Towards better health and well-being in Small Countries in the WHO European Region: the Montenegro statement

Eighth high-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative, 2–3 June 2022, Bečići (Budva), Montenegro

We, the Ministers and high-level delegates of the 11 Member States in the WHO European Region with populations of two million and less, met in person in Budva, Montenegro, on 2–3 June 2022 to attend the Eighth high-level meeting of the Small Countries Initiative (SCI): Towards better health and well-being in small countries of the WHO European Region. We meet at a time when the European Region is facing war in Ukraine and its enormous consequences; an ongoing pandemic; economic recession; and an ever-growing demand on national health systems. With great concern, we observe the impacts of these challenges on our people, prosperity, partnership, peace and our planet.

At this Eighth high-level meeting of the SCI, we agreed on the following key points:

1. We welcome the objectives, priority areas and work modalities of the Roadmap towards better health in small countries of the WHO European Region, 2022–2025 as a valuable instrument delivering the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health”, and agree to cooperate to ensure its implementation.

2. We recognize that dealing effectively with multiplying, complex and multidimensional threats requires a strengthened health governance approach to provide timely emergency preparedness and response, health security, service delivery, access to medicines, innovation in digital health, social protection and an optimal coordination between systems, services and functions. Recognizing the diversity of our countries, we agree to work together to strengthen leadership capacity and support each other in emergency response and recovery.

3. We underscore that health financing must be sufficient, stable and predictable, and equitably generated to meet health care needs. Small countries vary widely in their fiscal capacity to secure sustainable public financing for health. Where spending is insufficient, we will aim to increase it to levels commensurate with health care needs. Spending more on health from public budgets is also an important tool for protecting households from experiencing financial hardship. We agree to continue to design appropriate coverage policies to protect people from experiencing financial hardship and any unmet need for health care. We request the WHO Regional Office for Europe to work together with the SCI countries to analyse financial protection, coverage policy and budgetary space for health, facilitate evidence-informed policy dialogue, and support the SCI countries where needed.

4. We reaffirm the critical role our health and care workers have played during the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of strengthening our workforces to build more resilient health systems. We underscore the need to make health-workforce planning and supply capability a priority so that, by 2025, all small countries will have developed and implemented national strategies for human resources for health. The SCI Working Group on Human Resources for Health in Small Countries in the European Region will continue to take this process forward and target country support and action across the SCI network.

5. We recognize that health and tourism are deeply interconnected in a globalized world, and the reopening of travel and tourism is crucial for economic recovery, jobs and livelihoods in small countries. Cooperation and collaboration are required to ensure protection against health emergencies and global risks, adjust to transitions and shocks, manage and recover from adverse conditions, and better address change and uncertainty. We welcome and support the creation of a coalition of partners on health and tourism, jointly coordinated by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), to elaborate the evidence for policy measures and facilitate country dialogue. We invite the proposed coalition to report on its deliberations at the Ninth high-level meeting of the SCI.

6. We suggest increasing the SCI interaction with other subregional groups of countries and regional bodies among WHO regions to exchange innovation and experiences to achieve a healthier and more resilient future for current and future generations.