



Wilton Park



Report

## **Europe and North America regional dialogue on healthy societies**

**Opportunities and challenges for collective action**

Thursday 10 June 2021 | WP1948V4

In partnership with:



Government Offices of Sweden



**Alliance**  
for Health Policy  
and Systems Research



## Report

# Europe and North America regional dialogue on healthy societies

## Opportunities and challenges for collective action

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### Background

Creating healthy societies requires collective action across different sectors and disciplines. Stakeholders across sectors need to identify shared ideals for healthy societies that they can build into their agendas. While the health sector can steward these efforts, success will require broad engagement and collaboration.

In February 2020, Wilton Park and partners held a dialogue to explore the social, economic and environmental determinants of healthy societies, the promotion of cross-sectoral approaches for better health and the prioritisation of health in other sectoral policies and settings. In partnership with the Government of Sweden and the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research, WHO, Wilton Park held a follow-up series to explore how we can deliver healthy societies and healthy populations; the first of these dialogues was held in April 2021 and the second in June 2021.

Ahead of the June event, several smaller regional discussions in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia Pacific and Europe and North America explored the visions and narratives for healthy societies. The aims were to explore the plurality of ideas about the narrative and vision for healthy societies and understand the similarities and differences between and within regions and across sectors, disciplines and levels. Through a process of listening and engaging across different levels and sectors, we can collectively build converging ideas around which to align actors and actions.

Participants at these regional meetings did not speak with one voice on behalf of the whole region, but rather represented different sectors and stakeholder groups in order to contribute their perspectives and ideas for future direction and collaboration. Some important stakeholders were not able to attend, so there was an element of bias. These conversations are a starting point and need to be part of a continuing and wider dialogue among the different countries in each region.

This is a report from the Europe & North America regional dialogue on healthy societies, held on 10 June 2021. It complements and builds on previous reports from Wilton Park meetings on healthy societies in [February 2020](#) and [March 2021](#).

## Introduction

1. The World Health Organization's triple billion targets focus on universal health coverage (UHC), health emergencies and healthy populations. Progress towards meeting the first two targets is well underway, and global and national responses to UHC and health emergencies are evident. The third target of healthy populations, or healthy societies, has become more tangible as a result of COVID-19 but still requires a collective effort to engage meaningfully with the agenda and take action. How do we address structural factors that affect whether people make healthy choices or not? How do we create opportunities and empower people to make healthier choices?
2. The meeting's discussion focused on answering some key questions relating to healthy societies such as what ideas, areas of action and social forces are essential and already engaging to make society healthier? What is enabling efforts to achieve healthy societies and how do we promote this? What is opposing or undermining these efforts and how do we confront this?

## Summary points

- Unequal distribution of wealth and resources are driving health impacts and inequities across the world. While high-level principles and commitments to equity, human rights and universal health coverage are laudable, gaps exist in domestic policies and action to address the structural causes of inequities.
- Multi-sector and inter-sector collaboration is crucial, especially in areas where there are strong inter-linkages such as between health, transport and the environment. A governance platform or arena that allows for the building multi-sectoral alliances is missing and needs to be developed.
- Redistributive social policies are a key driver of healthy societies, but laws and instruments to achieve high requirements are lacking. A strong framework for public accountability is needed.
- Democratic participation including community dialogue, civil society and consumer activism and social movements are fundamental to drive bottom-up demands for accountability and healthier societies. Engaging with existing social movements is crucial for the healthy societies agenda.
- To develop a healthy societies narrative and engage with multi-sector actors and broader social movements, we must define our goals and values with a nuanced understanding of equity, and organise our political activity around this.

## Main areas of discussion

3. Some main areas of interest to emerge from this Europe & North America regional discussion included: equity, multi-sector collaboration, legislation and action, social movements and developing the narrative around healthy societies.

## Equity

4. Unequal distribution of wealth and resources are driving health impacts and inequities across the world. However, a redistributive growth paradigm should not address inequality at the expense of living on a finite planet and putting finite resources at risk.
5. Data exists to demonstrate that inequalities reverberate through societies, and while good policies and laws exist to address them, in practice it is hard to address the structural issues that drive these inequalities.
6. The pandemic has opened up discussions of the role that gender plays in all aspects of health, including driving health inequities, and how we might address relationships between gender, gender inequality and health outcomes.

"Inequality is what made this a global crisis - it was not the virus."

"The economy only works for certain people, social policies only work for some people."

"We need to be nuanced as just calling for equality might not lead us to the outcomes that we really want to see."

“We as academics, can create awareness, we can force politics at the national level to meet cross sectorally. We should not just rely on social movements.”

“We have a fantastic opportunity, an ‘NHS’ moment if we capture it.”

“Equity discussions don’t trickle down from the top to the bottom. Principles and commitments are in one place and the actions are in another.”

“What we absolutely need is bottom up movement to push legal norms and the actions of companies and states.”

7. Nuanced discussions around equality and inequality are needed; we must be careful what we ask for. For example, the more gender unequal society is, the higher the mortality gap in favour of women. The biggest driver of women’s equal mortality with men is women’s participation in the workforce. However, we are then asking for equal participation an unhealthy environment and society.

### **Multi-sector collaboration**

8. Current global discussions, for example on pandemic preparedness which focuses on viruses and bio-medical issues and a food systems summit which talks about food production, are not connecting with the healthy populations and societies agenda. There is no connective analysis of the drivers of the pandemic including the food system, the environment and inequities in political, commercial and social determinants of health.
9. Multi-sector and inter-sector collaboration is key to driving healthier societies. For example, urban transport planning, the environment and health are interconnected and each of these sectors would benefit from collaborating.
10. We do not have a governance platform for the multi-sector aspects of the determinants of health, which also links planetary and human health.
11. We need to identify an arena to form the alliances that are needed; alliances that bring together industry, academia, civil society, and the health sector to speak in one voice to the political level to apply pressure for change. The life science platform might provide such an arena.
12. When inter-sector collaboration happens, it is possible to advocate solutions for the development of healthier and more just societies that promote wellbeing over maximising profit. For example, in Sweden the House of Representatives have converge multi-sectorally on adolescent and child health.
13. Democratic participation is also a crucial driver of healthy societies, and community dialogue and engagement are needed to identify needs and find solutions.

### **Legislation and action**

14. While countries can have strong commitments to universal health coverage, equity and human rights, there are often gaps in domestic policies. There can be high-level principles and commitments but actions are lacking and inequities and disparities in indigenous health, and race and ethnicity pervade.
15. It is important to reinforce norms, policies, law and mechanisms of human rights and equity, but we are at a political reckoning with the inadequacies of our laws and instruments to achieve the high requirements expected.
16. There are some real attempts to get to grips with the failures of human rights, including the blindness of the human rights system to inequity. In some countries, such as South Africa, it is very significant that human rights law is now taking into account concepts of intersectionality and how legal standards can assess accountability and access to rights.
17. Redistributive social policy is a key driver of healthy societies, including for income security, housing, education and wellbeing. The more that countries have moved towards this form of social policy, the greater the advances in health.
18. Access to information and transparency are critical positive drivers for health, but this alone is insufficient; a strong framework for public accountability is also required. This is evolving in some sectors, for example, the environment, where it is possible to take multinational companies to court.
19. International law however is not sufficient. Bottom-up demands from citizens, civil society and social movements are crucial to put pressure on both the private sector

and the state. For example, the food industry will find ways to get around government regulations but said they would respond to consumers wanting healthier products. The United States government has supported a TRIPS waiver for COVID-19 vaccines, which arguably would not have happened without a strong civil society movement on access to vaccines.

“Social movements are fundamental. Without Black Lives Matter our institution would not be having the conversation it is having now.”

“Until we focus on the actual people, and include them, we won't get anywhere.”

## **Social movements**

20. Politics needs to change to address political determinants of health, and find solutions, and social movements are playing a major and influential role.
21. The healthy societies agenda must engage with existing social movements broadly to leverage the great energy that is happening across sectors and agendas.
22. We risk having a static view of what constitutes a social movement; it can be dynamic and include consumer associations.
23. Our vocabulary and nomenclature on north / south divisions are outdated and we must engage with social movements in all countries and regions and across the globe.

## **Developing a healthy societies narrative**

24. To develop a healthy societies narrative, we need to define our goals and values and then organise our political activities around this.
25. What is the desired outcome? What are we striving for? How do we measure whether we are successful? Are there opportunities to review the healthy societies narrative from the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets?

## **Europe & North America - Healthy societies action agenda**

Participants identified some concrete ways in which to take this agenda forward.

26. Build a multi-sectoral governance arena and platform for the multi-sector aspects of the determinants of health, which links planetary and human health.
27. Develop a healthy societies narrative which identifies desired goals and outcomes, and which takes into account the nuances around equity and equality.
28. Engage with the energy and power of social movements to promote bottom-up change and accountability for healthy societies, including broader notions of movements, such as consumer activism.

### **Alison Dunn**

Wilton Park | June 2021

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