Crises, cuts & civil society: reclaiming public health leadership in Europe

20 November 2025

On 20 October 2025, the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) and the International Society of Doctors for the Environment (ISDE) convened a high-level virtual roundtable, “Crises, Cuts and Civil Society: Reclaiming Public Health Leadership in Europe.” The event brought together nearly 200 participants from across Europe and beyond to examine the shrinking civic space in health and to identify ways forward for a stronger, more visible civil society.

Background & purpose

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are indispensable to Europe’s public health and democratic resilience - linking institutions with communities, extending the reach of health systems, and helping safeguard trust and equity. During the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises, from climate-related health threats to conflict and forced migration, CSOs proved their capacity to deliver, mobilise, and counter misinformation. Globally, sustained support for CSOs has proved decisive in driving equity, service delivery, and knowledge exchange. Today, that capacity is at risk. In Europe, recent budgetary shifts have left CSOs without structural funding, undermining preparedness and weakening public health infrastructure at a time of multiple emergencies.

Civil society voices: value & risks

Civil society leaders, academics, and institutional representatives from across Europe gathered to discuss the uncertain future of Europe's civic space in health governance. Opening the roundtable, Dr Paolo Lauriola expressed his appreciation to ISDE for linking this meeting with its 35th Anniversary International Conference, noting that this connection lends the dialogue both symbolic significance and continuity. He invited panellists and participants to reflect on a multi-faceted approach to the importance of civil society, on how the erosion of funding for CSOs weakens the foundation of Europe's public health resilience, and how CSOs can mobilise to save democracy.

In his recorded message, Dr Henri P. Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, underlined that civil society remains a fundamental in holding government accountable and in strengthening social cohesion. Interventions from panellists echoed this message: defunding civil society is not a financial issue, but a risk multiplier undermining preparedness, social participation, and policy coherence.

Through their interventions, representatives from leading civil society networks underscored the diverse contributions and perspectives of CSOs. CSOs have the ability to embody the patient's voice, while also serving as knowledge and capacity builders, conveners and amplifiers of evidence, and conduits for global learning. Valentina Strammiello (EPF) reaffirmed that patient-led organisations bridge the critical gap between policy and lived experience. Anne Stauffer (HEAL) warned of increasing political hostility and disinformation campaigns that delegitimise NGOs, eroding the very fabric that binds together European democracy. Federica Margheri (EHMA) emphasised that funding civil society is not a luxury, but rather is an investment into the infrastructure of sustainability and trust.

> "Civil society is not a luxury, it's infrastructure." - Federica Margheri

From the academic sphere, Professor Henrique Barros (ASPHER) underscored that partnerships between academia and civil society foster trust, legitimacy, and equity in knowledge generation, but Charlotte Marchandise (EUPHA) cautioned that the growing fragmentation of Europe's health NGO community weakens its collective impact, urging a renewed unity and "a return to public health's activist roots" to rebuild influence in European policymaking. Professor Raman Bedi (WFPHA) placed these trends within a global context, noting that the retreat of wealthy nations from health equity commitments signals a wider loss of solidarity, with destabilising social consequences which are far more grave that have yet to be realised. Closing the CSO panel, Kjeld Hansen (WHO Civil Society Commission) reminded participants that civil society and governments are not competitors but complementary actors, each indispensable to the other.

Institutional perspectives: recognition & cooperation

Institutional voices echoed and reinforced the points made by CSO leaders, highlighting shared responsibility for protecting civic space. Dr Vesna Kerstin Petrič (Ministry of Health, Slovenia) described the indispensable role of CSOs in national responses, from flood recovery to HIV prevention, and warned that their marginalisation would be a "disaster" for governments seeking to reach vulnerable populations. In her intervention, Dr Petrič strongly affirmed that throughout her career, her most successful initiatives have always been linked to civil society. Michael van den Berg (OECD) emphasised that patient and civil society engagement improves both trust and system efficiency, aligning with OECD data showing that approximately 20% of healthcare spending is wasted through inefficiency and fragmentation.1 He further noted that people ultimately place greater trust in people than in systems, a reminder of the human foundations upon which health governance rests. Dr Maria Neira (World Health Organisation) called for a "public health revolution," convinced that this is a moment when public health is needed more than ever. She urged the adoption of positive, multisectoral narratives that link health to economic and environmental well-being, reinforced by evidence and legislation.

As of EU Institutions, DG SANTE was invited to contribute but was unable to participate on this occasion. Nevertheless, the European Parliament was represented: MEP Peter Agius (EPP, Malta), joining from Strasbourg, underscored the need for the European Parliament to remain open to the contributions of civil society, emphasising that policymaking must include those most affected by the issues under debate. The discussion then turned toward the future - from describing the problem to driving solutions.

Charting the way forward

> "We must become enough of a problem to be recognised as part of the solution." - Dr Milka Sokolović

The concluding dialogue, moderated by Dr Milka Sokolović (EPHA), invited participants to reflect on how health civil society can move from being overlooked to being indispensable. She called for greater visibility, critical mass, and courageous leadership to ensure health CSOs become unavoidable actors in Europe's public health landscape. Emphasising the need for shared platforms and common goods, she urged the sector to unite around collective capacity-building and to confront misinformation with the same coordination and vigour that opponents deploy against sound health messaging. The consensus emerged that health NGOs must become "enough of a problem to be noticed," assertive and unified in advocacy, yet solution-oriented and cooperative. Proposals from participants and panellists through further discussion included cross-sector alliances with youth movements, media, academia, and faith communities; shared platforms to counter disinformation; and renewed emphasis on solidarity over competition.

Reflecting on the sector's fragmentation, Dr Sokolović posed a series of pressing questions: how can civil society stay united rather than fragmented by shrinking resources? How can it continue to speak truth to power while dependent on institutional funding? And how can organisations help each other sustain courage under pressure? Emphasising the need to build shared capacity and common goods, she along with panellists and participants urged the creation of collective platforms to counter misinformation and amplify impact, concluding that only through solidarity can Europe's health civil society preserve its strength and voice.

The concluding dialogue brought a chorus of reflections on unity, visibility, and the moral courage required to sustain civil society under pressure. Federica Margheri (EHMA) affirmed that courageous leadership is already present within the health community, nurtured through mutual support and solidarity. She urged CSOs to transcend competition, break down silos, and act as partners rather than rivals in pursuit of the shared goal of improving citizens' health. Dr Vesna Kerstin Petrič (Ministry of Health, Slovenia) echoed this sentiment, aligning with Dr Maria Neira's call for a public health revolution and emphasising that governments, professionals, and civil society alike must change the narrative of how they work together. Drawing inspiration from examples in Africa, she highlighted the potential for global learning and for reshaping collaboration through necessity and innovation. Michael van den Berg (OECD) pointed to emerging cultural shifts in governance, noting that research and reform succeed only when CSOs and other stakeholders co-own the process. Raman Bedi (WFPHA) proposed mobilising global foundations to reinforce civil society infrastructure through dedicated planning grants, while Dr Sokolović concluded that the sector's true strength lies in its unity, visibility, and courage to persist.

In his closing remarks, Peter van den Hazel (ISDE) added that CSOs together form a vast and interdependent ecosystem whose value extends beyond advocacy to economic and social benefit. Participants ultimately converged on the need for a coordinated European task force to sustain cooperation, share knowledge, and advocate for equitable financial mechanisms, ensuring that health civil society remains a resilient and indispensable force within Europe's democratic fabric.

Key takeaways

Three key messages echoed throughout:

- Civil society is essential infrastructure for Europe's health and democracy
- Defunding CSO's weakens Europe's resilience, trust and preparedness
- Visibility, solidarity and collective strength are vital to safeguard civic space

The roundtable concluded with a powerful, uplifting, and unifying message: sustaining Europe's public health capacity requires sustained investment in its civil society. In an age of intersecting crises, investing in civil society is not charity - it is a strategic necessity for Europe's democracy, trust, and resilience.

The full recording of the discussion is available on EPHA's YouTube channel here.