Regional Committee for Europe
71st session
Virtual session, 13–17 September 2021

Side event on the Small Countries Initiative:
Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic and priorities for implementing the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025, in small countries

Friday, 17 September 2021, 11:00–12:30 CEST (virtual)

Background

1. The Small Countries Initiative (SCI) is an active network, launched by the WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) in 2013, which brings together countries with a population of 2 million or less. Since 2019, the SCI network has comprised 11 small countries from across the WHO European Region.1 Throughout the years, the SCI has successfully acted as a catalyst for innovation and unique solutions to the health policy concerns of small countries. Small countries have been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has amplified pre-existing challenges faced by these countries specifically, such as:

   - dependence on larger neighbouring countries for trade, access to medicines and vaccines, and health workforce supply (this dependence became particularly evident following the implementation of border closures);
   - economic and financial constraints aggravated by developments over the past year (such as the suspension of tourism, the problems faced by diaspora workforces and the isolation of small countries); and
   - limited capacity of domestic resources (including human resources) to tackle the pandemic.

2. New challenges and needs have continued to emerge in the course of the pandemic. More than one year since its outbreak, small countries are not only having to contend with pressing day-to-day concerns, but are also facing longer-term challenges, including:

   - growing incidence of noncommunicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and obesity, among others;

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1 Andorra, Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, San Marino and Slovenia.
- rehabilitation in cases of so-called long COVID (that is, post-COVID-19 conditions) and potential long-term disabilities;
- a parallel rise in mental health problems, the full extent of which cannot yet be gauged;
- increased out-of-pocket payments due to a shift from public to private health services;
- vaccination roll-out, supply issues and longer-term problems in the administration of vaccines;
- reviving economies while ensuring that no one is left behind;
- restoring integrated and personalized social and health care systems to full capacity;
- tackling unemployment and promoting economic recovery in an environment of uncertainty;
- addressing systemic gaps in emergency preparedness and response; and
- harnessing the full potential of new digital ways of working.

**Scope and purpose**

3. Small countries have reached out to WHO/Europe during the pandemic to request specialized assistance. Despite the experience they have accumulated over the past year, small countries are currently still confronted by many of the above-mentioned challenges. At the same time, there are various opportunities to be leveraged, which can possibly be best achieved if they tackle these challenges jointly.

**Objectives**

4. This side event will bring together the small countries participating in the SCI (and other Member States) to:

   - articulate a forward-looking and common vision as a united group of countries, and identify the most immediate areas of need and short-term health priorities for a fair recovery that leaves no one behind; and
   - reflect on common priorities for the medium term, taking into account national health plans and using the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025, as an overarching umbrella for guiding national policies and activities.

**Target audience**

5. This side event is directed at the 11 small countries from the SCI network and other interested Member States, civil society, international organizations and relevant European Union agencies.
**Event outline**

6. The side event will take place in a virtual format. It will feature a presentation of the Draft roadmap for health and well-being of the European small country initiative, 2022–2025, and include short interventions by SCI network representatives to discuss needs and required interventions.

7. The programme for this side event will be made available on WHO/Europe’s website, on the web page for the 71st session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe.