



Centro Region Rural  
Village

## Centro Region, Portugal

### General overview

Situated in the geographic centre of Portugal, the Centro Region occupies a strategic position in the country, with the city of Coimbra serving as its main educational, cultural and health-services centre. The city prides itself on being the location of one of Europe's oldest and most distinguished universities (the University of Coimbra, established in 1290), Portugal's largest hospital (Coimbra University Hospital Centre, which belongs to the National Health Service), the oldest and largest Portuguese nursing school (Coimbra's Nursing School), and one of the best science-based incubators in the world (Pedro Nunes Institute). These institutions share a long history of delivering much admired education, research and transversality in the fields of medicine, health-care services, and health sciences and technologies. Since 2015, the consortium, Coimbra Health, established by the University of Coimbra and the Coimbra University Hospital Centre, has been a member of the world network, M8 Alliance of Academic Health Centers, Universities and National Academies.

The national health-care system in Portugal, established in 1971, comprises three complementary parts: (i) the National Health Service, the functions of which are the financing, regulation, management and provision of health-care services; (ii) the social and private sectors, which provide health-care services; and (iii) subsystems of public and private insurance, which deal with the financing and provision of health care. In 2016, national health expenditure was

8.9% of the gross domestic product (1).

Portugal is not regionalized (except for the Autonomous Region of the Azores and the Autonomous Region of Madeira) and its health system follows a strong model of central governance and financing, according to which five administrative health regions were established in 1993. Each region has its own health administration board, answerable to the Minister of Health, and assumes responsibility for the management of population health and the provision of health-care services. The regional health administration of the Centro Region is carried out by the Central Regional Health Administration, which is responsible for the implementation of national health policies and the coordination of all levels of health care at the regional level, in accordance with the current National Health Plan.

With a land area of 23 671 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 1 674 660 inhabitants (2011) (population density 71/ km<sup>2</sup>), the Centro Region comprises 78 municipalities, which are home to 17% of the population of mainland Portugal. The average life expectancy in the Region is 81.7 years (78.5 years for men and 84.6 for women); infant mortality (2016) is 2.1 per 1000 (mainland Portugal: 3.2 per 1000). The Region hosts an ageing population: in 2015, it recorded one of the highest ageing indices (190.4) and one of the lowest fertility rates (1.17 births per woman) in Europe (2). As these challenges have been recognized as major

societal issues for the Centro Region, and taking into account the performance of the consortium, Ageing@Coimbra (a partnership among the University of Coimbra, the Coimbra University Hospital Centre, the Central Regional Health Administration, the Pedro Nunes Institute and the Coimbra City Council), the European Commission considers it as one of the 74 European reference sites for active and healthy ageing.

Currently, in the Centro Region, the National Health Service has 85 primary-health-care centres, 18 hospitals (corresponding to 4695 beds), and 101 long-term health-care units (corresponding to 2427 beds) (3). They are all administered by the Central Regional Health Administration and work alongside an extensive health-care network, including hospitals for active treatment, centres for specialized and primary outpatient care, nurseries, and institutions

providing care of the elderly and adults and children with physical or mental disabilities.

The Central Regional Health Administration – in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, such as municipalities and schools – manages several public health programmes and health-promotion activities in different areas. Examples of these are child immunization, screenings (cervical cancer, breast cancer and diabetic retinopathy, the last-mentioned being pioneered at the national level), child and maternal health, children’s oral health, healthy eating, childhood obesity, adolescent mental-health and suicide prevention. Environmental-health activities are developed at the local level by public health units and include waste management and water surveillance (the use of water for drinking and recreational purposes) in cooperation with municipalities, regional environmental authorities and water-pipe suppliers.



## Strengths

The Centro Region’s strengths are:

- ✓ its diversified regional economy, encompassing both low-technology-level industrial sectors and sectors with medium- and high-technology levels, such as those dealing with health services, biotechnology and IT;
- ✓ a relevant critical mass for high-quality research activities and regional competencies related to health services (several hospitals have gathered leading national and international knowledge on various health topics and are supported by the universities in the region, for example, the consortiums, Coimbra Health and Ageing@Coimbra);
- ✓ the “health hub” in Coimbra, which brings together resources, professional competencies and quality services (the University of Coimbra and the Coimbra University Hospital Centre work in close collaboration with the regional health network and charities administered by the Central Regional Health Administration);
- ✓ EU’s recognition of the Region as one of the 74 reference sites for active and healthy ageing;
- ✓ the Region’s extensive, quality network of health-care services (in both the National Health Service and the private sector);
- ✓ the presence of quality education and research centres, the Region being the location of several public universities, medical and nursing schools, and numerous incubators for innovative businesses (the University of Coimbra is the reference point for higher education and research and development in Portugal).



## Aspirations

The Centro Region is aiming to:

- ✓ develop an ecosystem of good practice in health care associated with active and healthy ageing, and in monitoring the social determinants of health in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (4);
- ✓ develop an effective regional health strategy for promoting health gains in accordance with the national and regional health plans;
- ✓ strengthen health-system integration and health information systems at the regional level;
- ✓ develop an intersectoral health approach according to the Health in All Policies (HiAP) (5,6) model.

## Challenges

These are:

- ✓ demographic and societal challenges related to an increasingly ageing population;
- ✓ low population density: there is an asymmetry in the Region characterized by a desertification of the "inland" areas (apart from the urban centres located there) in contrast to the coastal areas, which are mostly populated and urbanized;
- ✓ health inequalities among urban/rural and socially disadvantaged groups;
- ✓ lack of political decision-making at the regional level (regional resources for health policies depend on national policies/decisions);
- ✓ the proneness of the Region to natural disasters (namely wildfires) due to its extensive forested area, in combination with the factor that the elderly population resides mostly in rural areas.

## Potential areas of collaboration

The Centro Region is interested in collaborating with other regions on:

- ✓ establishing health-promotion/public health programmes;
- ✓ tackling health planning and health-policy implementation and evaluation with a view to achieving the SDGs (4) at the regional level, based on the principles of HiAP (5,6);
- ✓ ensuring highly qualified health-care/health-services staff and exchanging experience on working in international projects, for example, on international public health care and health management/administration;
- ✓ addressing environmental health (including health-impact assessment and health-contingency planning for heat-waves and extreme cold).

## Working Groups

The Centro Region is interested in participating in working groups on:

- ✓ the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (4)/equity;
- ✓ environment;
- ✓ the all-of-government approach/intersectoral action.

## People active in the Regions for Health Network (RHN)

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### **Rosa Reis Marques**

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*Technical focal points*

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