

Improving the performance and resilience of health systems

What is the topic about?

High-performing and resilient health systems are essential to the health and wellbeing of countries in Europe, as well as for health security, as was illustrated so vividly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rajan et al., 2022). Health system performance aims to achieve optimal health outcomes and relates to how well health systems achieve their goals, including quality, access, equity, efficiency, responsiveness, overall health improvement, people-centredness and financial protection (Papanicolas et al., 2022). Health systems' resilience is their ability to prepare for, manage and learn from a sudden, unanticipated, and extreme disturbance (Sagan et al., 2021) and the aim to withstand and recover from shocks by maintaining core health system functions.

Over the years, health systems performance assessment (HSPA) has been an iterative approach used to inform policymakers with health reform efforts, priority-setting and resource allocation. Assessment data and information are, however, rarely used to their full potential and the assessment process is complicated by a lack of consensus on the boundaries of health systems, how goals are determined, and which factors are influential. A lack of a common framework, common benchmarks and regularity in assessments has led to difficulties in intra- and cross-country comparability. Yet it is precisely that comparability which fosters and motivates cross-country learning in order to address the evolving needs of a population's health, and more broadly, societal wellbeing.

Why is it important to EU Member States?

High-performing and resilient health systems are of paramount importance to EU Member States, with many parties working to harmonize and align existing assessment approaches directly ensuring compliance with EU healthcare standards but more broadly, for a coordinated global approach on health systems strengthening.

Beyond protecting and improving the health of populations, they provide a solid foundation for broader societal goals outside of the health system remit such as sustainable economic development, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, public trust and preparedness for future challenges. These outcomes have traditionally been overlooked, with many health systems assessments looking



to health status or health improvement as the final objective, but are becoming increasingly relevant as we continue to understand and develop cross-sectoral interrelationships (Greer et al., 2023).

All EU Member States have recognised the connection of performance and resilience of their health systems to the health of citizens, with improvement efforts beginning with better measurement, and more nuanced interpretation of what has been measured. The EU's Expert Group on Health Systems Performance Assessment (discussed below) is testimony to the importance of this workstream to EU Member States.

Expert Group on HSPA

The Expert Group on Health Systems Performance Assessment focuses its analysis on different priorities each year with particular attention to areas of strategic relevance and impact. Its primary purpose is to provide evidence-based information and recommendations to support policymaking and improvements in healthcare systems, aiming to enhance the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of healthcare delivery in the EU. Previous years have been dedicated to quality-of-care assessment (2015), integrated care systems (2016), primary care (2017), health care efficiency assessment; tools and methods (2018), resilience (2019), improving access through measurement (20/21) and, most recently, prevention indicators (2022).

What has the EU done to date?

Recognising that health care is defined in EU treaties as primarily a responsibility and competence of individual EU Member States, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the EU can nevertheless make a vital contribution in supporting Member States in their efforts to improve the performance and resilience of their health systems. Some of these efforts may look to strengthen EU cooperation and action to identify best HSPA practices, facilitate cross-country learning, and develop common HSPA benchmarks. This can be observed in the most recent performance indicator report which attempts to streamline EU Member State-reported health promotion and disease prevention indicators to a lowest common denominator to provide a benchmark for comparison across EU Member States, while highlighting best practice guidelines and survey tools options for consideration (see the Expert Group's report on Mapping metrics of health promotion and disease prevention for HSPA). This exercise demonstrated the continued importance of using and advancing a standardized EU-wide indicator set and framework to ensure consistency and comparability across national assessments.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has expanded its role in health system performance and resilience, responding to requests from Member States for a more joined-up effort so that health systems are better prepared to respond to future shocks. Moving towards a European Health Union, the EU has increased the mandate and budget of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and has set up the Health Emergency and Response Authority (HERA). The EU has also adopted a substantial COVID-19 recovery plan within the scope of NextGenerationEU and expanded the health programme budget (EU4Health).

Support to EU Member States in strengthening HSPA is currently provided through the HSPA Expert Group and the EU Country Health Profiles. The EU has also provided direct support to national HSPAs of several Member States and is issuing policy recommendations on health as part of the annual European Semester cycle.

More generally, efforts which support the equitable maintenance of practices, such as (i) the establishment of a dedicated fund to enhance healthcare system assessments and resilience or (ii) the integration of health system assessments into EU4Health to prioritize these efforts and allocate resources accordingly could further bolster the support offered to Member States.

Key takeaways

- The COVID-19 pandemic was a dramatic reminder of the crucial role of health system performance and resilience in the individual and coordinated effort of safeguarding the health and wellbeing of populations, society more broadly, and for economic and sustainable development. Recognizing this, EU Member States have sought EU cooperation through the COVID-19 response mechanisms, the European Semester or the Expert Group on HSPA.
- Improving health system resilience and performance begins with comprehensive efforts to ensure accurate data, good measurement and benchmarking. A coordinated effort allows for cross-country comparison and learning, followed by identifying and implementing appropriate policy measures to uphold EU regulation.
- The EU could step up its support to EU Member States by strengthening EU-wide cooperation on HSPA and health system resilience. It could invest in developing a common EU-wide indicator set, technical and financial support to EU Member States in undertaking national HSPAs and assessments of health system resilience, and the identification of best practices and possibilities for cross-country learning.

Further reading

European Commission, Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety, Greenley, R, Karanikolos, M, Rechel, B et al., Mapping metrics of health promotion and disease prevention for health system performance assessment, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2875/951720>.

Greer S et al. (eds.) Making Health for All Policies: harnessing the co-benefits of health, Copenhagen, World Health Organization 2021 (acting as the host organization for, and secretariat of, the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies).

Papanicolas I et al. (eds.) Health system performance assessment: a framework for policy analysis, Copenhagen, World Health Organization 2022 (acting as the host organization for, and secretariat of, the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies).

Rajan D et al. (eds.) Health system performance assessment: a primer for policy-makers, Copenhagen, World Health Organization 2022 (acting as the host organization for, and secretariat of, the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies).

Sagan A et al. (eds.) Health systems resilience during COVID-19: Lessons for building back better, Copenhagen, World Health Organization 2021 (acting as the host organization for, and secretariat of, the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies).

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