

Review of social determinants and the health divide in the WHO European Region: final report



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Review chair

Michael Marmot

Report prepared by

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Abstract

The WHO European Region has seen remarkable health gains in populations that have experienced progressive improvements in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live and work. Inequities persist, however, both between and within countries. This review of inequities in health between and within countries across the 53 Member States of the Region was commissioned to support the development of the new European policy framework for health and well-being, Health 2020. Much more is understood now about the extent and social causes of these inequities. The European review builds on the global evidence and recommends policies to ensure that progress can be made in reducing health inequities and the health divide across all countries, including those with low incomes. Action is needed on the social determinants of health, across the life-course and in wider social and economic spheres to achieve greater health equity and protect future generations.

Keywords

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Foreword

Health and well-being are much needed assets for us all and for the societies in which we live in today's increasingly complex world. At first sight, overall population health indicators have certainly improved across the WHO European Region over the last decades. Yet when we look more closely, we can see that improvement in health status has not been experienced equally everywhere, or by all. There are widespread inequities in health between and within societies. They reflect different conditions in which people live and affect the magnitude and trends in health inequities in today's Europe. Health inequities offend against the human right to health and are unnecessary and unjust.

Given our European values and know-how, we can and must do better to promote health and reduce health inequities in our continent. It is for this reason that when I took up office as WHO Regional Director for Europe I started the process of developing Health 2020. My commitment was to producing a values- and evidence-based European policy framework supporting action across government and society for health and well-being.

The promotion of population health and well-being, the reduction of health inequities and the pursuit of people-centred health systems are key to a sustainable and equitable Europe. This vision is duly reflected in the key strategic objectives of Health 2020. I am delighted that Health 2020 was adopted at the sixty-second session of the Regional Committee held in Malta in September 2012.

Behind Health 2020 lies a simple yet vital idea: health and well-being matters to human, social and economic development and the future of Europe. Health is a fundamental resource for the lives of people, families and communities. Poor health wastes potential, causes despair and drains resources. By developing this new health policy framework for Europe, the European Region and its Member States wanted to bring a focus on health and improve its distribution in societies. To achieve this, we need to tackle the root causes of health inequities within and between countries. This has to be seen as a priority within our current European context, characterized in many countries by increased or persisting health inequities, a growing burden from noncommunicable diseases and shrinking public service expenditures due to the financial crisis. In this context, there is an urgent need to promote and protect health, particularly for the most vulnerable segments of the population. The WHO Regional Office for Europe has a key role to play in addressing these challenges as a proactive leader and a partner when joint actions are needed. This is the rationale of all the efforts that brought about Health 2020.

I commissioned a number of studies and scientific reviews to inform Health 2020's development. One of the most important is the European review of social determinants of health and the health divide, led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot and his team at the University College London Institute of Health Equity.

The review was carried out by a consortium of over 80 policy researchers and institutions and in close cooperation with technical units and programmes in the Regional Office. I am delighted that the findings and recommendations of the review informed Health 2020 and are now published and made available throughout Europe and globally. I congratulate Sir Michael and all those who contributed to accomplishing this unique piece of work.

The review has collected new evidence on the magnitude and pathways related to health inequalities in the European Region and the most effective interventions and policy approaches to address them. We now know that what makes societies flourish and sustainable also makes people healthy. We understand more of the powerful impact of the social determinants on both health and disease. We better appreciate how the conditions of everyday life affect health at individual and population levels. We know that the opportunities to be healthy are far from being equally distributed in our countries. We have more accurate evidence that today's disease burden is rooted in our present-day societies, in the way our resources are distributed and utilized and in how we address gender and other social factors that shape current patterns of ill health and lifestyles. We know with much greater insight that our opportunities to live in healthy settings are closely linked to good upbringing and education, decent work, housing and income support throughout our life-course.

My aim in promoting the review's findings is to generate new interest and commitment in tackling health inequities and their causes in the Region and to strengthen existing support and effective action. The review provides a "wake-up" call to action among political and professional leaders and an opportunity to actively facilitate the generation and sharing of effective practices and policy innovations among those working to improve health outcomes and narrow the health gap among and within our European Member States.

This review had an impact on the content of Health 2020 and its goal to be a powerful vehicle for collective action to seize new opportunities to enhance the health and well-being of our populations across the whole of the Region. The present often extreme health inequities across our Region must be tackled. In the end, the impact of Health 2020 will depend on successful implementation in countries. Its success will be judged by tangible improvements in health and health equity in our populations. I am sure that, informed by the findings from this most important review, we can add significant value to our collective work for the benefit of all peoples of the Region. We must act on the new evidence provided by this review for better health outcomes for present and future generations. This is both our opportunity and our challenge.

Zsuzsanna Jakab

WHO Regional Director for Europe

Note from the Chair

Recognizing the importance of addressing health inequities globally, WHO set up the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH). Commonly, health is equated with health care and public health with disease control programmes. A different approach is needed to complement these two. The CSDH 2008 report, *Closing the gap in a generation*, concluded that health inequities were determined by the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, and the inequities in power, money and resources that give rise to these conditions of daily life. It said: "Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale".

The CSDH made recommendations for action based on its synthesis of evidence. In my note from the Chair, I said that all associated with the CSDH were united by three concerns: a passion for social justice, a respect for evidence, and a frustration that there appeared to be far too little action on the social determinants of health.

Things have changed. All connected with the European review share the CSDH's commitment to social justice and evidence. But there is now tangible, and very welcome, interest in applying understanding of social determinants of health to improving health and increasing health equity. Showing the lead in Europe, and wishing to translate her vision into practical action, Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe, set up this review of social determinants of health and the health divide. Building on the CSDH, our task was to synthesize the evidence and make recommendations that could be applied in the 53 countries that make up the diversity of the WHO European Region.

There are persisting and substantial health inequities across the Region. It includes countries with close to the best health and narrowest health gaps in the world. The evidence suggests that this welcome picture is related to a long and sustained period of improvement in the lives people are able to lead – socially cohesive societies, increasingly affluent, with developed welfare states and high-quality education and health services. All these have created the conditions for people to have the freedom to lead lives they have reason to value.

The review set up 13 task groups to review new evidence on what can be done in diverse countries across the Region to take action on the social determinants of health. The findings of the task groups, and the work of the review teams at the University College London Institute of Health Equity and WHO, was overseen by a group of senior advisors who brought their wisdom and experience to bear on translating the evidence into recommendations ready to be implemented.

The global financial crisis has brought conditions of great hardship to parts of the Region. There is therefore an even more pressing need for action on the social determinants of health to ensure that a commitment to health equity survives and is enhanced. A central argument of this review is that social policies can be judged by their likely impact on health equity. Our aim was to provide both the evidence and the recommendations to make such a judgement possible. What is now needed is the political and social commitment of governments, civil society, transnational bodies and academic institutions to translate into reality the vision of a more equitable Europe. We are optimistic.

Michael Marmot

Chair, European review of social determinants of health and the health divide

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