

## **How to build resilient and sustainable European health and care systems: learning from the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Healthcare must be people-centred and valued as a social investment, not a 'cost', concluded a [conference](#) organised by the [Civil Society Organisations' Group](#) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) at the House of Europe in Stockholm on 25 May 2023. For this to happen it is necessary to change mindsets socially, economically and politically. Building on cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic, EU Member States need to join forces to build resilient and sustainable health and care systems that leave no one behind and value the work of care workers, civil society organisations and volunteers.

The conference was attended by some 90 civil society and institutional representatives from the national and the European level.

Opening the conference, **Séamus Boland**, president of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, recalled that access to affordable and quality healthcare is a right for EU citizens. "It was agreed upon by all EU Member States with the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017," stated Mr Boland and added that "it was reiterated by citizens in 2021, when they called for the 'Right to Health' in the Conference on the Future of Europe". Mr Boland also stressed that in order to provide qualitative healthcare for the most vulnerable - be it the elderly, the young, or persons with a disability – it was necessary to build resilient and qualitative health and care systems.

**Lena Hallengren**, Member of Parliament and former Swedish Minister for Health and Social Policy (2019-2022), reflected in her speech on the measures taken by the Swedish government in response to the pandemic. She said: "Regarding our chosen measures, Sweden was often described in the international media as odd. But we saw that the measures we took had a sufficient effect when people kept distance and refrained from visiting public places. And when other countries closed their schools, ours were open. Because we knew how important school is for children and young people in their upbringing, especially for those coming from the smallest means".

The State Secretary to the Swedish Minister for Health Care, **Miriam Söderström**, spoke about the conditions for resilient and sustainable health care systems: "Skills supply is key to achieving equality and accessibility in health care. Health care professionals are our greatest resource and we must promote skills enhancement and strengthen primary health care".

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on European health systems was addressed by **Dr Andrea Ammon**, Director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), who highlighted the importance of cooperation and coordination with partners at the local, regional and national levels, but also between EU Member States and globally. "The pandemic showed us that serious threats to health are inherently cross-border," she said and stressed that "with the different building blocks of the new European Health Union in force since December 2022, the EU now has the necessary tools to prepare and better respond to future public health emergencies".

Participants underlined the need to improve emergency preparedness, as the pandemic exposed existing inadequacies of national health and care systems, which were often already over-stretched by years of under-investment and an ageing population. The need to invest in research, data and social innovation and reaping the opportunities provided by digital technologies were mentioned, also with a view to improving Europe's competitiveness.

In the different panels, participants discussed current challenges to the health and care systems, the European Health Care Strategy, Europe's Beating Cancer Plan and the role of social enterprises. They also addressed the questions of how to overcome gender inequalities in the workforce and how to guarantee an educated, skilled and motivated workforce. Training, recognition of the key role of informal carers and adequate remuneration were considered key elements.

The topic of mental health was addressed by **Noura Berrouba**, President of the Swedish Council of National Youth Organisations (LSU). "Mental health issues among young people are on the rise," she warned and stressed that "the risk for young LGBTIQ people is twice as high as for their peers". In order to effectively manage mental health among young people, Ms Berrouba recommended improving their livelihoods and enhancing social contacts, decreasing uncertainty and stigma, preventive treatment and early intervention.

In the course of the conference, other speakers also called for health and care policies to be made in partnership with civil society organisations, rather than for them. It is crucial to take the different needs of all parts of society into account and to pay attention to gender and age differences. This involves many interrelated policy areas which should work in coordination and complementarity. Families caring for persons with disabilities and the elderly need to receive support in order to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Resilient and sustainable health and care systems must be based on solidarity and equity and leave no one behind.