



## EPHA Statement

**Towards an effective implementation and delivery of the Health 2020 strategy in times of austerity  
62nd session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, September 2012**

**EPHA is the European Platform bringing together public health organisations representing health professionals, patients groups, health promotion and disease specific NGOs, academic groupings and other health associations. Our membership includes representatives at international, European, national, regional and local level.**

**EPHA's mission is to protect and promote public health in Europe. EPHA brings together organisations across the public health community, to share learning and information and to bring a public health perspective to European decision-making. We help build capacity in civil society participation across Europe in the health field, and work to empower the public health community in ensuring that the health of European citizens is protected and promoted by decision-makers. Our aim is to ensure health is at the heart of European policy and legislation.**

Please see [www.epha.org](http://www.epha.org) for more information.

---

Mr Chair, Excellencies, honourable ministers, distinguished delegates, Ms Jakab, ladies and gentlemen,

Today the European Public Health Alliance has the honour of addressing the WHO Regional Committee for Europe for the second time. First and foremost, I would like to convey my gratitude to Ms Jakab for her kind invitation and to the government of the Republic of Malta for hosting this timely event. As we stated last year, partnership with civil society, both within and outside of the health sector, is crucial to the success of the Health 2020 Strategy and achieving the European Region's full health potential by 2020. This is especially true during a historic financial crisis and austerity measures, as governments alone are not able to tackle all the perils facing health systems. Without deliberate steps taken to champion people's wellbeing, the financial crisis could easily turn into a health crisis of unpredictable consequences.

Today, before you, here at WHO Regional Committee, I would like to affirm our resolve and commitment to promoting better health outcomes in these difficult times will not be changed.

We can no longer sacrifice health for temporary financial gains and allow the financial crisis to erase the health and social accomplishments of the last century – for example the EU Region having one of the highest life expectancies in the world. This seriously undermines one of the extraordinary achievements in the past decade of the WHO – the recognition that “Health is Wealth.”

Austerity measures that reduce social support and healthcare not only threaten the fundamental right of universal access to care - it also undermines the core values at the heart of the European vision and the functioning of our democracies. In the current climate, the financial markets are setting priorities for public spending with a shameful disregard to the needs and challenges facing society. Governments do have the power to fix the status quo through taking steps to promote health and well being while preventing disease. For instance, banning marketing to children would build on the gains from fiscal measures aimed at reducing consumption of junk food and boosting consumption of whole grain, fruit and vegetables. Minimum unit pricing and discount bans would produce substantial savings every year in health, crime and employment costs – and we applaud the efforts of the UK and Scottish government to turn back increasingly damaging patterns of consumption. As you know, alcohol intake in the European Region is the highest in the world and has sharply increased due to the financial crisis.

As you have witnessed first-hand, this economic, financial and economic crisis has created vast inequalities across Europe. Today we face record levels of poverty and unemployment and the poor, as always, are the first and worst-hit victims. Public healthcare is among the most severely affected sectors in the European Region, posing a threat to which policy-makers in some Member States have largely failed to meet. So far austerity measures have led to skyrocketing levels of poverty, food insecurity trickling down to broader sections of the population, a worsening of housing, and a re-emergence of communicable diseases. All this has led to worse health outcomes, as well as increased incidence of suicide and mental ill health.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This tragic situation is not only ruining people's lives and health - it also has a two-fold impact on health systems, as an increased demand on health services coincides with deep cuts made in Member State health provisions. Just when health systems face rising levels of chronic disease, an ageing boom, and an obesity epidemic, their resources to confront these major risks are being taken away. This is not acceptable in the European Region today.

During these bumpy times the political temptation has been to make short-sighted "savings" through indiscriminate reductions in health and social services. However, it has only too well demonstrated that these cuts only led to worse health outcomes in the short term and the need for more expensive interventions in the future. This direction poses a serious threat to social cohesion in Europe as health investments serve as an effective safeguard against poverty, prevent marginalisation of vulnerable groups, and cushion the impacts of the financial crisis.

We cannot afford to fail. Now is the time for strategic thinking to strive to fix the underlying problems with health systems while increasing efficiency and sustainability. Progressive reforms that promote cost-effectiveness through emphasizing prevention, health promotion, early interventions, and tackling health inequalities emerge as an innovative solution to the healthcare crisis. To adequately address today's challenges, health system reforms must be accessible, sustainable, adequate, socially inclusive and economically productive. If we want to reach the Health 2020 vision "to strengthen health systems, revitalize public health infrastructures and institutions" the European Region cannot afford to waste its human capital. We cannot emphasize enough the need to reach the full advancement of a dynamic health workforce as a source of quality employment and end the misconception that the health sector is a drain on resources. The health sector is a producer of economic gains - without health there is no sustainability. This is a message that should be in everybody's minds.

The economic crunch and the austerity wave it triggered is forcing policy-makers to make very hard choices. Through solidarity, courageous leadership and the full involvement of health actors in financial decision-making, the European Region can emerge from the financial crisis not only stronger, but healthier. I know it is not an easy task. It will require visionary leaders to prioritise people's health, invest in public health infrastructures, and rebuild the public health care workforce, while ensuring sufficient allocation of funding and cutting costs where efficiencies can be found. For the Health 2020 vision to be brought about, finance and economic affairs Ministries and Ministries of health need to partner together- working side by side in these difficult times is the only way forward. This is not easy, but the success of the Health 2020 Strategy and most importantly, the well-being of hundreds of millions across Europe depends on it. As civil society, we ask you to show courage and bold leadership in these times when we need it the most.

I thank you for your attention.