

2021

A year in review



NDPHS

Northern Dimension
Partnership in Public Health
and Social Well-being

PROGRESS REPORT

List of abbreviations

AgeFLAG Roadmap to improve health and wellbeing of the ageing population in the Baltic Sea Region (project)

EG NDPHS Expert Group:

AMR EG Expert Group on Antimicrobial Resistance

ASA EG Expert Group on Alcohol and Substance Use

HIV, TB & AI EG Expert Group on HIV, Tuberculosis and Associated Infections

NCD EG Expert Group on Non-Communicable Diseases

OSH EG Expert Group on Occupational Safety and Health

PHC EG Expert Group on Primary Health Care

PH EG Expert Group on Prison Health

EUSBSR European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

HiAP Health in All Policies

MITTENS More Impact Together to Empower Northern Stakeholders (project)

ND Northern Dimension

NDPHS Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being

PAC NDPHS Partnership Annual Conference

WHO World Health Organization

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Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 was a successful year for the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS). We had learned how to sustain and even intensify work in a remote mode and a new, EU co-financed project “More Impact Together to Empower Northern Stakeholders” (MITTENS) – largest in the NDPHS history – began with great enthusiasm from the network members.

The shocking events of 2022 that have shaken the world, affected this Partnership as well. As a response to the Russia’s unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine, all Northern Dimension activities involving Russia have been suspended from 8 March 2022. This also meant the suspension of MITTENS project, around which the practical work of the Partnership was planned to a large extent in 2021-2023.

Nevertheless, it is still worth looking back at 2021 and appreciating the accomplishments and the potential of this Partnership to achieve practical results that matter. The lessons that we learned, the working methods we adopted and the results that we accomplished in 2021 remain important for the growth of our Partnership in 2022 and beyond.

This document describes the Partnership’s overall progress in 2021, covering accomplishments and reflecting on challenges. Whenever the results of work done in 2021 have been affected by the events of 2022, it is acknowledged for the sake of clarity and transparency.

2. Accomplishments

In many ways, 2021 brought success to the Partnership. We continued advocating for health, learning from each other, and sharing knowledge. Simultaneously, we worked on elevating our communications and increasing the Partnership's visibility.

2.1. Sharing knowledge and learning from each other

Our Partnership is a forum for sharing and producing knowledge and for learning from each other. In 2021, we continued facilitating expert level exchanges of experiences and expertise, while making efforts to commence studies and research that our Partners find useful.

In 2021, the Partnership continued meeting within its existing constellations. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the regular Expert Group and governing bodies' meetings took place primarily online. While online communication allowed the Partnership's work to continue smoothly, there was an aspiration for more face-to-face meetings among the network members – particularly in terms of building interpersonal connections and engaging in development work. Therefore, while continuing to utilize remote communication whenever possible, the Partnership is looking forward to a partial return to face-to-face meetings and workshops in 2022.

All the Expert Groups met at least once in 2021. The Prison Health Expert Group that had been dormant since 2019 managed to meet once online on 18 February 2021 with assistance from the NDPHS Secretariat and the WHO/Europe. Despite not having met in 16 months, the Expert Group members expressed their interest in continuing the joint work and the importance of the topic. The efforts to find a new chair for the group are ongoing.

The other Expert Groups were eager to start implementing the EU grant project MITTENS. Much of the EG work in 2021 was dedicated to the development of their own MITTENS activities – all aimed at increasing scientific knowledge on topics that the NDPHS Partners find useful. In the early stages of implementation, the Expert Groups tested new working methods to bring their projects forward. Some EGs, such as OSH EG and AMR EG, met online more frequently than before in unofficial settings to jointly discuss their projects. Others established their own Work Package Management Groups as ad hoc working groups within their EGs. In general, the MITTENS activities were initiated with vigour, albeit with some delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and time-consuming administrative procedures. Sadly, these activities have not been pursued as of March 2022, due to the suspension of the MITTENS project.

Amidst MITTENS implementation, the EGs have continued learning from each other through exchange of knowledge and experiences. Round-table discussions on current topics remained popular among the Expert Groups. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was a major topic for discussion. For example, the PHC EG group shared country updates on how the primary health care services were coping with the pandemic, and the HIV, TB & AI EG discussed the epidemiological situations with HIV, TB and hepatitis and the service accessibility in light of COVID-19.

More effort was also put into intentionally sharing the wealth of knowledge produced by the Expert Groups. For example, in Spring 2021, the NCD EG organized three seminars on the premature mortality from preventable causes in the Northern Dimension area, which attracted in total over 180 registered participants. The seminars received praise from the participants and shed light on major public health concerns in the Partner Countries, including tackling harmful use of alcohol, tobacco addition, obesity, and digital divide. The Partnership continues the efforts to disseminate its results more strategically in 2022 and beyond.

2.2. Health advocacy: connecting minds and caring for people

Health advocacy is at the heart of the NDPHS mission. We bring people together to promote and advocate for good health and wellbeing for all, throughout their lives. In 2021, we made good progress in connecting with new stakeholders, strengthening our ties with the existing ones, strengthening the Health in All Policies approach, and promoting active and healthy ageing.

2.2.1. Active and healthy ageing

Active and healthy ageing as a cross-cutting theme was prevalent in the Partnership's health advocacy efforts in 2021. With the project "AgeFLAG – Roadmap to improve health and wellbeing of the ageing population in the Baltic Sea Region" successfully ending in November 2021, the Partnership was ready to bring further its findings to advocate health policies that meet the needs of the region.

During the 15th Partnership Annual Conference held online on 25 November 2021, the AgeFLAG project and its outcomes were showcased to the NDPHS Partners. During the meeting, the health ministers and other high-level representatives discussed the measures aimed at promoting active and healthy ageing and praised the Partnership's work on the topic. The PAC also adopted the NDPHS Manifesto "Connecting Minds Across the Ages", which committed the NDPHS to supporting the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing.

In addition, a conference "Connecting Minds Across the Ages" held back-to-back with the 15th Partnership Annual Conference was dedicated to combating ageism, promoting intergenerational contacts and increasing inclusivity of older people in service design and policymaking – topics that arose from the national needs assessments held as a part of the AgeFLAG project in 2020. The online conference attracted high profile speakers from Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea Region and was attended by over 50 participants. The event and its panel discussions received praise from both the speakers and the viewers.

Through AgeFLAG and associated activities, the NDPHS has established its commitment to promoting active and healthy ageing and advocated for it at various international fora, including at the Northern Dimension Business Forum and the 71st session of the WHO European Regional Committee. The AgeFLAG project partners also submitted a coordinated response to the European Commission's public consultation on the EU Green Paper on Ageing. As a recognition of our work in the field of active and healthy ageing, the NDPHS is currently listed on UN Decade of Healthy Ageing – The Platform as an organisation to collaborate with to improve the lives of older people.

2.2.2. Health in All Policies

In 2021, the Partnership stepped up its efforts to promote Health in All Policies (HiAP) and the concept of economy of wellbeing. The new Action Plan for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, which came into force in 2022, designates Health in All Policies as one of the priorities for Policy Area (PA) “Health” along with active and healthy ageing, and stakeholder capacity building. As the Coordinator for PA Health, the NDPHS has utilised the EUSBSR to reach out to other policy sectors and to advocate Health in All Policies and promote the economy of wellbeing.

One of the most noteworthy activities related to promotion of HiAP in 2021 was the webinar “Indoor Environment Quality and Health” organised as a part of the 12th Annual Forum of the EUSBSR in collaboration with Policy Area “Energy”. The webinar successfully attracted participants across different sectors and prompted stimulating discussions on the evidence, best practices and lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis for how to utilise indoor environments in supporting good health and wellbeing.

2.2.3. Stakeholder engagement

Reaching out to people and actors who are impacted by and not yet well represented in our work is important for inclusivity and success of our actions. In 2021, we opened avenues for further collaboration with new actors while strengthening our ties to those whom we already collaborate with.

In addition to connecting with other Policy Areas within the EUSBSR, we initiated contact with civil society actors and local authorities. Most notably, we started the process of establishing a network of municipalities focused on exchanging knowledge and experiences in preventive work to reduce harm caused by alcohol and drugs among youth. For this purpose, the ASA EG reached out to and partnered with several municipalities and non-governmental organisations across Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea Region.

Simultaneously, we continued and strengthened cooperation with some of our partner organisations, most notably with the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe and International Labour Organisation. They have not only participated in the regular Expert Group and/or CSR meetings but have also actively engaged in the leadership of many Expert Groups and in the development of studies and research. For example, in 2021 WHO/Europe assisted in the development of methodology for PHC EG’s study on the best practices in remote health and social care services, and International Labour Organisation provided active support for the OSH EG’s research on updating the core competencies of OSH professionals in the changing world of work.

2.3. Telling the NDPHS story

In 2021 more human resources, expertise and time were put into communication, we accelerated our communication activities and expanded our communication channels. The most notable activities in 2021 were the introduction of a new visual identity, communication capacity building workshops among the network members, completion of a communication audit, and development of a communication strategy.

During the 15th Partnership Annual Conference, we inaugurated the new NDPHS visual identity. As a result of this, the NDPHS is now more visible and able to guarantee high quality visual content across online, print, and physical presentation. The new visuals have also enabled us to better tell the NDPHS story in a visual format: the threads of the new logo intertwine just as our Partners work together to create a strong Partnership.

We also initiated the development of a communication strategy to mobilise knowledge about our work, enhance cooperation within our network and support cross-sectoral collaboration. As a part of this development process, we analysed our communication and collaboration between network members, partners, and external stakeholders to identify our current strengths, while mapping and addressing the existing problems. Concurrently to the communication audit, we held two capacity building workshops for our network members to increase their capacity to tell the NDPHS story. Therefore, we took notable steps towards implementing more purposeful and goal-oriented communication that builds on our existing strengths.

3. Challenges and way ahead

The suspension of funding of the MITTENS project by the DG NEAR was an astonishing surprise. The Expert Groups and Secretariat have invested much time and effort to prepare the project application and most of the Partnership's activities in 2021-2023 were planned with MITTENS in mind. Discontinuation of activities has led to much disappointment among experts and partners who were eager to embark on the work that had been meticulously planned for a long time. There are also financial and contractual consequences that need to be mitigated. The MITTENS project was planned to fund a large majority of Expert Group activities until the end of 2023. The suspension and termination of the project has made their implementation impossible, as it leaves a deficit of funding of approximately 800.000 EUR for Expert Group activities and support of the Secretariat to these activities.

At the same time, there are challenges that are not new and have been known for a long time. One complaint that is not shared by every Expert Group, but nevertheless is voiced rather frequently, is the limited amount of time that experts are able to allocate for the NDPHS work. Sometimes it is only for participation in the meetings, but it would be valuable if experts were able to work together and exchange on issues of common interest in between face-to-face meetings, especially now that we have learned to connect using the remote working methods.

As instructed by the Partnership Annual Conference, we also need to become better at delivering practical results. This does not mean only project implementation – and it is understandable if after the bitter experience with MITTENS in some EGs the appetite for project implementation would not be so high right now. We shall also think about getting more practical value out of work that we do best – exchanges of information. The Expert Group members generally find the country updates useful and interesting – however, it should be considered how to make the wealth of information shared during the EG meetings more available for others, so that people outside the Expert Groups, and especially public health leaders in the countries, could have a better and more systematic access. By way of example, it could take a form of briefs disseminated to wider audience, containing the highlights of the information shared during the meeting or, if meeting has taken place online, some parts could be converted into a webinar.

And finally, as the rapidly changing world has shown, we must become more agile, while preserving the well-established and valued core of this Partnership. Flexibility of working structures, embracing new thematic topics for cooperation, ambition to assume the leadership role for health advocacy in the region, and ability of the whole Partnership to speak in one voice would be highly valued assets in these uncertain times.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE
LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER
CARING FOR PEOPLE

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