

Putting health at the centre of post-COVID recovery: WHO European Region faces stark choices that will shape its future



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Given the far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the WHO European Region, countries face daunting challenges in tackling health inequities and achieving the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. But a critical window of opportunity still exists if governments and health authorities take necessary actions, according to the flagship European Health Report 2021, released by the WHO Regional Office for Europe today.

Published every three years, the latest report takes stock of the Region's progress on SDG health indicators such as universal health coverage, noncommunicable diseases and environmental health, but it also illustrates how the COVID-19 pandemic has impeded countries' efforts to reach crucial targets.

Importantly, for the first time, the report includes a set of projections outlining health impacts across three scenarios: no strategic action is taken to get back on track; progress is accelerated and strengthened; or progress is further slowed and diluted.

“We have a stark choice at this juncture almost two years into the pandemic,” noted Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe. “We can prioritize the health sector as never before, with an urgent focus on long-neglected issues including mental health – recognizing health systems and health workers as essential pillars of socioeconomic recovery and key to preparing for future shocks. Or we can lose the chance we have, jeopardizing the health and well-being of citizens, and undermining the health security of individual countries and indeed our entire Region. The choice is obvious.”

In a first, the latest European Health Report includes projections

based on health forecasts carried out by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle, United States of America.

The projections present three possible scenarios until 2030 for 12 SDG health indicators:

Taking HIV incidence in the Region as an example, the IHME projections show that in the reference scenario, based on current actions, the rate of infection will remain at the same high levels as in 2010; decrease towards, but not completely reach, the SDG targets in the better scenario; and significantly rise in the worse scenario.

On another SDG health indicator, intimate partner violence against women, a scourge that escalated amid pandemic lockdowns, the IHME projections reveal that in the better scenario prevalence could decrease by 5% in 2030 compared with 2015, but could increase by 3% under the worse scenario.

“There are many success stories in this flagship report, like child and maternal mortality continuing to decline, or progress towards reducing deaths from cancer and cardiovascular disease,” explained Dr Christopher Murray, IHME Director. “But gains made on various indicators remain fragile. Our projections clearly underscore the urgency for countries to intensify their efforts to achieve positive health outcomes on multiple fronts.”

“Fortunately, the Region has a roadmap to follow – our forward-looking five-year plan unanimously approved by Member States in 2020,” continued Dr Kluge. “The European Programme of Work recalibrates health priorities under key themes and pillars, envisaging united action for health by governments, civil society and other key partners. Even as we acknowledge the Region’s significant advances let us heed the warnings embedded across the European Health Report, as we look to a post-COVID future.”

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