ROADMAP TOWARDS BETTER HEALTH IN SMALL COUNTRIES IN THE WHO EUROPEAN REGION

2022–2025
CORRIGENDUM

Roadmap towards better health in small countries in the WHO European Region, 2022–2025

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In figure 1, page 3, “Access to medicines and vaccines” was added at the bottom of the list in the column titled “Universal Health coverage”.

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Foreword

I am proud and honoured to follow the achievements of the members of the WHO Regional Office for Europe Small Countries Initiative and to introduce the *Roadmap towards better health in small countries in the WHO European Region, 2022–2025*.

Over the past two years, COVID-19 has put us all to the test and we have witnessed both progress and setbacks. Governments and health systems have faced unimaginable challenges that have demanded resilience, adaptability, innovation and resourcefulness. The pandemic has impacted countries differently for a number of reasons, not least because the issues facing a country with 2 million inhabitants or less are significantly different to those of a country with a population of 50 million. We have sought to consider this important reality in the Roadmap.

The *Roadmap towards better health in small countries in the WHO European Region, 2022–2025* contributes to rethinking health across policy sectors, taking areas of concern, such as overburdened health systems and health professionals, into account. It also brings to light new challenges, such as ensuring healthy and sustainable tourism in small-country contexts, reinforcing and strengthening primary health care, innovation in digital health, mental health, and sustainable health financing, and ensuring longer-term emergency preparedness and response. As such, it is a valuable additional resource that can contribute to delivering the European Programme of Work 2020-2025, “United Action for Better Health”.

My hope is that the Roadmap, which was developed with the input of small countries and takes their priorities into account, will help guide them in the coming years towards transitioning to sustainable COVID-19 response, recovery and control.
Small Countries Initiative: united action for better health

Small countries share common characteristics in terms of political context, economic features, and constraints in resource capacity. The Small Countries Initiative (SCI), launched by the WHO Regional Office for Europe in 2013, is an active network of countries with populations of two million and less, which jointly address common issues unique to small countries. Since 2019, the SCI network has comprised 11 countries across the WHO European Region of which six are members of the European Union (EU) and five are non-EU countries.\(^1\)

Since its inception, SCI has provided a forum for innovation, enabling members to share their experiences in, and tailor solutions to, health-policy implementation (1–6). Involvement in this forum has included the hosting of high-level SCI meetings, resulting in the development of joint commitments, the establishment of small-country technical working groups, and the provision of a path to implementing policies, strategies and interventions in small countries (7).

The small countries participating in the Initiative are contributing to the achievement of the Triple Billion targets of WHO’s Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023 (GPW 13) (one billion more people benefitting from universal health coverage (UHC); one billion more people better protected from health emergencies; and one billion more people enjoying better health and well-being) (8) and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda (9). They are also committed to the implementation of the WHO European Programme of Work (2020–2025) (EPW) (10) and its objectives of leaving no one behind and strengthening the leadership of health authorities in countries of the Region.

Small countries have been hit hard by the COVID19 pandemic, which has amplified preexisting challenges, such as dependency on larger neighbouring countries for trade, access to medicines and vaccines, and the shortage of and strain on health workers. It has also delayed further social and economic development, for example, through the suspension of tourism and restrictions on movement, and put a large burden on domestic resources. In addition, new challenges have emerged relating, for example, to the availability of and access to medicines and vaccines, the distribution of misinformation, the maintenance of public health measures, the detection of variants, and the aggravation of noncommunicable diseases (including childhood and adult obesity, later-stage cancers, and disability) and mental-health problems, the magnitude of which is still unfolding.

1 Andorra, Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, San Marino and Slovenia.
Objectives of the Roadmap towards better health in small countries in the WHO European Region, 2022–2025

In recognition of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, to pursue agile transformation and innovation and accelerate action to this end, the Roadmap seeks to:

- place health and well-being high on the key political agendas of small countries;
- advocate the needs of small countries at the regional and international levels;
- promote investment for health and well-being, leaving no one behind;
- build a solutions platform for better population health and resilient health systems;
- measure progress.
Priority areas for united action 2022–2025

The pandemic has highlighted the need for united action in several areas that are critical to small countries now and for the near future. With an emphasis on agile transformation, innovation and responsiveness to changing country needs, while leaving no one behind, the forward-looking agendas of SCI countries take the key drivers of change into consideration, including the strategic direction of EPW (10). Several consultations with these countries revealed the following areas as priorities for joint action (Fig.1).

**FIG. 1. SCI AREAS OF THEMATIC COLLABORATION GROUPED ACCORDING TO THE THREE EPW PILLARS**

**EMERGENCIES**
- COVID-19 response and sustained disease control
- Government-level preparation for future emergencies

**UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE**
- Primary health care
- Human resources for health
- Health financing
- Mental health
- Digital health
- Access to medicines and vaccines

**HEALTHIER POPULATIONS**
- Health and tourism
- Climate change and environmental risks
- Noncommunicable diseases and their risk factors
- Equity, gender and human rights
COVID-19 prevention, preparedness, response and recovery towards sustained disease control

The small countries participating in SCI have reiterated the need to strengthen their strained health systems to be able rapidly to transition to sustainable COVID-19 response, recovery and control with a focus on:

- developing multisectoral, medium-term response, recovery and/or contingency plans;
- engaging in sustained disease-control efforts.

Strengthening governance to prepare for future emergencies

Small countries are at risk of a wide range of international and national environmental, geopolitical, societal and technological challenges and risks. Small countries strengthen cooperation with stakeholders and across countries to:

- promote/revise/adapt/operationalize the recommendations of the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development (11);
- promote the One Health approach (12).
Primary health care

During the pandemic, primary-health-care (PHC) services were crucial in providing information to patients and e-health services, as well as in treating mild and moderate COVID-19 and non-COVID pathologies and protecting hospitals from becoming overburdened. The small countries participating in SCI have stressed the importance of reaffirming political commitment to PHC, revisiting strategic directions, and closing gaps in the need for essential health services. This will entail supporting small countries in developing comprehensive networks of health-care centres and providing full packages of health services. Proposals to this end include:

Stronger planning and development of human resources for health

Well-educated, skilled, and motivated health and care workforces are the key to the sustained improvement of population health in small countries. Any pre-existing workforce shortages have been exposed by the pandemic. It has highlighted the risks of creating reliance on cross-border-commuting workforces in some small countries and the need for effective investment in, and the management of, workforce flow to combat shortages. Needs identified include:

- the joint elaboration of innovative ways of bolstering PHC delivery by addressing, for example, geography, staff shortages, limited finances, and limited data;
- the establishment of hands-on demonstration sites and the documentation of experience (13).

- the ability to forecast critical health-workforce demands in the coming years, retain health-care workers in the long term, and promote digital solutions, where needed;
- support in the education and development of health-workforce capacity, which includes ensuring a health workforce well trained in the all-hazards approach, and the safety measures required to avoid infection, both at the workplace and in households and communities.
Longer-term sustainable health financing

The COVID pandemic has shown small countries the importance of understanding that sustainable health financing is closely linked to keeping health high on the political agenda. Health systems in small countries need the financial means to be able to continue to protect their populations while working in alliance with non-health sectors, even in non-emergency situations. Proposals to this end include working together towards:

- identifying innovative ways of public financing health systems;
- investing in an economy of well-being (14).

Stronger mechanisms to ensure the accessibility, availability and affordability of medicines, vaccines and medical devices

Small countries face challenges related to inclusion in the medicines market, vaccine procurement (for example, during the pandemic, some non-EU countries initially had difficulties in procuring vaccines), vaccine uptake, communication, and misinformation. Ways of supporting small countries include:

- promoting small-country participation in the Oslo Medicines Initiative (better access to effective, novel, high-priced medicines) (15);
- bolstering the role of WHO as a liaison between small countries and the pharmaceuticals industry, including the strengthening of voluntary multicounty/multiarea collaboration;
- using political, strategic and technical leverage to ensure the effective implementation of the European Immunization Agenda 2030 in the Region (16).
Better mental health

Lockdowns, social and economic downturn, and limits on movement and social interaction as a result of COVID-19 have caused a rise in mental-health issues associated with personal safety, self-isolation, unemployment, financial worries, and social exclusion. Small countries have expressed a growing need to focus attention on mental health and to:

- engage in the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health 2021–2025 and the new Mental Health Coalition (17);
- promote mental well-being throughout the life course, with a specific focus on youth and elderly people;
- transform mental-health services.

In small countries, digital technologies have been essential in addressing COVID-19, complementing health-system efforts in transitioning to safe, inclusive, people-centered health services. Next steps include:

- sharing lessons learned through digital experiences and digital innovation (18);
- ensuring training and capacity development through innovation labs;
- elaborating integrated real-time health-data information systems specific to small countries (19).

Innovation in digital health
PROMOTION OF HEALTH, EQUITY AND WELL-BEING

Rethinking healthy and sustainable tourism

Many small countries are dependent on tourism, and COVID-19 brought to the forefront the socioeconomic and health consequences linked to the slowing down of this sector. Both the health and tourism sectors have the need to strengthen cooperation and coordination at all levels to engender healthy tourists, healthy communities, healthy environment, and healthy economies for current and future generations. Strengthened cooperation within and across small countries could be supported through:

- the development of a policy paper for discussion at the annual SCI meeting and possible submission to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe;
- a coalition of partners aimed at elaborating harmonized guidance.

Intensified action to implement existing SCI commitments and build back better

As a means of achieving long-term health promotion and protection, SCI will pay specific attention to addressing:

- climate change and the environment (in coordination with the European Environment and Health Task Force (20) and the Working Group on Health in Climate Change (21));
- equity, gender and human rights;
- the control of noncommunicable diseases (particularly obesity) and the implementation of best-buys and other commitments made at the UN high-level meetings on noncommunicable diseases.
Innovation in modalities of cooperation

Building on earlier successful cooperation, the Roadmap proposes enhanced political, technical and resource-related cooperation (Fig. 2).

**FIG. 2. MODALITIES OF COOPERATION**

**POLITICAL COOPERATION**
- High-level meetings
- Strategic partnerships
- International advocacy

**TECHNICAL COOPERATION**
- Thematic working groups
- Partnerships
- Innovation laboratories
- Joint learning

**RESOURCES-RELATED COOPERATION**
- Documentation of success
- Strengthened communication and outreach
- SCI communicators’ network
- Stakeholder engagement
Support to increasing solidarity among small countries

This includes:

- holding annual high-level SCI meetings on specific political and policy areas of joint concern to elaborate coordinated strategic political input;

- advocating the needs of small countries at the international level through, for example, joint statements on aspects specifically relevant to small countries;

- partnering with existing mechanisms, such as EU (22), Nordic Co-operation (23), and the Central European Initiative (24), and establishing technical cooperation on the implementation of the Roadmap for health and well-being in the Western Balkans (2021–2025) (25), among others.
In-country and multicounty technical support related to norms and standards, the exchange of good practice, experience, and mutual learning

This includes:

i. **the creation or continuation of technical bodies, such as:**

   - the Small Countries Health Information Network (SCHIN) to regularly update health targets, indicators, data and information (26);
   - the SCI technical working group on strengthening health-system governance (27);
   - the Ad Hoc Working Group on Human Resources for Health in Small Countries in the European Region with the renewed aim of supporting small countries in planning and forecasting critical health-workforce demand, needs and operationalization in the digital world;
   - SCI communicators’ network.

ii. **a coalition of technical partners to:**

   - assess and advise on healthy and sustainable tourism and develop policy, strategic and technical recommendations;
   - engage in specific topics and existing coalitions relevant to small countries.
iii. in-country and multicountry capacity-building and joint learning in specific areas of interest, including the:

- mobilization of a rapid technical response and policy support in case of need;

- organization of thematic seminars, thematic workshops, and study visits (bilateral and multilateral);

- promotion of the active participation of SCI members in WHO summer schools, academia, and/or virtual and face-to-face capacity-building activities.

iv. the establishment of innovation laboratories to promote:

- champion innovation countries;

- the exchange of learning between pilot sites with the aim of resolving common challenges and testing and generating new practice-based solutions;

- new ways of doing business in creating communities of good practice and stimulating new ways of working.
RESOURCES-RELATED COOPERATION

In-country and multicountry cooperation through the WHO SCI secretariat

This includes:

- documentation of success and experience in implementation, focusing on a know-how approach;

- increased active communication, awareness-raising and outreach through social media, the Internet and weekly outreach;

- engagement in a wider range of strategic partnerships, including actors in and beyond small countries (for example, youth, those working in civil society, academia and the community, as well as various stakeholders, such as schools, universities and nongovernmental organizations) to help harness community spirit, volunteerism and the documentation of a wide range of creative approaches to achieving solidarity at the community, regional and national levels (beyond government-led approaches).

- identification of opportunities to jointly mobilize financial resources for key areas of concern in small countries.
References


7. Seventh high-level meeting of small countries: small country experiences during COVID-19: online. 28 June 2021, 10:00–11:30 hours CET. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2021 (https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/349840).


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2 All URLs accessed 9 May 2022.


2. Small all countries share common characteristics in terms of political context, economic features and capacity constraints of domestic resources.
The WHO Regional Office for Europe is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

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