

Conclusions by the Chair

The Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being held its tenth Annual Conference (PAC) on 22 November 2013 in Helsinki, Finland. Ms. Susanna Huovinen, Minister of Health and Social Services of Finland, hosted and chaired the Conference. Ministers responsible for health and social affairs and other high representatives of Partners took part in the event.

In marking the tenth anniversary of the NDPHS, the Conference appraised the progress and achievements of the Partnership over the past decade, discussed the current and foreseen shared regional challenges to health and social well-being and, finally, set priorities for the coming years. More in-depth discussions were also held on two selected topics – the impact of the HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis on people and economies in the Northern Dimension countries as well as occupational accidents in these countries.

Two statements were adopted as detailed further down to reflect the NDPHS' views and commitment to further action.

Appraising the past to better address the future. 10 years of the Partnership

The PAC expressed its satisfaction with the progress made by the Partnership since it was established in Oslo in 2003. Health and social well-being has, over the past years, firmly established itself as an important component on the regional cooperation agenda, not least under the Northern Dimension Policy umbrella, and NDPHS efforts have vastly contributed to that end. During the decade that has elapsed the Partnership has evolved into a mature and yet a dynamic, flexible and responsive network benefitting from its committed Partner Countries and Organisations, governing structures, a broad pool of experts as well as the NDPHS Secretariat.

The PAC recalled a wide array of concrete and pragmatic activities were and are run by the Partnership ranging from high-level ministerial dialogue and policy shaping, to efforts to raise the profile of health and social well-being on the regional agenda, to project development and implementation as well as outreach and support to and engagement of interested actors operating in the Northern Dimension area. The Partnership's activities help address common problems shared by the societies in the region and contribute to the improvement of people's health and social well-being in a pragmatic way. The network is recognised as a useful source of knowledge and expertise by other actors in the region who approach the Partnership for cooperation and advice, and who benefit from the tools developed by the NDPHS, not least its Database and Project Pipeline. The NDPHS Strategy 2009-2013 played an instrumental role in strengthening and improving the pace of the Partnership's work and making it more focused.

The PAC discussed the outcomes of the recently completed five-year evaluation of the NDPHS, thanked the Evaluation Team for its successful work, and thanked Germany for chairing the group and for its support to the process. The PAC recognised there are areas and aspects where the NDPHS structures and efforts need to be strengthened and improved building on the work already done. The development and subsequent implementation of a new NDPHS Strategy and its Action Plan shall be used to that effect.

While expressing its satisfaction about the entry into force of the Agreement on the establishment of the NDPHS Secretariat, the PAC thanked the Host Country Sweden for its support and generosity and commended the Secretariat on the successful commencement of its operations. The Partner Countries that have not joined the Agreement yet have been encouraged to do so without delay. Finally, the PAC underlined the importance of ensuring financial stability of the Secretariat and pleaded that all contributions to the latter's annual budget be paid consistent with the principle of co-financing.

Health and social well-being on the regional agenda

The PAC underlined a unique role that the NDPHS performs as the linking agent in the region for cooperation in health and social well-being, helping bridge priorities and efforts related to policies and strategies, e.g., the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and the Russian Federation's Strategy for the Social and Economic Development of the Northwestern Federal District for the Period up to the Year 2020. To that end, the successful NDPHS Regional Conference: Preparing Health Initiatives for 2014-2020, held on the side-lines of the EUSBSR Annual Forum in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 12 November 2013, was noted with appreciation. The NDPHS' work in its capacity as the Coordinator of the Priority Area Health in the EUSBSR Action Plan is widely recognised and praised by stakeholders in the Region.

The PAC expressed its satisfaction with the upgrading of Health, including its social aspects, to a self-standing Priority Area in the EUSBSR Action Plan as revised in early 2013.

The PAC took note of the Joint statement from the third Ministerial meeting of the renewed Northern Dimension convened in Brussels, Belgium, on 18 February 2013, hosted by the European Union. It appreciated the support expressed to the NDPHS by the Foreign Ministers, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission. The PAC also appreciated their recognition of the Partnership's achievements in fostering regional cooperation in the health and social welfare sector.

The PAC took note of the Final statement from the third Northern Dimension Parliamentary Forum held in Arkhangelsk, the Russian Federation, on 11 - 12 November 2013. It appreciated the participating parliamentarians' resolve to further develop and strengthen the Northern Dimension and its partnerships.

While appreciating the inclusion of health and social well-being among the common priorities for the EU-Russia cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, the PAC reemphasised its view that health and the social dimension should be given a status adequate to their role and importance for the region's societies and economies, having also in mind the character of this sector as well as the volume and intensity of regional cooperation in this field.

For better health and social well-being of people: Setting priorities for the future regional cooperation and providing adequate resources for their achievement

While taking into consideration the appraisal of the NDPHS' progress and achievements during the past years, as well as the recommendations from the recent evaluation of the Partnership, the PAC discussed the process and aspects to be taken into account while developing the new NDPHS Strategy for the period 2014-2020. To that end, it noted that during its recently held meeting the NDPHS CSR established the Strategy Working Group and tasked it to draft a new strategy.

The PAC discussed the future direction and political priorities of the Partnership to be followed during the development of the NDPHS Strategy 2014-2020. It is important that the new strategy and its action plan properly take stock of the relevant priorities and efforts related to existing policies and strategies in the Northern Dimension area, e.g., the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the Russian Federation's Strategy for the Social and Economic Development of the Northwestern Federal District for the Period up to the Year 2020 and Health 2020.

The PAC agreed that the following areas, where serious challenges and opportunities exist, shall be prioritised in the NDPHS Strategy 2014-2020:

- Antimicrobial resistance;
- HIV/AIDS and associated infections;
- Non-communicable diseases;
- Alcohol and substance abuse;
- Occupational safety and health and well-being at work;
- Primary health care.

When developing the new strategy and its action plan, the Partnership will identify and agree on specific topics to be dealt with within the above priorities including, but not limited to relevant cross-cutting issues.

The PAC reiterated that health and social issues needed to be better balanced within the Partnership's work. Further, the PAC stressed that the Partnership should focus only on issues and actions where it can bring regional added value, in particular taking into account the work done by the national governments, the WHO and the EU.

The PAC instructed the CSR to make the Partnership's work, and foremost the activities of the future NDPHS Expert Groups, better focused on achieving the specific, measurable and time-targeted objectives that will be included in the NDPHS Strategy 2014-2020 and its Action Plan. The expert-level structures of the Partnership need to be reshaped where necessary to ensure that they are well focused on the NDPHS Strategy 2014-2020 and its Action Plan so that the Partnership may further strengthen its role as a useful platform for concerted action in the health and social well-being sector by focusing on the selected priority actions addressing the identified challenges and promoting positive developments.

The PAC noted that efforts should continue to have health and social well-being visibly exposed among the funding priorities of relevant financial instruments during the financial period 2014-2020. In appreciating the financial contributions made to the Partnership in the past, the PAC agreed that further efforts are warranted to mobilize a variety of available funding sources and to have a range of pragmatic activities implemented within the Partnership, or with the Partnership's facilitation, that address regional challenges and have a measurable impact. To that end, the PAC took note with appreciation of the Joint Statement adopted by the NDPHS Partner Countries and the European Commission during the Conference. The Statement, *inter alia*, calls on the NDPHS Partners to consider increasing their commitment and encourages them to take efforts to mobilize financing from relevant sources for joint actions within the framework of the NDPHS.

Impact of the HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis on people and economies of the Northern Dimension Countries – status quo and the way forward

While commending the NDPHS Expert Group on HIV/AIDS and Associated Infections for its successful work, the PAC discussed the outcome of the PAC side-event, the conference "Combating HIV and TB through a joint regional action," which was organised by the NDPHS the day before the Partnership Annual Conference. The PAC shared the participants' view that the increasing number of HIV and TB co-infections, multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR TB) and extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR TB) cases, and other associated infections pose a serious challenge and threat to public health in the Northern Dimension area.

The PAC agreed it is imperative that the governments in the region recognise their responsibilities and renew their commitment to developing and supporting effective country and regional responses to further improve the current HIV and tuberculosis situations and reduce their impacts on human lives, economy and society. A powerful, multisectoral response involving the

development of new working approaches is necessary to meet the worrying situation in the Northern Dimension area and its neighbouring countries. The response should include wide and determined actions.

Having in mind the above, the PAC adopted the NDPHS Statement “Impact of the HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis on people and economies of the Northern Dimension Countries – status quo and the way forward” pledging the NDPHS Partners will be engaged in:

- Exchanging information and experiences in the work against HIV, AIDS and TB and HIV/TB co-infection;
- Supporting multilateral actions combining primary health and social care, improving early diagnostics, treatment, psychological care and access to services;
- Supporting NGOs working with vulnerable populations;
- Further developing national efforts, joint platforms and new regional approaches;
- Supporting the NDPHS in facilitating cooperation through joint international activities;
- Strengthening prevention, control and reduction of harmful consequences of HIV, AIDS and TB as well as other associated infections.

Injury at work – a hidden tragedy

While expressing appreciation to the NDPHS Task Group on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH TG) for its successful work, which forms a part of the implementation of the NDPHS “Health at Work Strategy,” the PAC considered the presentation “Injury at work – a hidden tragedy,” delivered by the Task Group Chair, which focused on the issue of underreporting of accidents at work.

The PAC noted the conclusion of an assessment done by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that there is a severe underreporting of accidents at work as only a fraction of work related accidents are registered in some countries. It further noted that the OSH TG had preliminarily reviewed the reliability of the reporting of occupational accidents in the NDPHS Member States and concluded likewise that some countries are facing a challenge of severe underreporting.

Having held a discussion on the presented issue, the PAC took note that:

- There is a need to ensure comparability between the NDPHS Partner Countries with regard to occupational accidents statistics;
- Underreporting of occupational accidents constitutes a challenge for the awareness of the scope of the problem of poor working conditions;
- Low safety and health awareness leads to increased human suffering as the necessary resources and attention are not channelled to the problem at enterprise and governmental levels;
- The necessary funding and resources for OSH research, policy development, training and information, occupational health services and inspection activities are currently withheld or have been decreased.

Further, the PAC emphasised the need for actions by the NDPHS Partner Countries:

- Partner Countries should review the coverage and efficiency of their occupational accidents recording systems with a view toward providing realistic data for planning and management of OSH prevention policies;
- Partner Countries are encouraged to proceed with the ratification of the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention 187. They are also encouraged to proceed in applying the ILO Protocol to Conventions 155 related to systems for notification and recording of accidents. To that end, it was noted that the OSH TG can provide support through advice and consultations.

Further, the PAC affirmed the need for the OSH TG – in collaboration with the Baltic Sea Network on Occupational Health and Safety – to elaborate on the recording and notification systems of occupational accidents in the NDPHS Partner Countries, with the objective of presenting improved methods for recording and prevention of occupational accidents and reporting back in connection with the next Partnership Annual Conference. The occupational health services may provide a collaborative partner in raising awareness and advising on the prevention of occupational accidents.

Finally, the PAC called attention to the fact that human life and health at work need to be protected by efficient occupational safety and health systems. Safety and health at work improves competitiveness and productivity while maintaining a motivated work force, improvements which are an essential precondition for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Final provisions

The PAC thanked Finland for successfully chairing the Partnership during its two-year term, as well as for the excellent hosting of the PAC event and the “Combating HIV and TB through a joint regional action” Conference.

The PAC expressed its appreciation to the NDPHS Secretariat for its excellent work and support to the Partnership during the Finnish Chairmanship.

The PAC elected Germany as the Partnership Chair and Estonia as the Co-Chair for the next two years.

The PAC accepted with appreciation Russia’s offer to host the Partnership Annual Conference at the senior representatives level in 2014 and decided to hold the next ministerial-level Partnership Annual Conference in 2015.

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