#### INFORMATION NOTE

# The WHO Regional Office for Europe Small Countries Initiative – an introduction

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Established in 2013, the WHO Small Countries Initiative is a platform where Member States in the WHO European Region with a population of less than one million can share their experiences with implementing Health 2020 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Initiative seeks to (i) document ways of aligning national health policies with Health 2020 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; (ii) develop joint capacity-building events around the key themes of Health 2020 to promote health and reduce health inequities; (iii) create an environment that supports the Health 2020 strategy by engaging the media as an implementation partner and (iv) create a platform for sharing experiences and learning about, Health 2020 implementation. It is an example

of WHO Europe's cost-effective support of Member States by means of a diversified portfolio focusing on support for alignment of national policies; topic-specific technical assistance and offering opportunities for networking. The annual high-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative provides an opportunity for countries to work together to tackle the most pressing health policy concerns. Since its inception, the Initiative has shown that all Member States benefit from support regardless of their location in Europe and due to the fact that their small size makes them vulnerable to issues such as brain drain, higher prices for medicines and the effects of larger countries' policies.

Keywords: HEALTH POLICY, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, PUBLIC HEALTH, HEALTHY SYSTEMS

# WHAT IS THE WHO REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE SMALL COUNTRIES INITIATIVE?

The WHO Small Countries Initiative is a platform where Member States in the WHO European Region with a population of less than one million can share their experiences with implementing Health 2020 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It was established in 2013 after the idea had been suggested by San Marino at an informal meeting, which was held during the sixty-third session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in Çeşme Izmir, Turkey. The countries supported by this initiative are Andorra, Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro and San Marino. The Small Countries Initiative is coordinated by the WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development, Venice, Italy, of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, which also acts as the Secretariat of the initiative.

The Initiative has the following four key aims: (i) document ways of aligning national health policies with Health 2020 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; (ii) develop joint capacity-building events around the key themes of Health 2020 to promote health and reduce health inequities; (iii) create an environment that supports the Health 2020 strategy by engaging the media as an implementation partner, and; (iv) create a platform for sharing experiences in, and mutual learning about, Health 2020 implementation (1–3). Participation in the Initiative (1) affords countries the opportunity to share their experiences in implementing Health 2020 (2), and strengthens their technical capacity by accelerating the adoption of innovative approaches (for example, whole-of-government and whole-of-society) to Health 2020 (2) implementation, and by documenting their processes and outcomes. Participating countries also receive tailored technical assistance with Health 2020 (2) implementation and, by documenting their experiences, they contribute to filling the knowledge gap on health policy development within the context of small countries in Europe.

# THE SMALL COUNTRIES INITIATIVE AND ITS LINKS TO WHO'S GLOBAL AGENDA

The Small Countries Initiative (1) is in line with the country focus of the WHO draft thirteenth general programme of work (GPW13) 2019–2023, "WHO will drive impact in every country. WHO will become more focused and effective in its country-based operations, working closely with partners, engaging in policy dialogue, providing strategic support and technical assistance, and coordinating service delivery, depending on the country context" (4). The platform also contributes to the achievement of the following GPW13 outcomes:

- Outcome 1: Strengthened health systems in support of universal health coverage without financial hardship, including equity of access based on gender, age, income, and disability.
- Outcome 3: Improved human capital across the life-course.
- Outcome 4: Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) prevented, treated, managed, and their risk factors controlled, and mental health prioritized and improved.
- Outcome 7: Health impacts of climate change, environmental risks and other determinants of health addressed, including in Small Island Developing States and other vulnerable settings.
- Outcome 8: Strengthened country capacity in data and innovation.
- Outcome 9: Strengthened leadership, governance, management and advocacy for health.

The Small Countries Initiative (1) has explored each of these issues. The Initiative supports the strengthening of health systems as one of its overarching themes and reminds countries of the importance of taking equity into consideration (outcome 1). This goes hand-in-hand with WHO's stewardship, which helps countries to strengthen their leadership, governance, management and advocacy for health (outcome 9). In the context of Health 2020, the life-course approach (outcome 3) has been an ongoing theme since the Initiative was established and it was highlighted at the Third High-level Meeting of the Small Countries (Monaco 2016), where the Monaco Statement called for Health in all policies – Health in all SDGs: Call for action on climate change (1, 4, 5). Ending childhood obesity and the importance of resilience at the individual, community and system level

came out strongly during the Fourth High-level Meeting (Malta 2017) in response to small countries having expressed the need to better understand the effect of the latter on health (6). Both childhood obesity and adverse effects on resilience are linked to increased NCDs (outcome 4), the former at the individual level, the latter at the macro level. Monaco took the lead on the topic of climate change (outcome 7) when the Scientific Centre of Monaco was designated a WHO Collaborating Centre for Health and Sustainable Development with the aim of improving the evidence base on health and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by focusing on climate change and the small countries. The Initiative (1) has provided ample opportunity for improving the small countries' health information systems (outcome 8) (4). The Small Countries Initiative became particularly relevant with the launch of the new Special Initiative to address the impacts of climate change on health in Small Island Developing States. The aim of the initiative, which was launched in November 2017 by the WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom, is to protect people living in Small Island Developing States from the adverse effects of climate change on heath. The vision is that, by 2030, all Small Island Developing States will have health systems that are resilient to climate change and that countries around the world will be reducing their carbon emissions to protect the most vulnerable from the adverse effects of climate change and deliver large health benefits in carbon-emitting countries. The Small Countries Initiative has addressed the issue of climate change through the Monaco Statement (October 2016). However, the issue will be in focus again at the fifth High-level Meeting of the Small Countries, which will take place in Iceland on 26-27 June 2018, where the European Small Countries will prepare a joint Statement on water and climate change.

# THE SMALL COUNTRIES INITIATIVE – AN EXAMPLE OF WHO EUROPE'S COSTEFFECTIVE SUPPORT OF MEMBER STATES

Small countries share unique contexts and needs and they are sometimes more vulnerable than their larger counterparts. Furthermore, as many of the small countries are located in Western Europe, there is often the misconception that they are "rich" and, therefore, need little support from WHO. However, this is untrue. In fact, since its inception, the Small Countries Initiative (1) has shown that all Member States need support regardless of their location in Europe and, in the case of the small countries, due to the fact that their size makes them vulnerable to

brain drain, higher prices for medicines, and the effects of larger countries' policies. Through the Small Countries Initiative, WHO Europe can give Member States cost-effective support. The Initiative (1) serves as an entry point into western Member States and represents a valuable forum where these countries can share their experiences and find solutions to challenges, many of which have been of interest to larger countries. This makes the case for ensuring that, when setting norms and developing protocols, scientific guidelines and recommendations on policy direction and the experiences of both large and small countries are taken into consideration.

On the other hand, the size of these countries probably means that they are better able to navigate the increasingly complex and turbulent global environment as they have a shared sense of purpose and can implement policy quickly and effectively, which makes them ideal settings for policy experimentation and innovation. The Small Countries Initiative has helped small countries exploit their size, especially when implementing broad, multisectoral policies, such as Health 2020 (2), which require whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.

# THE SMALL COUNTRIES INITIATIVE – A DIVERSIFIED PORTFOLIO

The portfolio of the Small Countries Initiative is diversified and provides Member States with:

- Support that is aligned with national policies.
- Topic-specific technical assistance.
- Opportunities for networking.
- A forum for mutual learning and sharing innovative approaches.

## WHO EUROPE SUPPORT ALIGNED WITH NATIONAL POLICIES

The annual forum provided by the High-level meetings of small countries gives ministers and department directors from participating countries the opportunity to discuss their health agendas (Box 1) and topics of relevance and to assess whether there is a need for technical assistance. WHO Europe's Small Countries Initiative (1) has also provided direct support to countries to help them align their national health plans with Health 2020 (2), which was requested by San Marino in 2015.

## BOX 1. SMALL COUNTRY INITIATIVE HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS AND THEMES

 First High-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative: Implementing the Health 2020 vision in countries with small populations, San Marino, 3–4 July 2014 (7)

The San Marino Manifesto: Implementing the Health 2020 vision in countries with small populations

 Second High-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative: Advancing Health 2020: Small countries at the forefront of whole-of-government approaches to health, Soldeu, Andorra, 2–3 July 2015 (8)

The Andorra Statement: Health promotion and disease prevention throughout the life-course

 Third High-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative: Health and sustainable development, Monaco, 11–12 October 2016 (9)

The Monaco Statement: Health in all policies – Health in all SDGs: Call for action on climate change

• Fourth High-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative: Building resilient and healthy communities, Valletta, Malta, 26–27 June 2017 (6)

The Malta Statement on ending childhood obesity, promoting healthy weight and well-being throughout the life-course

 Fifth High-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative: Working together for better health and well-being for all, Reykjavík, Iceland, 26–27 June 2018

#### TOPIC-SPECIFIC TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

The WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development, in collaboration with other relevant departments, has also provided topic-specific technical assistance to small countries. In 2015, Montenegro's experience with addressing the issue of adverse childhood experience was published as part of a compendium of cases (10). The documentation process often helps countries to identify solutions to implementation issues. Country requests for technical support on the complex issue of resilience have also been supported by WHO, which has resulted in three country visits (Iceland, Malta and San Marino), an analysis and a collection of cases from the visited countries (11). As a result, some small states, such as Malta, have requested WHO support on this topic. In 2018, San Marino received technical assistance to hold a national workshop to advance the 2030 Agenda in their country.

# FOSTERING NETWORK-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES AMONG SMALL COUNTRIES

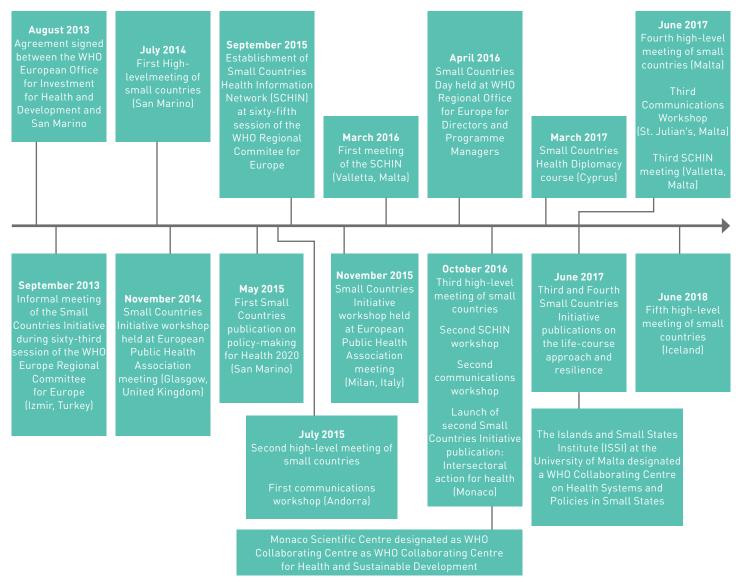
Since its inception, the Initiative has provided the small countries with opportunities for networking in the field of communications and for developing their health information systems. Each year,

communications officers and journalists from the Initiative's Member States are invited to the High-level meetings to advise on how to report on specific topics. The Third High-level Meeting of the Small Countries (9) (Monaco 2016) emphasized the need to support the implementation of Health 2020 by better engaging the media as a partner, which had previously been identified as an action area during the Second High-level Meeting in Andorra in 2015 (8). The Small Countries Health Information Network (SCHIN) (12), which was first proposed at the High-level meeting of ministers of small countries in Andorra (2015) (8), has also significantly improved small countries' health information systems. The SCHIN brings together small countries to exchange experiences and address shared health information challenges, for example, the implementation of a harmonized approach to data collection, which has minimized Member States' reporting burden. The Ministry for Energy and Health in Malta hosted the first meeting of the focal points of the SCHIN in Valletta (March 2016). To date, three meetings have been held, each focusing on the specific health information needs of Member States. The Initiative has also made it easy for small countries to meet to address issues such as the need for affordable medicines and the brain drain of health professionals.

## MUTUAL LEARNING AND THE SHARING OF INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

In the five years since its inception, the Small Countries Initiative has developed a forum for mutual learning and the sharing of innovative approaches between countries. The Initiative (1) has made it possible for all eight countries to document and, subsequently, present their work on intersectoral approaches to improving health and well-being and the life-course approach in the context of Health 2020 and the sustainable development goals. Two case studies featuring in-depth country experiences with implementing intersectoral approaches and the life-course

FIG. 1: MILESTONES OF THE WHO REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE SMALL COUNTRIES INITIATIVE



approach have been published (10, 13). Additional research into life-course actions implemented in small countries has been conducted in 2018, which will soon result in the publication of in-depth case studies from Malta (addressing obesity through the life-course with the *Healthy Weight for Life Strategy*) and Iceland (Welfare Watch), both of which focus on evaluating initiatives and deal with the issues of inequity and gender.

#### THE SMALL COUNTRIES INITIATIVE BRINGS TO THE FOREFRONT THE HEALTH POLICY ISSUES OF MOST CONCERN TO MEMBER STATES

The annual high-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative provides an opportunity for these countries to work together to tackle the most pressing health policy concerns. It also allows them to be part of a dynamic movement, which raises their profile, gives them direct exposure to WHO policies, strengthens their capacity in the core areas of Health 2020 and SDGs, facilitates peer-to-peer learning and collaboration among non-WHO Regional Office for Europe small countries as illustrated by the attendance of Barbados, the Maldives and Mauritius.

To date, the Small Countries Initiative has been a success. In its first five years, it has provided a forum where small states can communicate with other countries. Its work clearly resonates with the theme of the 2018 High-level meeting, "Working together for better health and well-being for all". In their attempts to fulfil this aim, the small countries have shown that when they cooperate, they have a greater impact.

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