

74th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, 29th-31st October 2024, Copenhagen, Denmark

Session on Governance and leadership of the WHO Region – Wednesday 30 October, 14:00-15:15

Joint Statement by Non-State Actors

As our healthcare systems face growing challenges, from rising health inequalities and access barriers to emerging public health threats, the need for inclusive health governance is more urgent than ever. Participatory approaches ensure that those directly affected by health policies help inform and shape decisions. Meaningful and systematic engagement fosters transparency and public trust not only in healthcare systems, but also in policy-making and in our collective ability to respond effectively to people’s needs.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are a key pillar of open, democratic societies. In healthcare systems, CSOs bring to the public debate the voices of patients, carers, professionals, experts, people with lived experience of health conditions, and many others. This helps bridge the gap between policy making and what truly matters to citizens. However, shrinking civic spaces have confined civil society organisations to a narrowing advocacy role, with advocacy campaign outcomes as the primary measure of “impact”. By contrast, in May 2024, the World Health Assembly Resolution on social participation acknowledged that we, NSAs, can and should be much more – we can be active participants in decision making, true and equal partners to policy-makers. By approving the Resolution, WHO Member States have committed to facilitating this critical societal role.

The European Patients' Forum, the European Public Health Alliance, and the co-signatories of this statement express our strong support for the NSA Engagement Plan presented at this Regional Committee session. We welcome the Plan’s focus on fostering active and open dialogue, formalising structured mechanisms for collaboration with NSAs, and leveraging NSA expertise to support WHO Europe’s work at all levels.

The Plan brings together established, already tested and implemented workstreams with ambitious future goals, demonstrating the WHO Regional Office’s commitment to civil society engagement and collaboration. The very process of developing this Engagement Plan exemplifies this commitment. NSAs were heard, our asks were answered, and our contribution integrated. The idea for a regional NSA engagement plan began during an NSA dedicated session at the last Regional Committee meeting in Astana, and was followed up promptly and collaboratively. This is a model of what civil society organisations have continuously advocated for across Europe and the world: early engagement, co-creation, and respectful dialogue.

On behalf of the signatories, we stress the importance of anchoring the NSA engagement plan in the values and principles of the World Health Assembly resolution on social participation adopted earlier this year, initiated by Slovenia and Thailand, and supported by many countries in our Region.

To secure the long-term sustainability of this Plan, we would like to propose, as a first step, collaborating on the development of a monitoring framework with clearly defined short-term outcomes and longer-term targets. EPF is in the process of developing a first-of-its-kind Barometer of Patient Organisations' involvement, whose methodology could contribute to this framework. We believe that monitoring and measurement can help identify short and medium-term priorities, better understand potential roadblocks and solutions, and highlight best practices.

We call on WHO regional and country offices as well as Member States to promote the NSA Engagement Plan as a catalyst for implementing the Social Participation Resolution and advancing national strategies for meaningful, institutionalised civil society engagement.

As we move forward with implementing this strategy however, we call on Member States and the WHO to recognise and help address ongoing political and operational challenges to the sustainability of civil society organisations. We urge Member States to allocate budgets for sustaining this essential dialogue and clarify how enhanced consultative processes can be supported by reliable and transparent funding.

We also call on the WHO to help contribute to the sustainability of NSAs through joint work and fundraising, through funding frameworks at all relevant levels.

We recognise and praise the value of this NSA engagement plan and look forward to working with WHO to translate it into concrete actions. We express the signatories' commitment to making it a tool for bringing more and diverse voices into health policy, towards better health outcomes for all, and more equitable and resilient health systems.

Signatories:

1. EUROCAM
2. European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians
3. European Forum of National Nursing and Midwifery Associations
4. European Patients' Forum
5. European Public Health Alliance
6. International Diabetes Federation Europe
7. International Federation of Medical Students' Associations
8. International Society of Physical and Rehabilitation medicine
9. International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth
10. Movendi International
11. Women in Global Health
12. World Federation of Hemophilia

