

Supporting health system transformation

What is the topic about?

Transformation is a complex yet critical process to meet new challenges and rising demands in health systems. Across the European Union, countries are grappling with the rising costs of health care and workforce shortages, while dealing with health service backlogs in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasingly evident consequences of climate change. Many health systems are struggling to adapt and embrace the adjustment or change required to tackle these issues. This highlights the importance of strengthening health systems resilience and effectiveness through transformation. From technological progress to implementing systemic and organizational changes, transformation can encompass the implementation of different types of innovations. It is a process which requires dedicated resources, long-term investment, intersectoral and political commitment, as well as an overall supportive environment. Although the organization and delivery of health care and health systems more broadly is primarily the responsibility of the EU Member States, there are different ways in which the EU can support and facilitate transformation.

Why is it important to EU Member States?

Innovative solutions are needed to meet the rising and competing demands faced by European health systems. This entails being able to detect and anticipate challenges, as well as identifying suitable solutions that work, are affordable and improve access in practice. Potential solutions must ideally be tested before implementation and their progress monitored to enable continued adaptation towards the improvement of outcomes. In this regard, policy-makers in EU Member States must not only know what they need to do, and when, but also how to do it, in order to enable the delivery of (more) effective, efficient, safe, high-quality and people-centered health services for all. However, successfully implementing change is complex and requires awareness of the social, political and economic context in which the health system operates along with the dynamics of key stakeholders. The EU can support Member States in various ways during the process of implementation and change.



What has the EU done to date?

The delivery of health services is a Member State competence; however, the EU has provided crucial support in different ways to enable health system transformation.

The EU has supported and can continue to support Member States through the collection of comparable data to identify areas for action and monitor progress, including through the European Semester, as well as other ongoing benchmarking initiatives. The European Semester is a mechanism dedicated to coordinating Member States' economic and fiscal policies, and also monitors progress in health systems. The collection of standardized indicators through Eurostat and the production of comparative publications within the State of Health in the EU cycle can supply pertinent data to monitor the functioning, gaps and progress made across European health systems.

Furthermore, the EU has a dedicated research programme (Horizon Europe) which provides financial support for collaborative research and initiatives aiming to identify joint transformation needs across Member States and develop potential solutions to address them. Horizon Europe is not health-specific, but has an important focus on health, and substantial funding has traditionally been dedicated to drive relevant objectives. For instance, Horizon Europe promotes dedicated research projects and collaborative partnerships including multi-country projects like TO-REACH and the new European partnership for transforming health and care systems. With a view to help Member States transfer best practices, the EU health programme has funded joint actions like JADECARE and CIRCE-JA. Building on these initiatives, the institution of an EU-wide, formalized and health-specific needs assessment mechanism, as well as a stronger focus on research and projects in the area of implementation science, are warranted.

The EU also supplies targeted technical assistance through its Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) to help Member States plan, pilot and implement reforms and innovative solutions by mobilizing hands-on support through experts in the field.

Transformation requires sustained financial support, and this is not always sufficiently available at national level. The EU can continue to offer complementary funding instruments, although more can be done to render available funds more user-friendly, sustainable and to tailor them to the specific needs of Member States. Among several relevant financial instruments, the Cohesion Policy Funds and broader initiatives within the EU's regional policy (e.g. the Harnessing Talent Platform), aim to support Member States in addressing regional disparities, including in health services, and strengthening territorial cohesion. The newly established Recovery and Resilience Facility provides targeted funding for investments and reforms to strengthen health system resilience (greening and the digital transformation of health systems being central components). However, this is only a temporary instrument which may solicit future financial commitments of a similar magnitude to drive health system reforms. A recent multi-country project supported by DG REFORM aims to establish a new EU Health Resources hub for health-specific advisory assistance, which, if properly resourced, has the potential to become a one-stop shop for Member States to obtain tailored assistance to access suitable EU funding to meet their health system transformation needs.

Key takeaways

- The ability to evolve and innovate lies at the heart of European health systems' response to changing health needs and burden of disease, rising health care demands and costs, as well as emerging challenges, such as new pathogens, workforce constraints, COVID-19 related backlogs and climate change.
- Transformation requires sustained investment, political initiative, stakeholder engagement and a supportive environment which should be instilled at national and regional level, but which can be facilitated through targeted support at EU level.
- EU support can hence financially complement available national resources, as well as promote collaborative research, cross-country learning activities and transfer of best practices.
- Current funding opportunities are somewhat fragmented and not always easily accessible; they could be better tailored to meet Member States' needs.

Further reading

Mauer N, Panteli D, Eichwalder S (2022). Investment in Health: Supporting countries with implementing health system reforms. Eurohealth Vol. 28, No. 3. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/362205/Eurohealth-28-3-35-39-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Fahy N, Mauer N, Panteli D (2021). European support for improving health and care systems. Policy Brief 43. European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies. <https://eurohealthobservatory.who.int/publications/i/european-support-for-improving-health-and-care-systems>

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