

2022

A year in review



NDPHS

Northern Dimension
Partnership in Public Health
and Social Well-being

PROGRESS REPORT

List of abbreviations

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

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

Table of contents

1.	OPENING REMARKS	4
2.	CHALLENGES	5
3.	ACCOMPLISHMENTS	5
4.	WAY FORWARD	9



In 2021, the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being looked towards 2022 with a great deal of anticipation. A prospect of resuming face to face meetings and starting the implementation of various new practical activities generously funded by the EU's grant under the MITTENS project was motivating and invigorating. The messages of the deteriorating security and political situation in the region towards the end of 2021 and in the beginning of 2022 were concerning but a full-scale war in the 21st century Europe was impossible to imagine.

But the war happened and is sending shockwaves around the globe. Our Partnership was deeply affected, too, as described further down in this report. 2022 was the most challenging year in the history of the Partnership. Suspended activities, terminated financing, and a sense of disappointment, since one of the aims of our work was to contribute to ensuring that no dividing lines are established in the North of Europe. Yet, deep dividing lines are established in Europe once again.

Despite the immense challenges, the year 2022 turned out to be a period of valuable opportunities and a fresh start. The commitment of all remaining Partners and experts reinvigorated the Partnership with enthusiasm. Additionally, the Partnership demonstrated maturity and self-awareness by confronting uncomfortable questions, not just about how to continue the work, but also about why it is important to continue. By addressing these questions, the Partnership has grown and evolved.

It turns out, 2022 marked the beginning of the next great chapter in the history of this Partnership, as it enters its third decade of operation.

2. Challenges

Following Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the three other Northern Dimension Partners – the EU, Iceland, and Norway – issued a joint statement on 8 March 2022, announcing suspension of all Northern Dimension activities involving Russia and Belarus. The statement was followed by a brief period of uncertainty regarding the modalities of continuing the Partnership's activities in the new circumstances, but the work was swiftly resumed from spring 2022 on all levels, in accordance with the statement. Nevertheless, the overall uncertainty about the future of the Northern Dimension policy and how it may impact the Partnership continues to linger, although it does not affect the everyday work of the Partnership.

One of the most tangible negative effects on our Partnership resulting from Russia's unprovoked aggression was the suspension and subsequent termination of the EU DG NEAR's Grant financed by the European Neighbourhood Instrument, which was supposed to fund a large proportion of the Partnership's activities in 2022 and 2023 through the MITTENS project.

The negative consequences of the termination were multifold. The most obvious was that all the various activities that had been carefully planned since 2020 or even earlier, had to be stopped mid-way, which meant not only wasted time and expertise, but also, understandably, disappointment and discouragement for all those involved in the work. There were also ethical challenges involved, since many of the terminated activities were targeting particularly vulnerable population groups, such as cancer patients, people with disabilities and mental disorders, small children, homeless people, and others. On top of that, the closure of the project still required a considerable amount of work by the Secretariat, to meet the demanding reporting requirements.

The above-mentioned challenges were sudden and unpredictable. However, as articulated eloquently by one of the Expert Groups, these challenges aggravated the operational symptoms that some of the Expert Groups have been struggling with for a longer time – such as passivity in between the meetings, mismatch between the Expert Group's objectives and the expertise represented in the group, as well as absence of operational funding. These are not new problems, but we need to find new ways to solve them.

Nevertheless, despite the challenges, the Partnership has been able to find the strength to endure the obstacles, find a fresh start and produce some good results, as described in the next chapter.

3. Accomplishments

3.1. Renewed commitment and fresh start

Following the events of 24 February 2022 and the statement of 8 March 2022 suspending all activities with Russia and Belarus, the NDPHS' governing bodies met several times to discuss the continuation of work under the new circumstances. It became evident that all other Partners are willing to continue the work and see the situation as an opportunity to have a fresh start and make the necessary changes in the Partnership's working methods to develop and grow further.

On 15 December 2022, the NDPHS adopted its new Strategy 2022-2025, which further confirms the commitment of the Partners to the Partnership despite the changed political circumstances regionally and globally. In fact, the new political reality is seen as an opportunity for this Partnership to become an even stronger regional leader, a strong alliance of the countries united by common values of promoting democracy and sustainable development in our region.

Furthermore, there has been a change or succession of leadership in several Expert Groups, which has also injected a fresh energy and new approaches to the work.

3.2. NDPHS events

Connecting minds for healthy lives remains one of the cornerstones of the NDPHS work. For a large part of 2022 meetings continued online due to travel restrictions imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but from summer 2022, face-to-face meetings were gradually re-introduced. At the same time, the flexibility and agility provided by the possibility of organising online meetings will be used also in the future and is a valuable skill and additional working method learned during the pandemic.

Out of seven NDPHS Expert Groups, three met regularly in 2022: the ASA EG held two face-to-face meetings, the HIV, TB & AI EG held two online meetings, and the OSH EG held three online and one face-to-face meeting (in addition to several more project preparation meetings). The remaining EGs – AMR, NCD, PHC and PH – did not meet, for various reasons, some directly related to the events of 2022, and some caused by systemic problems that existed already before. Nevertheless, these themes remained visible on the NDPHS agenda. Antimicrobial resistance was discussed during the 35th CSR meeting in Stockholm, and the NDPHS Secretariat as the interim ITA represented the PH EG in the WHO Health in Prisons Steering Group meeting in May. Discussion for possible continuation of the Potential Years of Life Lost study, previously run within NCD EG, was also initiated. Moreover, the PHC EG has resumed regular meetings from the beginning of 2023, and there are plans for organising AMR and PH EG meetings in 2023.

As usual, the meetings of the Expert Groups led to invigorating discussions. The feedback from participants is that the exchanges with fellow professionals are very helpful for their work nationally. The information obtained during these meetings gives the EG members more confidence to pursue new policy measures at home, as well as allows them to look at their own health systems with fresh eyes.

The Committee of Senior Representatives, after two years of seeing each other only online, met in Stockholm on 8-9 September 2022, with participants from Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden, EEAS, BEAC, IOM, WHO, as well as the NDPHS Secretariat and the NDPHS Expert Groups. The meeting discussed issues, such as the future of the Partnership, the new NDPHS Strategy and the pressing themes of antimicrobial resistance and mental health, as well as the NDPHS' role as Policy Area Coordinator for Health in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The Partners expressed their strong commitment to continue the collaboration within the Partnership, at the same time using the opportunity to review the work of the Partnership, including its political orientation, focus topics, as well as expanding the geographical collaboration to countries previously not covered, such as Ukraine.

3.3. Projects

The EU Grant ENI/2020/415-614 co-funding the project “More impact together to empower Northern stakeholders” (MITTENS), to be implemented by the NDPHS Secretariat as the Lead Partner in cooperation with the seven NDPHS Expert Groups in 2021-2023, aimed to strengthen the project management and communication capacity of the NDPHS Secretariat, as well as provided funding for implementation of concrete activities in public health fields prioritised by the NDPHS.

The funding was suspended in March 2022 and subsequently terminated by the EU in October 2022 due to the unprovoked and unjustified Russian military aggression against Ukraine. With the DG NEAR’s decision to terminate all planned and ongoing activities involving Russia, the project no longer fulfilled the formal requirements of the grant programme, requiring inclusion of one of the neighbouring non-EU/EEA countries. With the two thirds of the project left unimplemented due to the termination of the funding, the project did not manage to reach most of the outcomes envisaged. Few of the activities had had sufficient time to deliver concrete outcomes before their suspension and subsequent termination. However, some notable milestones were reached, including launching of a new visual identity for the NDPHS, partial commencement of the Art of Staying Healthy programme, and collection of data and initial analysis in the two studies in the field of HIV, TB and Associated Infections.

Another tangible outcome from the MITTENS project was a new project application developed by the OSH EG together with the NDPHS Secretariat during the second part of 2022, based on the OSH work package of the MITTENS project. To apply for the Interreg funding, a new project plan had to be developed with a new emphasis. The new project “Mental Health Matters” has been submitted to the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 and, if successful, will be implemented from autumn 2023 until 31 December 2025, aiming to improve the preparedness of OSH professionals as well as owners and managers of small-to-medium sized enterprises to deal with psychosocial risks at work.

Furthermore, in 2022 the NDPHS Secretariat has engaged as a project partner in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 project “Arts on Prescription” and participated in the development of the project application. The project duration is from 1 January 2023 until 31 December 2025. The primary focus of the project is to qualify local authorities and practitioners in organising, evaluating, and financing sustainable Arts on Prescription programmes. This is primarily done through the production of an online how-to guide for practitioners and by evaluating the costs and benefits of the programme. Among other tasks, the NDPHS Secretariat will promote the programme among policy makers and facilitate connections with other projects linking well-being and culture where the Secretariat has been involved, namely, Arts and Health and Culture for Health.

3.4. Coordination of Policy Area ‘Health’ in the EUSBSR

In 2022, the Partnership continued its long-term engagement as the Policy Area ‘Health’ Coordinator in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The year marked the commencement of the EU co-funded “PA Health Support 4” project, the fourth of its kind, funded through the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme. The project has been successful in providing the NDPHS with the necessary resources to coordinate PA Health of the EUSBSR effectively and efficiently and in

supporting the implementation of the PA Health actions in the EUSBSR Action Plan.

During the first year of implementation, PA Health made a breakthrough in its governance by adopting new Rules of Procedure for the PA Health Steering Group. The SG under its new rules met for the first time in November 2022 and endorsed the PA Health Work Plan 2022-2024. PA Health has gained strategic importance among the experts and policy makers represented in the NDPHS, thanks to the resources provided by the project to advocate the added value of the EUSBSR.

3.5. Bridging the silos and working with other sectors

As the Policy Area Coordinator for Health in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the NDPHS is well-placed to engage with other policy sectors to **promote the Health in All Policies and the Economy of Well-being approaches** through dialogues with other policy areas, as well as initiating projects, thematic events and knowledge exchange in topics related to health and well-being.

The NDPHS has already engaged in cross-sectoral work, through projects on culture and well-being, and has a close cooperation with the coordinator of the Policy Area Education in the EUSBSR, aiming to design joint activities. To that end, during 2022 a joint flagship project “Economy of Well-being of People” has been designed with the Policy Area Education and in 2023 submitted for funding to the Swedish Institute, aimed to establish a collaboration platform for advocating an inclusive growth and well-being agenda in all policies.

Furthermore, at the initiative of the ASA EG, **a new network of cooperation for municipalities in the Baltic Sea Region** was established in Oslo on 9 November 2022, for collaboration on preventive work to reduce the harm caused by alcohol and drugs. Around 30 representatives from the municipalities of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and Norway, together with the representatives of the Expert Group, gathered in Oslo to present to each other how they work, challenges they face, and to discuss how to cooperate transnationally to achieve more effective results in their work. The network is aiming to become a platform for sharing knowledge, learning from each other, and building capacity in strengthening community actions in health promotion and alcohol prevention.

3.6. Communicating the NDPHS work

In 2022 scaling up of communication activities continued to be an important priority of the NDPHS. The **new visual identity together with the new slogan** (“Connecting minds for healthy lives”) and **claims** (“Sharing. Learning. Caring”) have been promoted. A brand new NDPHS website was developed in 2022, and continues to be updated in 2023, in line with the feedback received from the users. A new communication product, the **NDPHS podcast “Tune in Health”** was piloted with four episodes developed in 2022:

- “Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis: People living with HIV/AIDS” (developed in close collaboration with the HIV, TB and AI EG).
- “How can the Economy of Well-being lead to resilient communities and societies?”.
- “Ageism and different narratives of Ageing”.
- “Changing behaviours in Alcohol consumption in North Europe”.

4. Way forward

Change is the underlying theme of the new NDPHS Strategy. From 2023, the Partnership will conduct a thorough review of the challenges and opportunities, identify solutions that are adapted to the needs of the stakeholders, and prepare a roadmap for change. It is important to devote sufficient time for introspection, to ensure that there is no rush, and the process of re-evaluation and internal reflection is done in a holistic, meaningful, and inclusive way.

It is stressed once again that the process of reflection is not an indication of a diminished commitment to this Partnership, it is in fact the opposite – because the stakeholders have trust in this Partnership, they want to reach for what they believe is the full potential of this collaboration.

The 16th Partnership Annual Conference, to be held at the ministerial level on 30 November 2023 in Stockholm, will provide the political guidance and outline the overall vision and modalities of the future collaboration.

We strive to become more practical and agile in our work, and for the whole Partnership working as one team, united by a strong sense of ownership and speaking in one voice. More inclusivity, closer collaboration with the existing and reaching out to new partners will make this alliance stronger than ever before. The vision of this Partnership leading the way to sustainable and inclusive societies with equal opportunities for good health and well-being for all throughout the life course is within reach.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE
LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER
CARING FOR PEOPLE

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