

Strengthening the EU's global voice and leadership

What is the topic about?

One of the key objectives of the European Union has long been to have a strong voice in global affairs. Health, a priority in European politics, is an area where the EU and its Member States shape global agendas and outcomes. The issue has been whether they try to speak with one voice and strategic approach: "Team Europe". Increasingly they do, developing a common EU global voice and leadership which are important in a dynamic international system undergoing substantial change.

Global voice and leadership can mean a variety of things. One is coordination in international fora and organizations such as the United Nations (UN), World Health Organization (WHO), G20 and international financial institutions. Another is support for certain approaches to international politics, e.g. support for the WHO and its strengthening. Yet another is funding and practical coordination in areas such as development assistance and civil protection, where the EU institutions can work with Member States to avoid overlap and contradictions in their efforts. Finally, it can be coordination at all levels in response to crises such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why is it important to EU Member States?

The EU is, according to Eurostat, the third largest economy in the world (just behind the United States) and its approximately 448 million citizens live in an enormous single market. EU trade, regulatory, development, civil protection and other policies shape the health policies and outcomes of countries around the world. COVID-19 showed the extent to which the EU's decisions helped to shape global responses, for example, in supporting the WHO and contributing to initiatives such as COVAX (dedicated to promoting a more equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines). Individual EU Member States are less able to shift international politics, but the EU can give one voice to 27 votes. While Member States may pursue their own global health policies reflecting diverse interests such as, humanitarian causes or the pursuit of development and stability in third countries, there are challenges of a cross-border nature which are more easily managed together. A common approach can contribute towards strengthening Member States' global policies while pooling efforts and avoiding fragmentation.

What has the EU done to date?

In 2010, the EU institutions and Member States committed to a global health approach that included efforts to coordinate development priorities and their views in multilateral meetings and international organizations. Coordinating development priorities remains a challenge because Member States understandably have different focuses. One effect since then has been that Member States will rely on the EU institutions for certain objectives. The European Union is a top contributor to the WHO budget. The EU as an entity is also a major donor of official development and humanitarian aid.

As regards a focused international voice, Member States and the EU institutions have become habituated to preparing shared views before meetings and maintaining a united front whenever possible. Member States are obliged to coordinate their views in a forum such as the UN or the WHO's World Health Assembly, so their choice to do so as a matter of course is a success for collective action.

In 2022, the Commission presented the first European global health strategy, which ties together the work of different EU policy areas, with a focus on the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) and the Directorate General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA). It highlighted a number of shared principles which include the goals of better health, stronger health systems, and better preparation for response to health threats. It also emphasises the need to regain lost ground in the Sustainable Development Goals, and to strengthen multilateral institutions in general and WHO in particular. The focus on a stronger and better WHO is important given its place in the fragmented and contested global health space.

There is scope for a more tools-based approach that tries to understand the many EU activities that affect global health and assess their fit with Member State activities and the stated priorities of the EU itself. It will also be crucial in the future that the EU's global voice and leadership is formulated across all relevant policy areas. At the same time, mapping ongoing activities can strengthen coherence and avoid the duplication of efforts by Member States and at EU level.

Key takeaways

- The number of policy areas in which the EU affects global health policy and outcomes extends far beyond the work of DG SANTE and DG INTPA, including its impact on global health through trade policy and intellectual property.
- The EU wields a great deal of power, through its market size, participation in international trade and intellectual property regimes, exports, development assistance, impact on technical standard and other policies. A voice in global health would be strongest if it were able to develop a shared understanding of what these different sectors do to health, and transversal global health priorities that use this power for shared goals.
- The EU has complex relationships, in particular, with neighbouring regions of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, with additional policy problems and policy tools especially important and not always well integrated with other global health goals.
- There is scope for a more tools-based approach that tries to understand the many EU activities that affect global health and assess their fit with Member State activities and the stated priorities of the EU itself.

Further reading

European Commission (2021). EU Global Health Strategy.

https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/international_ghs-report-2022_en.pdf

Greer, S.L., Rozenblum, S., Fahy, N., Brooks, E., Jarman, H., de Ruijter, A., Palm, W. and Wismar, M., 2022. *Everything you always wanted to know about European Union health policies but were afraid to ask*. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe.

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