

**Conference on**

**Health challenges in the EU in the pandemic context**

**31 March 2022**

***European Economic and Social Committee***

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us in unprecedented ways. The lateness and inadequacy of the response has had a **devastating impact in terms of the number of deaths, social consequences and damage to the global economy**. The pandemic is continuing to put enormous **pressure on health systems, in particular on the health workforce**, and has deepened **inequalities** both within and between countries and exposed a lack of preparedness in the EU for health crises. In the first months of the crisis, we have seen the **EU's inability to supply its own health system with enough pharmaceutical products, vaccines, protective equipment and medical devices, due to a lack of industrial capacity, lack of EU solidarity and overreliance on imports.** Subsequently, the EU managed to act in a united and solidarity-based manner, adopting various measures which made it possible, namely, to guarantee access to vaccines for all Member States in record time and in a fair manner, as well as to adopt other instruments to develop the European Health Union. It has also clearly shown the interdependence of the health situation in one country with that around the world and the **links between human health and animal health and the environment**. **The epidemiological evidence also shows that vulnerable groups have been disproportionally affected by COVID-related diseases and deaths and had difficulties in accessing public social and health care assistance throughout the crisis. We need to understand how this happened, which investments are needed in health infrastructures and health workforce at national and local level, so that we can prevent it from happening again.**

The aims of the conference will be to look into **possible actions to exit this crisis**, to **prevent the next health threat from spiraling out of control and turning into a pandemic**, and to **build stronger and more resilient health systems for the future**.

In this context the following questions could be addressed:

1. How can we **protect ourselves from the current pandemic** and **prepare for a safe reopening of society and the economy** and what are the lessons learnt from the current situation to **prevent the next viral threat from turning into a pandemic**? *(Can we maintain new infections at a level that can be managed with social distancing, testing, contact tracing, isolation/quarantine, voluntary or mandatory vaccination, Covid passes and medical treatments such as antiviral pills? What can we learn from the way the pandemic was managed in EU Member States and non-EU countries? Which instruments and strategies were used which helped make a difference?)*
2. If future pandemics cannot be prevented, how can the EU **improve the preparedness and resilience of health systems**? (*How effective are the proposals of the* ***EU Health Package****, HERA, the new* ***Pharmaceutical Strategy*** *and the* ***EU Industrial Strategy*** *in terms of reaching this objective? Which elements should be reinforced? Is a treaty revision and an increase in EU competences a possible solution?)*
3. **What role can international cooperation play for gaining control of the pandemic and future preparedness? (***Will we be able to exit the pandemic regionally and globally when 75% of all vaccines have been ordered by only ten countries? How can we reach vaccine equity at global level? What is the role of the TRIPS agreement in the context and what role can the EU play at WTO level? Can the new EU Trade Policy contribute to both vaccine equity and EU's strategic autonomy? What role could an international pandemic Treaty play?)*
4. How can the EU better **fight and eliminate health inequalities** and thoroughly implement principle 16 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, i.e. that everyone has the right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality? *(How can the EU address the negative impact of the pandemic on gender equality and the fight against inequalities in general?)*
5. How can the **Action Plan Towards a Zero Pollution Ambition** for air, water and soil, the **recovery and resilience plans** and other instruments in the context of the **European Green Deal** help to integrate and connect environmental, climate and public health agendas to protect and enhance people's health and avoid future pandemics? *(Can the EU work towards decisive action domestically and on a global scale to prevent the proliferation of zoonotic diseases?)*