



Policy Brief

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Using European Structural and Investment Funds to reduce health inequalities: helping local stakeholders find investment opportunities

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Socioeconomic health inequities

Equity is about fairness and justice. Promoting equity is essential if human and social development is to be combined with economically productive societies. Health equity is the absence of systematic differences in health and its determinants between groups of people at different levels of social advantage. The opposite is health inequity, which results from unequal economic, social and environmental conditions. Such differences are inherently unfair, unjust and avoidable. Therefore reducing health inequities are essential, and the upward trends for such differences call for further innovative, collaborative actions at all levels.

Socioeconomic disadvantage translates into a disadvantage in health of economically marginalised regions and social groups. Worse health among those with a lower socioeconomic status leads to labour productivity losses, unemployment, increased demands for health care and higher uptake of social security benefits. Therefore, action is not only about safeguarding human rights, but also has a strong economic rationale.

In order to address human rights and the economic consequences of health inequities, current strategies need to be strengthened and combined with new strategies, directly tackling social determinants. The potential for both national and regional policies to help improve the population's health need to be maximised. Regional policies are of particular importance for addressing existing differences between regions within the EU. Problems should be tackled locally, where they arise.

Reducing socioeconomic health inequalities

Health equity comes as a direct effect of wealth, distribution of resources across societies, access to information or holding capacities for action. Inequalities appear due to imbalances in the political, social, and economic policies and it is the role of Europe and its member states to foster economic development while sustaining cohesion.

Health equity is an issue of growing importance on the political agenda. In 2010, the European Commission proposed Europe2020 as the new path for development in the coming decade at EU level, setting up clear objectives to be reached towards a smarter, more

sustainable and more inclusive growth. Health is an integral element to these objectives while the idea of equity is even more interlinked with policies of social inclusion, employment, or combating poverty. Through the EU principle of "Health in all Policy" there is a clear acknowledgement of the need to tackle the effects policies have on health equity. At the same time one should also take into account how policies that integrate health in their framework can lead to better policy results, more development, and cohesion.

The European Structural and Investment Funds

European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) offer a window of opportunity to secure funding for or affect the impacts of large-scale actions on factors contributing to health inequalities. A key role of ESIF is to reduce regional economic and social disparities and – in line with Europe2020 – to promote economic growth and employment as well as inclusive societies. Activities addressing economic and social conditions have relevant indirect influences on health.

ESIF can be very much connected to health inequalities. Many actions on determinants of health like socio-economic vulnerability, social inclusion, better education, better public administration, safer environment can be funded through ESIF. One of the conclusions of previous evaluations on the usage of European funding is that health equity can be "easily" integrated within other policy priorities. But there are many difficulties to overcome as health was not highlighted as an independent investment priority.

Assisting regions to identify available ESIF opportunities to fund actions to tackle health inequalities: the HE2020 Policy Matrix

The [HealthEquity-2020 project](#) assisted Member States and their regions to develop actions on reducing health inequalities while at the same time appraising available ESIF opportunities.

In order to help achieve this goal, a [Policy Matrix](#) was developed which shows how health aligns with the European strategic frameworks and bridges them with the idea of health equity. Ideally, this Policy Matrix will help regional and local stakeholders put health equity on the ESIF discussion table. Specifically: influencing the implementation of current operational plans; informing the

mid-term ESIF review; agreeing how to fit health as a priority (with several strands) in negotiations for the next ESIF programming period.

The Policy Matrix is based on the provisions of the Common Strategic Framework published on 4 March 2012, the new ESIF Regulations published on 20 December 2013, and the "Investments in Health Policy Guide for the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2014-2020" (European Commission, 2014). It should be regarded as a consultation document and an umbrella framework. It identifies intervention pathways to address health inequalities based on current European policies and political context, leaving room for many small or large sized measures.

Addressing health inequalities within thematic priorities

The process of accessing European funding is highly complex. Aligning possible interventions with EU and national ESIF priorities depends on many factors such as: regional or country specific prioritization; national reform programs; or budget availability. So, the policy options offered using the Policy Matrix should be combined with concrete needs, policies and the regulatory context in the countries/regions.

The concrete directions of investment for the 2014 to 2020 ESIF period have been structured in a common set of 11 Thematic Objectives (TO). They take the Europe2020 Strategy goals and targets and set up workable actions to increase coordination and synergies between funds. Member States select these key main topics to focus on in agreement with the EU Commission (the Partnership Contract) rather than spread funding over all areas of possible investment. Based on this, operational programmes are then developed by the national and regional authorities.

The Investments in Health Policy Guide (European Commission, 2014) has gone a step further in matching these thematic objectives with provisions in EU health policy (Commission Communications, Action Plans, Reports, White papers, strategies, and recommendations) and select goals and interventions eligible for ESIF funding.

The Policy Matrix summarises how health equity fits in this working framework and aims to present the lines of possible investment for healthy equity under the ESIF thematic goals. (See the detailed analysis in the full Policy Matrix document).

Observations – Key Policy Points

1. Although it is not always the case, it often happens that those who benefit less from a policy are the most disadvantaged groups, even though they are the major target of many interventions. It is important for the success of health interventions that they are designed in a way that benefit those in need and do not make inequities worse. Combining population-based policies (with the same intervention for all groups) and approaches focused on high-at-risk groups, universal with selective actions can be an alternative.
2. When analysing the thematic objectives supported by ESIF most lines of interventions for health equity are connected to social inclusion and combating poverty. However, as a response to the economic crisis, many countries chose to reduce their public expenditure for social policies making it difficult for local actors to promote social inclusion actively at higher levels and secure national contributions for ESIF applications. Furthermore, the EU budget allocation for social inclusion is considerably smaller than for the other priority areas. An obvious question is: what funding is available for sustaining actions for health equity?
3. Moreover, the structure of European funding on thematic objectives follows a targeted approach with the aim to set a path to more catalysed growth. And while focused interventions are useful, there is a clear need for a more integrated approach. When choosing between policy options to direct investments, there is some tension between a focus on research or social policies. For example, with health, decision makers often need to choose between addressing problems caused by improper infrastructure or outdated technologies, investing in new products versus health prevention interventions. When addressing health inequalities within the ESIF framework, it is important therefore to see where policy synergies can be realised, links with other thematic area objectives or use the Health in all Policies principle.

In conclusion, there is a need to identify practical ways to use ESIF that will deliver effective interventions and effective use of resources.

The full Policy Matrix can be accessed at <http://www.healthequity2020.eu/pages/resources/>. . More information on the Health Equity 2020 project can be found at www.healthequity2020.eu.

Health Equity 2020 The general objective of the HealthEquity-2020 project is to assist Member States & regions to develop evidence-based regional action plans on reducing health inequalities, which also informs the use of Structural Funds in the present and new programming period.



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