of deaths globally. It stems from the misuse and overuse of antimicrobials in humans, animals and plants, which leads to the development of drug-resistant pathogens¹⁸. The health of humans, animals, plants, and the wider environment being closely interlinked and interdependent, the complex issue of AMR requires a One Health approach to integrate and unify efforts.

Therefore, our analytical framework includes elements related to this concept. We considered mentions and proposals referred to AMR and a One Health approach. One target from the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy was also taken into account¹⁹.

Research in health

In a context of ageing populations, the increase in non-communicable diseases, the challenge of antimicrobial resistance, and environmental factors including climate change, our health is confronted to many challenges. Coordinating research and innovation in health is therefore essential to develop new solutions to overcome current pressing public health issues.

For these reasons, our analytical framework includes mentions and proposals related to research, research in health, health research funding and the Horizon Europe programme.