The COVID-19 pandemic has upended lives and radically altered the political landscape. While we continue to fight fires and look towards an uncertain future, there is an opportunity for renewal amidst the ashes of this unprecedented crisis.

The European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) 2021 highlighted this unique window of opportunity to drive forward holistic action on the root causes and systemic failings that have allowed the virus to flourish. Decision-makers, experts, and community members from the public and private sector, civil society, and academia came together to envision how we can build resilience to fight for solidarity, equity and transformation in health, within Europe and on the global stage – for health to rise like a phoenix from this crisis.

The first EHFG topic track on Transforming tomorrow pointed to COVID-19 as a catalyst for accelerated innovation, specifically for innovative treatments and tools. Now an ambitious systemic and legal paradigm shift is needed to allow access for all, which entails a radical reappraisal of current practices. In her article on Joint Action Towards the European Health Data Space (TEHDAS), Minna Hendolin underlines the crucial role data plays in safeguarding the resilience of society. A smarter and more equitable use of data will contribute to improved policymaking and to better health care. In their article, Li Han Wong et al. show that for young people, sharing personal health data is two-sided – wider use of data in research and forecasting can contribute to improving personal and public health, but privacy is at risk. The necessity to protect people’s data and ensure informed consent, as well as better regulation and transparency on how health data are used are paramount.

Beyond working together across continents, continued efforts are needed to work across sectors. The Oslo Medicines Initiative (OMI), a pioneering partnership model, was launched at the EHFG 2020. It aims to bring together key stakeholders from health care, industry, and the public sector to work towards increased access to highly effective novel therapies.

The crisis has brought into sharp focus the need to work together in solidarity, to exchange international best practices, and to dive into new models of collaboration between all stakeholder groups in health – across countries, continents, sectors, and disciplines. In the topic track Joining forces for health, a loud call for a stronger and more equitable European Health Union with harmonised collaboration between Member States and strengthened institutions ensuring health security and care safety was heard. This also entails a strong global responsibility and leaving multilateralism as we knew it behind. In his article reflecting on plenary one, the EHFG President Clemens Martin Auer implores that the shortcomings in global health revealed during the pandemic must lead to a new era of multilateralism, with stronger global health policies and legally binding instruments anchored under the umbrella of a strengthened World Health Organization (WHO). There is a need to rectify the historically unequal relationship between Europe and Africa; yet, COVID-19 vaccine distribution did not prove to be a successful step in that direction.
medical products to patients. A high-priced medicine on a shelf is of no use to anyone. Beger in her article also emphasises the need for greater multi-sectoral stakeholder cooperation to build a sustainable environment for cardiovascular health in Europe, guided by the development of a new EU Action plan on cardiovascular diseases.

We have seen over the last couple of years how the pandemic has exacerbated health and social inequalities and taught us that no one is safe until everyone is safe. A truly resilient recovery towards a “better normal” for societies and economies is impossible without a focus on co-creation and equity as indispensable principles to ensure that no-one is left behind, principles explored in the conference track ‘Levelling up’. Reflecting on plenary 2, Sokolović and Belcher present a civil society perspective on how people can be involved in the creation of a European Health Union. McKee et al. then discuss plenary 3 with a focus on health and sustainable development and identify a set of measures that must be taken in the post-pandemic world. In their article, Leavey and Wilson summarise the findings from The Health Foundation’s COVID-19 Impact Inquiry, published in July 2021, showcasing the profound impact the pandemic has had on people’s health and livelihoods in the United Kingdom. It spotlights the unequal burdens carried by different population groups and regions across the UK and suggests sustainable recovery strategies to combat the impact of COVID-19 on health inequalities.

The track Complex systems explored the severe disruption health systems are struggling to recover from, while also creating space for exploring opportunities for transformation and future visions. Besides the necessity to be better prepared for future pandemics and to work together in an all-of-society approach, the severe shocks to economies call for new, fairer, and healthier future models. According to Münter et al., such a future economy cannot be built unless it is co-designed with the involvement of NGOs and social movements. Only a respective revision of general policies would enable more local action in communities and assist in building a future economy of wellbeing.

There was an agreement that levelling up in all areas of health, health policy, and multilateral cooperation will help transform the grim lessons learned during the pandemic into strategies for a better tomorrow. The principle of taking sustainable action to meet today’s societal needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, ran as a golden thread through discussions at the EHFG 2021. It posits a key question to us all: are we leaving the world better than we found it?

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