

European Health Union & Progressive Policy Frameworks

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1.4 | European Health Union & Progressive Policy Frameworks

Introduction

This chapter examines how an EHU would interlink with prominent European and global policy frameworks. We will conceptualise the essential components of the EHU against the current Commission's efforts to strengthen it. Subsequently, we will explore the potential alignment and impact of an enhanced EU role in health on crucial policy domains such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European Green Deal. Additionally, we will analyse the interconnectedness between the EHU and the overarching objectives of fostering peace and safeguarding sovereignty in Europe.

1. History and Context

The institutionalisation of EU health policy is relatively recent. Nonetheless, a European health project existed even before the birth of the European Economic Community (EEC). In 1952, the French Council of Ministers adopted a project regarding the creation of a "European Health Community" (*Communauté européenne de la santé* – CES), or "White Pool" (*Pool Blanc*). This project was submitted for discussion at the Organization for European Economic Cooperation meeting by the French Minister of Public Health and Population. The principle of a European Health Community seemed close to being adopted by the states participating in the preparatory conference. However, this project did not materialise.¹

1 Davesne, A., and S. Guigner (2013) "La Communauté européenne de la santé (1952-1954): Une redécouverte intergouvernementaliste du projet fonctionnaliste de «pool blanc»", *Politique européenne*, 41: 40-63.

Those who have looked into this aborted European health community have concluded that it confirms states' hostility to any loss of sovereignty in health matters. For example, writing in 1989, Maryse Cassan considered that "the failure of a Europe of health within the framework of a treaty seems to stem from [...] States' attachment to their sovereignty over health resources".² However, an in-depth historical analysis of this case conducted by Davesne and Guigner in 2013, concluded that *the situation and context* determine what governments can accept to integrate, more than the intrinsic characteristics of the sectors of activity.³ This highlights the importance of context and political will in the European integration process.

Half a century later, EU institutions concerned with EU health governance have risen in the European health arena. Although those institutions were not inspired by the "White Pool" project, they came as a response to global health challenges. This evolution of the health role of the EU has been marked by a gradual recognition of the importance of health as a fundamental right and the need for coordinated action at the EU level to address health challenges effectively. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (which was created in 2005 to strengthen Europe's defence against infectious diseases following the SARS CoV-1 pandemic) and the Health Security Committee (HSC) (which was strengthened in 2013 and mandated to reinforce the coordination and sharing of best practice and information on national preparedness activities following the H1N1 swine flu pandemic) are examples of this health-related institutionalisation at the EU-level. Although those steps, among many others, were and still are crucial for protecting the health of EU citizens, this evolution of health governance within the EU is regarded by some EU scholars as following the trend of "failing forward"⁴ in the EU integration dynamic.^{5, 6, 7}

2 Cassan Maryse (1989) *L'Europe communautaire de la santé* (Paris: Economica), p. 25.

3 Davesne, A., and S. Guigner (2013) "La Communauté européenne de la santé (1952-1954): Une redécouverte intergouvernementaliste du projet fonctionnaliste de « pool blanc »"

4 "Failing forward" happens when the existing level of EU integration creates a shared, European, crisis for which responses need to be European. Member States, defending their freedom of action, take an integrative step forward- but take care to make it the smallest possible step. The result is that while they might address their present crisis, they take what look in future crises like half measures. See Deruelle & Greer, 2022.

5 Deruelle, T., and S. L. Greer (2022) "Will the Covid-19 crisis make the European Health Union?", *Eurohealth*, 28(3).

6 Greer, S. L., et al (2022) *Everything you always wanted to know about European Union health policies but were afraid to ask* (Copenhagen: World Health Organization).

7 Jones, E., R. D. Kelemen, and S. Meunier (2016) "Failing Forward? The Euro Crisis and the Incomplete Nature of European Integration", *Comparative Political Studies*, 49(7): 1010–1034.

In the present context, the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged health systems globally. In spring 2020, the EU was the epicentre of the pandemic, and the efficiency of the current health governance of the union was put on public display. Reactively established institutions, scattered capacities and competencies for policymaking on health systems and public health at the EU level resulted in the fragmented and weak response of the union.^{8, 9} It challenged European citizens' vision of on the EU, and meant that people realised that there is no real health competence at the EU level.^{10, 11} This realisation translated into European citizens' proposals during the Conference on the Future of Europe (See Chapter 1.3). The political leadership recognised the need for a more significant role for the union in health, as its untapped potential in health governance was made more evident.

2. A European Health Union

The Current EHU

In the 2020 state of the union address, president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said: *"We are changing the way we address cross-border health threats. Today, we start building a European Health Union"*.¹² In 2020, the European Commission suggested a package of European Health Union policies, mainly concerned with pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response (PPR) and the fight against cancer. Measures such as reinforcing the mandates of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and European Medicines Agency (EMA), establishing the Health Emergency Response Authority (HERA), and more funding and competences for existing programmes such as the EU4Health programme.

8 Anderson, M., M. McKee, and E. Mossialos, (2020) "Covid-19 exposes weaknesses in European response to outbreaks". *Bmj*, 368.

9 David Townsend et al (2020) "What Is the Role of the European Union in the COVID-19 Pandemic?", *Medicine and Law*, 39(2), 249

10 Greer, S. L., et al (2022) *Everything you always wanted to know about European Union health policies but were afraid to ask*.

11 European Union (2020) *Uncertainty/EU/Hope: Public Opinion in Times of Covid-19* (Brussels: European Union).

12 Von der Leyen, U (2020). "State of the Union Address by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary". Brussels, 16 September 2020.

Although an important step, this can still be seen as a “fail forward”, in the sense that these measures are incomplete. The Covid-19 pandemic focused interest only on health protection from the virus, prevention, and treatment. Other equally important areas of health and public health remain out of focus. If the virus had occurred due to global warming, measures to control global warming would now be number one on the hit list of political talk shows and interventions. Focusing EU health policy purely on ongoing pandemic control would, therefore, fall short in the medium term.¹³

A True European Health Union

We envision the European Health Union as the “European Union’s concern about health for all”.¹⁴ This definition aligns with the WHO’s “health for all” concept,¹⁵ which indicates that health is to be brought within reach of everyone. “Health for all” is a holistic concept which calls for efforts in agriculture, industry, education, housing, and communications, just as much as in medicine and public health. Medical care alone cannot bring health to hungry people living in poverty. Health for such people requires a whole new way of life and fresh opportunities to provide themselves with a higher standard of living.¹⁶ Appropriately, the European Union is well-positioned to address this comprehensive health perspective through its role in critical policy areas, like the economy and agriculture, and its efforts within other policy frameworks like the SDGs, the Digital Agenda, and the European Green Deal.

European health integration is not about substituting or overtaking the role of member states (MS) in health-related areas, nor about consolidating more power in Brussels. It is about equipping the EU with the necessary competence to support and complement the actions of every MS. It is about delivering the promises of the MS and the EU to their

13 Brand, H (2021) “Auf dem Weg zu einer Europäischen Gesundheitsunion - im Zeichen der Corona-Krise”, in A. Gärber (ed.), *Europa.Besser.Machen: Vorschläge für eine progressive Wirtschaftspolitik* (Fankfurt: Campus Verlag) pp. 320-330.

14 Nabbe, M., and H. Brand (2021) “The European Health Union: European Union’s Concern about Health for All. Concepts, Definition, and Scenarios”, *Healthcare*, 9(12): 1741.

15 World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe (1999) “HEALTH21: the health for all policy framework for the WHO European Region”. *World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe*.

16 Mahler, H. (1981) “The meaning of health for all by the year 2000”, *World Health Forum*, Vol. 2, pp. 5-22.

citizens - the promise of ensuring a high level of human health. The EHU is about pursuing the EU's commitment to put people first and to build a more resilient union for the future.

We must seize this opportune moment following the Covid-19 pandemic to anchor an EU health policy beyond pandemic PPR and comprehensively addresses relevant health challenges in both communicable and non-communicable diseases. Nonetheless, the defining elements of the areas where the EHU is expected to be involved are still developing. Therefore, we envision the following set of criteria as the parameters that would determine the eligible areas of EHU action:

- When a member state is overburdened with the issue at hand.
- Cooperation between different member states on an issue brings added value.
- There are evident consequences to health.
- When a health issue causes public distress.
- There is a cross-border nature to the health issue at hand.
- There is a possible, timely, and socially accepted action at the EU level to address it.

3. The EHU interlinkage with other policy frameworks

The context of Covid-19 accelerated the discussion about a more integrated and comprehensive approach to health within the EU. However, The EHU is not only a response to the current crisis but also a vision for a healthier and more prosperous future for all Europeans – the EU's concern about "health for all".¹⁷ The EHU is, therefore, a comprehensive and holistic approach to improving health outcomes and wellbeing for all Europeans while also advancing other strategic goals of the EU. The success of the EHU lies not only in its individual merits but also in its ability to synergise and interlink with other key policy frameworks and objectives.

In this section, we will explore the interlinkage and alignment of an EU with a greater role in health with other crucial European and global policy frameworks like the European Green Deal, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Digital Agenda, SDGs, Peace in Europe, and European Sovereignty.

17 Nabbe, M., and H. Brand (2021) "The European Health Union: European Union's Concern about Health for All. Concepts, Definition, and Scenarios", *Healthcare*, 9(12): 1741.

The European Health Union and the European Green Deal

The European Green Deal is a comprehensive set of policy initiatives that strive to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 and to protect human health and well-being from environment-related risks and impacts.¹⁸ The measures needed to implement the European Green Deal demonstrate the urgent need for a stronger and more ambitious EU health policy. A greater role of the European Union in health can significantly affect the European Green Deal on many levels and through different aspects. The following are some of those aspects:

- The EHU would enhance the *co-benefits* of the green transition for health and well-being, such as reducing air pollution, improving diets, promoting physical activity, and preventing disease.
- It would support the *resilience* of health systems and communities to cope with the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, such as heatwaves, floods, droughts, wildfires, infectious diseases, and mental stress. This would require investing in adaptation measures, health workforce training, emergency preparedness, and health surveillance^{19, 20}
- An EHU would *foster innovation* in health technologies and practices that can contribute to the green transition, such as digital health solutions, circular economy models, sustainable procurement, and green public health interventions. According to the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report, *Climate Change 2023*,²¹ public health policies can advance a transition to sustainable and healthy diets, bringing significant co-benefits for the economy, climate and health. It can also create space to tackle antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and other food systems challenges, including biodiversity loss, GHG-intensive consumption, and agriculture-related air pollution.²²
- It would *strengthen the governance* of health and environmental policies at the EU level to reinforce the mainstreaming of sustainability

18 European Council (2022) *European Green Deal - Consilium* (Brussels: European Council).

19 WHO (2023) *Building climate-resilient health systems* (Geneva: WHO).

20 European Council (2022) *European Green Deal - Consilium*

21 Lee, H., et al (2023) *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023, Synthesis Report* (Geneva: IPCC).

22 Shukla, P. R., et al (2019) *IPCC, 2019: Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems* (Geneva: IPCC).

in all EU policies and climate emergency mitigation and adaptation into EU sectoral policies and EU funds as an essential component of a successful comprehensive policy. This process will include infrastructure, agriculture and forestry, marine, fisheries and coastal areas, water management, biodiversity, disaster risk reduction, and health. This strengthened governance would ensure coherence, coordination, and participation of all relevant actors and stakeholders.

The European Green Deal has the potential to implement the principles of the “Health in All Policies” approach so that health policy breaks outside the healthcare silo. Given that the European Green Deal was formulated before the Covid-19 pandemic, it necessitates reassessment to ensure its alignment with a post-pandemic healthy recovery. A coherent public health narrative injected into this strategy could unleash Europe’s hidden potential to improve population health and well-being while ensuring climate and environmental sustainability.

The European Health Union and the European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) sets out 20 key principles which represent the beacon guiding us towards a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity in the 21st century (Figure 1).²³ Initiated by the European Commission and proclaimed by the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council in November 2017 in Gothenburg, the EPSR is built around three main principles: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. A greater role for the EU in health can affect several health-related and non-health-related principles of the EPSR. Some possible effects include:

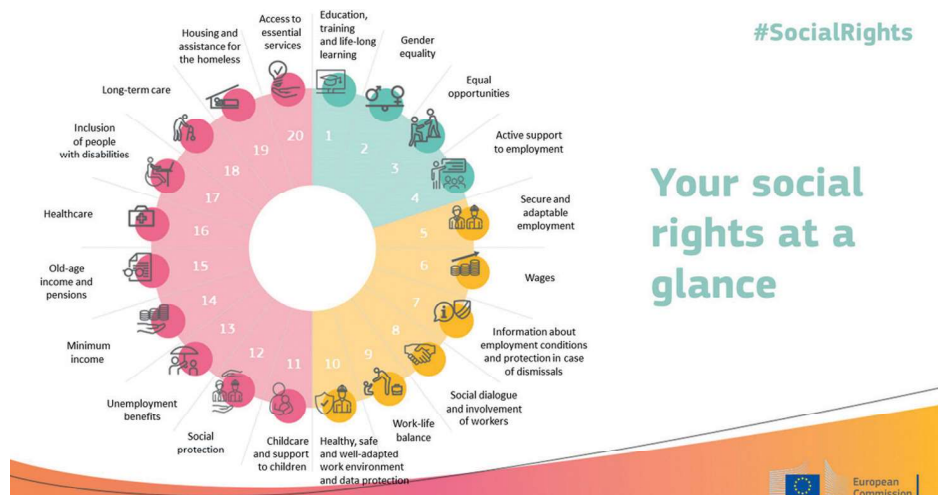
- Contribute to realising the right to *access quality healthcare*, a key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. By strengthening its role in health, the EU can work towards achieving universal access to healthcare across member states. This can include initiatives to reduce healthcare inequalities, improve infrastructure, and ensure affordable and timely access to healthcare services.

23 European Commission (2018) *European pillar of social rights*, Publications Office (Brussels: European Commission).

- Health-related issues often have significant social and economic consequences for individuals and communities. By addressing health challenges more comprehensively, the EU can *enhance social protection measures* within the pillar. This can involve strengthening social safety nets, supporting individuals facing health-related financial burdens, and implementing measures to protect vulnerable populations, such as those with chronic illnesses or disabilities.
- The EU's increased role in health can affect the relationship between *employment and health* within the pillar. Promoting healthy work environments, occupational safety, and workers' well-being is crucial to the pillar's principle of fair working conditions. The EU can support initiatives prioritising workers' health, such as promoting work-life balance, addressing workplace stress, and ensuring access to occupational health services.
- By addressing the social determinants of health and promoting health equity, the EHU can advance the pillar's central principles of *social inclusion and the fight against poverty*. The EHU can contribute to reducing health-related disparities and promoting social inclusion. This can involve targeted initiatives to address health inequalities among different social groups, ensuring that everyone has access to quality healthcare regardless of socioeconomic status.
- The EU's focus on health can also impact the pillar's objectives related to active ageing and long-term care. By promoting healthy ageing strategies, supporting preventive healthcare measures, and investing in long-term care services, the EU can contribute to enabling older adults to live independently, with dignity, and actively participate in society. This aligns with the pillar's principles of *equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and support for older persons*.

In short, a greater role of the EU in health has the potential to reinforce and interlink with various dimensions of the EPSR. By addressing access to healthcare, social protection, employment, social inclusion, and active ageing, the EU can contribute to realising a social Europe that embodies fairness, inclusivity, and opportunity for all.

Figure 1. The principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights²⁴



The European Health Union and the Digital Agenda

In 2020, the second five-year digital strategy – Shaping Europe’s Digital Future – was developed, focusing on three key objectives: technology that works for people, a fair and competitive economy, and an open, democratic and sustainable society. In 2021, the strategy was complemented by the 10-year digital compass: *The European way for the digital decade*, which puts the EU’s digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete terms.²⁵ The EHU and the EU digital agenda mutually affect each other in several ways:

- An enhanced health role of the EU would support the development and deployment of *digital technologies that can improve health and care services*, such as artificial intelligence, 5G, cloud computing, blockchain, and supercomputing. The EU has been investing in research and innovation projects, as well as in digital infrastructure and connectivity, to enable the creation and use of digital solutions that can enhance the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and monitoring of diseases, as well as the empowerment and participation of citizens and patients. The EU has also been promoting common standards

²⁴ European Commission (2023) *Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion* (Brussels: European Commission).

²⁵ European Parliament (2022) *Digital Agenda for Europe: Fact Sheets on the European Union* (Brussels: European Parliament).

and interoperability for health data and systems, as well as ensuring data protection and cybersecurity for health information.

- The EHU would foster the creation of the *European Health Data Space* that can facilitate the access, exchange, and use of health data across the EU for different purposes, such as healthcare delivery, public health, research and innovation, policymaking, and regulation. The EU has been working on a European Health Data Space legislative proposal. The proposal aims to provide a clear and harmonised framework for the governance, quality, and reuse of health data and to ensure respect for patients' rights and ethical principles. The European Health Data Space is expected to benefit citizens, health professionals, researchers, innovators, public authorities, and industry.²⁶
- The EHU would contribute to *society's digital transformation* and the achievement of the EU's strategic objectives for 2030. The EU has adopted a digital compass that sets out four cardinal points for the digital decade: 1) digitally skilled citizens and highly skilled digital professionals; 2) secure, performant and sustainable digital infrastructures; 3) digital transformation of businesses; and 4) digitalisation of public services.²⁷ The EU has also identified several areas where digital technologies can positively impact people's lives and the planet's sustainability, such as the environment, education, mobility, agriculture, energy, finance, public administration and skills. Health is one of these areas where digital can make a difference by improving health outcomes, reducing health inequalities, enhancing health system resilience, and supporting the green transition.²⁸

The European Health Union and Peace in Europe

The EU has been developing its common foreign and security policy, as well as its defence and security cooperation, to address the changing geopolitical environment and the increasing threats to European security, such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, terrorism, cyberattacks, disinformation, climate change, and the proliferation of weapons of mass

26 European Commission (2022a) *Shaping Europe's Digital Future: eHealth* (Brussels: European Commission).

27 European Commission (2021b) *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade* (Brussels: European Commission).

28 European Commission (2022a) *Shaping Europe's Digital Future: eHealth*

destruction. By enhancing its health capacity and resilience, the EU would strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy and its ability to act as a global actor in promoting peace and security internationally. Furthermore, it would also be able to protect its citizens and values and support its partners and allies in the face of health emergencies that may have political, economic, social, or humanitarian implications.²⁹ The following are dimensions of possible EHU actions to promote peace in Europe and the globe:

- The EHU would foster *solidarity and cooperation* among EU member states and other countries and regions. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of coordination and collaboration among European countries to protect people's health, both during a crisis and in normal times when we can tackle underlying health conditions, invest in strong health systems and train the healthcare workforce. As previously mentioned, the EU has been working to improve its crisis preparedness and response mechanisms, such as the joint procurement of medicines and medical devices, the European Health Data Space, and reinforcing the mandate of the ECDC and the EMA. The EU has also supported global health initiatives, such as COVAX, ACT-Accelerator, and Gavi,³⁰ to ensure equitable access to vaccines, diagnostics, and treatments for Covid-19 and other diseases.³¹ By enhancing its health solidarity and cooperation, the EU would also be able to build trust and confidence among its member states and partners, as well as prevent or resolve potential conflicts or tensions that may arise from health disparities or inequalities.^{32, 33}
- It would contribute to the *well-being and human rights* of its citizens and of people around the world. The EHU pursues a comprehensive approach to health that encompasses not only the prevention and

29 Lazarou, E. and I. Zamfir (2022) *Peace and Security in 2022 – Overview of EU action and outlook for the future* (Brussels: European Parliament).

30 COVAX is the vaccines pillar of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. The ACT Accelerator is a ground-breaking global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines. GAVI, The Vaccine Alliance (GAVI) was set up as a Global Health Partnership in 2000 with the goal of creating equal access to new and underused vaccines for children living in the world's poorest countries.

31 European Commission (2021a) *Factsheet - Team Europe Covid-19 global solidarity* (Brussels: European Commission)

32 Lazarou, E. and I. Zamfir (2022) *Peace and Security in 2022 – Overview of EU action and outlook for the future*.

33 European Union (2022) *World Health Assembly: Health for peace, peace for health* (Brussels: European Union).

treatment of diseases but also the promotion of healthy lifestyles, mental health, environmental health, social determinants of health, gender equality, and digital health.³⁴ It would also improve the quality of life and dignity of its citizens and people around the world, as well as advance the respect for human rights and democracy that are essential for peace.

- The EU's increased engagement in health can serve as a platform for *diplomatic efforts and international cooperation*. The EU can actively participate in global health initiatives, collaborate with international organisations, and engage in health diplomacy with non-EU countries. By promoting dialogue, sharing best practices, and supporting global health initiatives, the EU can build bridges, foster international cooperation, and maintain peaceful relations.
- A stronger EU role in health can help *improve the resilience and effectiveness of national health systems*. The EU can provide support and guidance to member states in areas such as healthcare infrastructure development, healthcare workforce training, and the coordination of health services. Robust and well-functioning health systems are essential for responding to health crises, and their strengthening can enhance overall societal stability and contribute to peace.

In conclusion, the European Union's efforts to enhance its health capacity and resilience hold significant implications for peace and security, both within Europe and globally. By fostering solidarity and cooperation among member states and beyond, the EU can effectively address health emergencies, protect its citizens, and support its partners and allies. Furthermore, the EU's engagement in health provides a platform for diplomatic efforts, international cooperation, and the improvement of national health systems, ultimately bolstering societal stability and contributing to a peaceful environment. As the EU continues to prioritise and strengthen its role in health, it can position itself as a global actor capable of effectively addressing and leading efforts to combat global challenges.

34 Habimana, K., M. A. Haasis, and S. Vogler (2022) *The 75th World Health Assembly "Health for peace and peace for health"* (Brussels: European Parliament).

The European Health Union and European Sovereignty

Facing the current dynamic global health landscape, realising a health union will affect European sovereignty. Aiming to enhance self-reliance, support integration in health policies and governance, and boost EU influence in global health, the EHU can be interlinked with many dimensions of sovereignty:

- The European Health Union would enhance the *autonomy and resilience* of the EU and its member states to cope with health emergencies, such as pandemics, bioterrorism, or environmental disasters, without depending on external actors or supplies. This would require building common strategic stocks, diversifying and reshoring supply chains, strengthening health security and surveillance, and ensuring access to quality healthcare for all.³⁵
- It would boost the *influence and leadership* of the EU in shaping the global health agenda and promoting its values and standards, such as human rights, democracy, and multilateralism. The EU can exert greater influence in international health organisations and negotiations by speaking with a unified voice and pooling resources. This could enhance the EU's ability to shape global health policies and standards. Nonetheless, this would require coordinating the external actions of the EU and its member states, engaging with strategic partners and regions, and supporting the reform and strengthening of multilateral health institutions, such as the World Health Organization.³⁶
- It would foster *innovation and competitiveness* of the EU in health technologies and industries, such as digital health, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and medical devices. This would require investing in research and development, protecting intellectual property rights, enhancing investment screening and export controls, and creating a single market for health.³⁷
- A greater EU role in health can *promote coordination and cooperation* among member states in addressing health challenges. By pooling resources, sharing expertise, and coordinating responses to health crises, the EU can enhance the collective ability of European nations

35 Hackenbroich, J., J. Shapiro, and T. Varma (2020) "Health sovereignty: How to build a resilient European response to pandemics", *European View*, 19(2).

36 Leonard, M., and J. Shapiro (2020) *Sovereign Europe, Dangerous World: Five Agendas to Protect Europe's Capacity to Act* (Berlin: ECFR).

37 European Commission (2022b) *Supporting policy with scientific evidence* (Brussels: European Commission).

to protect public health. This collaborative approach could strengthen European sovereignty by demonstrating the capacity to tackle health issues collectively and ensuring that decisions are made with the input and cooperation of multiple member states.

- An EHU would support the *integration and cohesion* of the EU and its member states in health policies and governance by enhancing the role of EU institutions, agencies, and mechanisms in coordinating, regulating, and financing health actions. This would require applying the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, proportionality, and health in all policies.
- As the EU expands its role in health, questions may arise regarding *democratic legitimacy and accountability*. Some argue that a greater EU role in health should be accompanied by mechanisms to ensure transparency, citizen engagement, and accountability. These mechanisms can help preserve European sovereignty by ensuring that decisions related to health are made through democratic processes and with public participation.

Ultimately, establishing an EHU would present an opportunity to promote cohesion across the continent and fortify European sovereignty.

The European Health Union and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of global targets that provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, adopted by the United Nations' member states in 2015. Health is recognised as a critical component of sustainable development. Improving health contributes to achieving multiple SDG targets, and achieving certain goals simultaneously contributes to realising the goal of Good Health and Well-Being (see Figure 2).³⁸ The EU's actions in the health domain interconnect and reciprocally contribute to attaining multiple SDGs:³⁹

- Reducing healthcare costs, promoting equitable access to healthcare, and providing financial protection against health-related expenses are all relevant actions under the EHU. In addition, with the increased

38 United Nations (2015) *The 17 Goals* (New York: United Nations).

39 European Commission (2023) *Sustainable Development Goals* (Brussels: European Commission).

productivity and economic wellbeing resulting from improved health, the EHU can *help alleviate poverty*, contributing to SDG 1 (No Poverty).

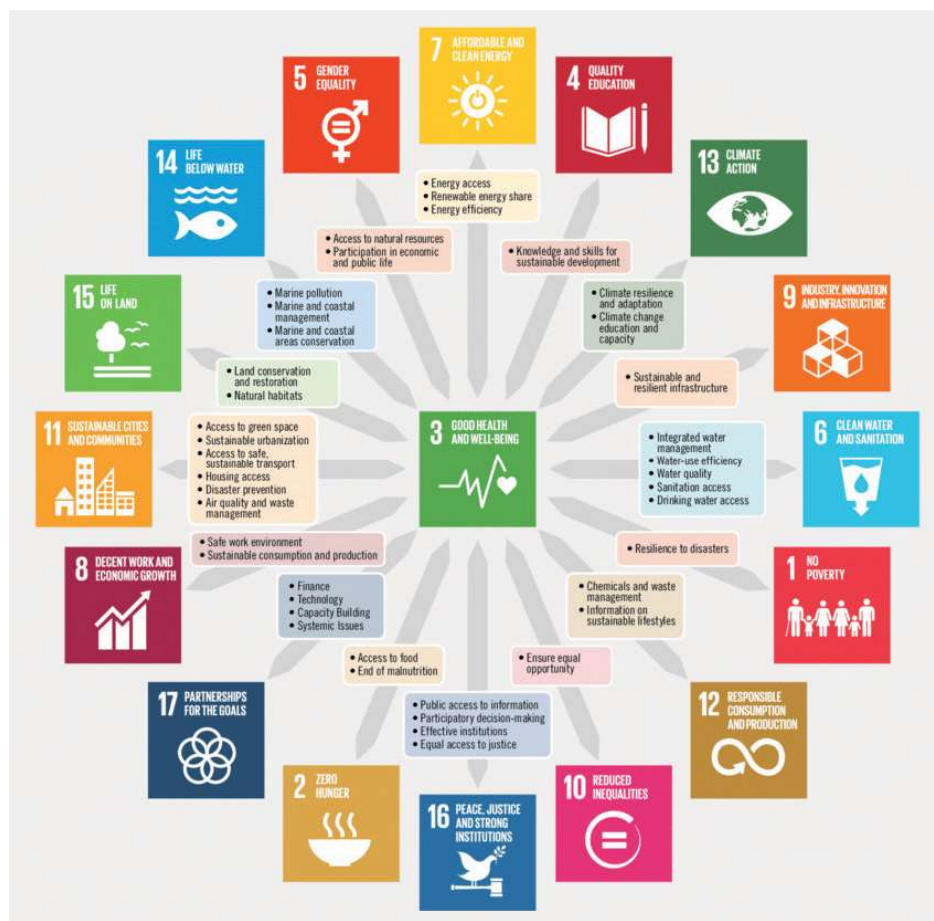
- The EHU could help reduce inequalities in access to quality healthcare by *strengthening health systems and advancing universal health coverage*, especially for vulnerable groups such as migrants, refugees, older people, and people with disabilities. This could also contribute to reducing maternal and child mortality, improving sexual and reproductive health, and preventing and treating communicable and non-communicable diseases – all targets of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being).
- The EHU can play a crucial role in achieving multiple SDGs by promoting equitable access to healthcare, addressing social determinants of health, and implementing policies that target vulnerable populations. In addition to SDG 1, the EHU can address health disparity and promote gender equity (SDG 5) by advancing gender-responsive health policies and programs that address specific health needs and challenges that women and girls face, which include ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, addressing gender-based violence, and promoting women's empowerment in healthcare decision-making and leadership roles.
- By *preventing and combating health threats*, including pandemics, and applying a *One Health approach*, the EU could help address the interconnections between human, animal and environmental health and the impact of climate change on health. This could also help preserve biodiversity, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and promote sustainable consumption and production patterns – targets of SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG15 (Life on Land). Additionally, by promoting sustainable and low-carbon practices, reducing air pollution, and ensuring environmental sustainability, the EU can improve public health outcomes and reduce the burden of climate-related health risks.
- By *supporting research and innovation for treatments and vaccines*, the EU could help foster scientific excellence, technological development and innovation in the health sector. This could also help improve access to affordable and effective medicines and medical devices, enhance public-private partnerships, and strengthen the role of the EU as a global leader in health research – all targets of SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure).
- By *promoting a holistic approach to sustainable development* and a strong partnership with the United Nations and other actors, the

EU could help advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs. This could also help enhance policy coherence, coordination and cooperation at all levels, mobilise resources and expertise, and support developing countries in achieving their health-related goals – tying in with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Furthermore, by sharing knowledge, expertise, and resources, the EU can strengthen health systems, address global health challenges, and promote sustainable development worldwide.

The EHU's actions have multiple connections with many SDGs. However, to effectively link the EU's role in health with the SDGs, the EU needs to adopt a comprehensive approach that considers the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of health. This entails adopting the One Health approach and integrating health considerations into various policy areas, such as climate, gender, poverty reduction, and education.⁴⁰ It also requires coordination and collaboration across different sectors involving stakeholders at all levels to ensure a holistic and sustainable approach to health and wellbeing.

40 McKee, M. (2022) "One health through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals." *Eurohealth*, 28(3).

Figure 2: The Sustainable Development Goals and Targets 2030 and their synergies with SDG3 – Good Health and Wellbeing⁴¹



Conclusion: an opportunity for far-sighted policymaking

This chapter has highlighted the need for a more integrated and comprehensive approach to health within the EU, emphasising the potential for the EHU to contribute to multiple policy objectives and improve health outcomes and wellbeing for all Europeans. By taking a comprehensive and interconnected approach to health, the EU can improve health outcomes, advance social objectives, promote sustainability, and enhance the

41 United Nations Environment Programme (2016) *Healthy Environment, Healthy People. Thematic Report, Ministerial Policy Review Session* (Nairobi: UNEP).

well-being of all Europeans. This pivotal moment following the Covid-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to anchor a far-sighted EU health policy that delivers on the promises made to citizens and fosters the best possible health for everyone, and, ultimately, brings the EU closer to its people - a core goal of the whole European integration project.

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