

# Health as a driver and beneficiary of well-being economies

## Briefing note



## Contents

About the WHO European Regional High-level Forum on health in the well-being economy	1
Aim of the Forum	1
Key themes	1
Forum participants	1
Intended impact of the Forum	1
Background and context	2
Pressing challenges exacerbating pre-existing challenges	2
The emergence of well-being economies	2
Health and welfare systems are under strain and health inequalities are widening	4
Health as a driver and beneficiary of well-being economies	5
Unlocking investments today for healthy, fairer, prosperous societies	6
Protecting trust and social cohesion	8
Conclusions	9
Further reading	9

The WHO European Well-being Economy Initiative is led by the WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, based in Venice, Italy

This document was produced as a companion product for the WHO European Regional High-level Forum on health in the well-being economy, held in Copenhagen, 1-2 March 2023. The briefing note draws out how health can be a driver and beneficiary of well-being economies. It provides a short, accessible introduction to the themes of the Forum, with a focus on how the health sector is driving and benefiting from well-being economy investments and policies.

© World Health Organization 2023

Some rights reserved. This work is available under the CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO license

## About the WHO European Regional High-level Forum on health in the well-being economy

### Aim of the Forum

The high-level event showed how countries are shifting investment, spending and resources to promote healthy, fairer and prosperous societies through a well-being economy approach – to inspire and galvanize action.

### Key themes

The Forum built on evidence, practical examples and country experiences of:

1. the importance of putting well-being at the centre to tackle the big challenges of today, such as cost-of-living increases, demand on health and social care systems, youth exclusion, risk of disinvestments in health and health determinants, and widening social fractures;
2. increased concern that markets alone cannot solve these challenges and the need for the economy to work for both people and the planet – not only for profit and corporations;
3. unlocking investments and policies to enable healthier, fairer and more prosperous societies for the next generation; and
4. the value of a healthy population and the health sector in achieving broad national and local resilience and recovery.

### Forum participants

High-level representatives from ministries of health, finance and economy, together with government advisers working on recovery, resilience and sustainable development policies, public health policy-makers, and representatives from financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations and European Union (EU) agencies.

### Intended impact of the Forum

Specific goals of the Forum were to:

1. **raise the visibility and increase awareness** of progress towards and concrete solutions for implementing well-being economies, in particular the role of health in the well-being economy;
2. **build common ground** between the health, economy, finance and development sectors and **set an agenda** to advance health in the well-being economy;
3. **establish a commitment** to deliver the following key outcomes of the Forum:
  - o a country policy initiative to provide Member States with the know-how, investment cases, and modelling of the return on investment in building economies of well-being; and
  - o a regular forum between ministries of health, finance and economic development to assess progress, overcome barriers, and set the agenda for how the health sector can serve as a driver, ally and co-creator in the shift towards economies of well-being that deliver better health for all.

The event took forward the work of the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development, including integrating health considerations within economic and business frameworks. The work around health in the well-being economy is essential to drive forward key concepts of the European Programme of Work (2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health”) (EPW) – leaving no one behind and empowering health leaders. It is also an important way of linking and delivering two pillars of the Global Programme of Work – 1 billion more people enjoying better health and well-being and 1 billion more people benefiting from universal health coverage (UHC).

This paper sets the scene for key stakeholders. It sits alongside a background paper containing evidence, case studies and a wide range of potential actions for stakeholders to embed health in the well-being economy.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the underlying evidence relevant to this summary briefing can be found in the background paper, and additional important resources are listed at the end of this paper in the [Further reading](#) section.

## Background and context

### Pressing challenges exacerbating pre-existing challenges

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic led to a decline in life expectancy across most of the WHO European Region between 2019 and 2021, widened health inequalities and unprecedented pressures on health systems. This has been compounded by increases in the cost of living, driving further risks to health, such as fuel and food insecurity and climate change (for example, heatwaves caused at least 15 000 deaths across the Region in 2022). Concerns are growing over civic unrest and the erosion of democracy, decreasing trust in institutions, the ability of the economy to recover and be resilient to shocks, and the need to protect national solidarity. These point to a need to rebuild socially divided societies.

### The emergence of well-being economies

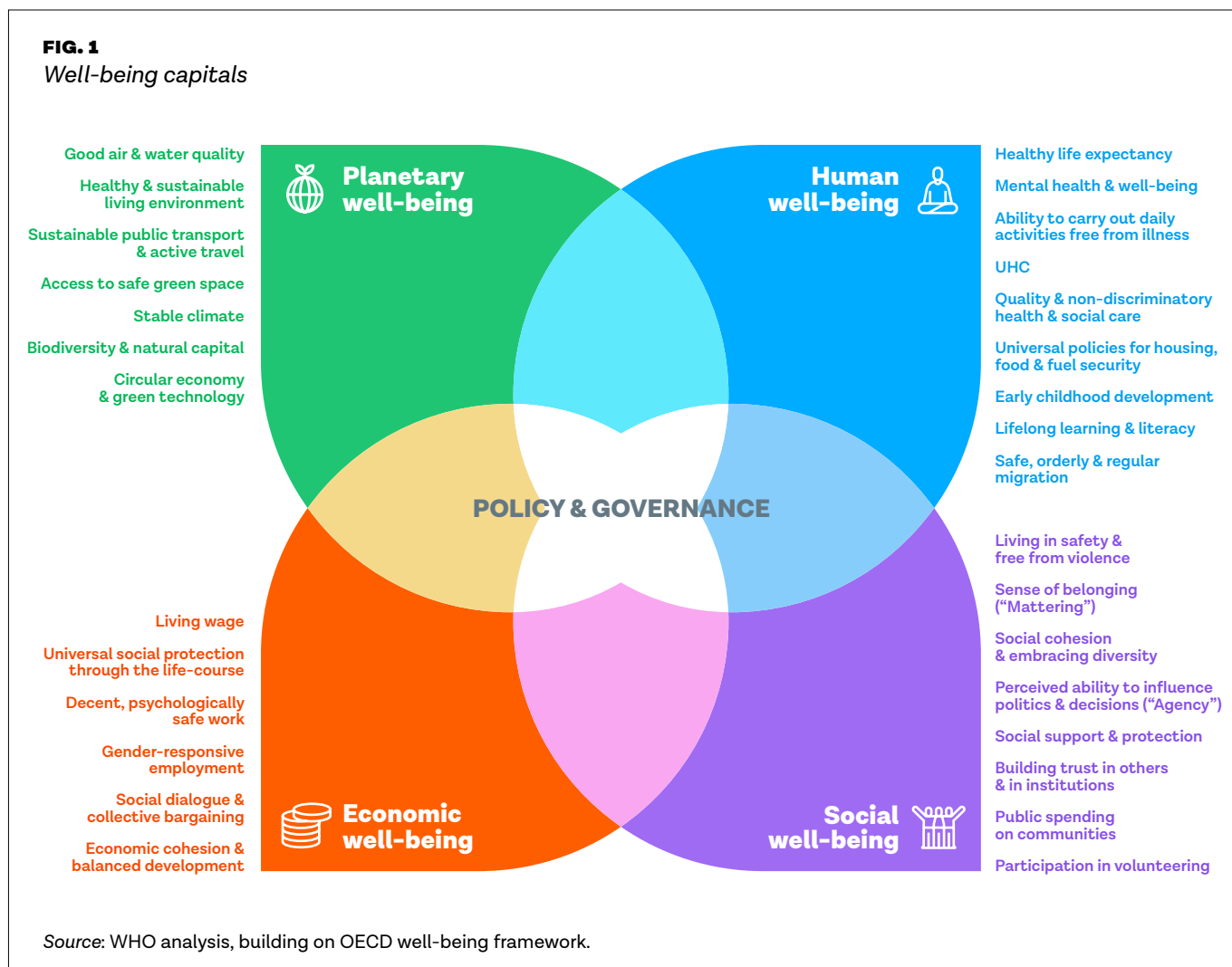
Countries are already adopting new approaches to develop well-being economies: economies that deliver in the interest of better lives, health and prosperity for people of all genders and ages, today and for the next generations.

Human, social, planetary and economic well-being are the well-being “capitals” that well-being economies invest in and protect (Fig. 1) – important assets, such as trust, social cohesion, participation, our environment and high-quality employment, which are crucial for developing healthy, fairer and prosperous societies in which people can thrive. Mutually reinforcing linkages also exist **between** these dimensions. Developing these domains of well-being is key to promoting improvements in health and health equity, while ensuring the resilience of health systems, as well as wider sustainable and inclusive development.

1 Health in the well-being economy. Background paper: working together to achieve healthy, fairer, prosperous societies across the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/366228>).

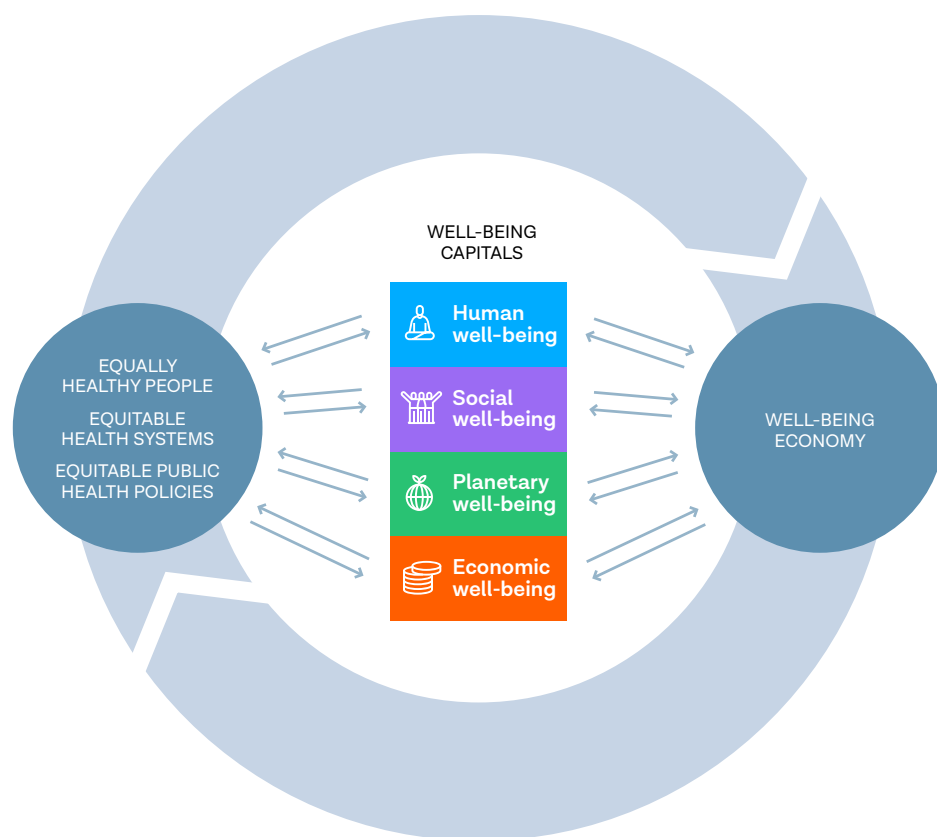
A well-being economy approach involves governing in the interests of all people's well-being, by:

- incentivizing public, nongovernmental and private institutions to generate well-being as part of their core business;
- prioritizing, measuring and reporting on the impact of investments, policies, services and innovations to increase human, social, planetary and economic well-being equitably;
- involving diverse sectors and stakeholders as partners in developing well-being economies, including local, regional, national and international partners; and
- using a well-being lens in anticipating and addressing social, environmental, economic and technological trends to ensure well-being for all, today and in the future.



Healthier societies and well-being economies are interconnected agendas. A well-being economy promotes health and health equity by building these capitals, contributing to reducing pressures on health services. Similarly, the health of populations and the health sector make key contributions to the development of well-being economies by developing these capitals and through partnerships to tackle significant challenges. Health and equity make key contributions to economic prosperity. Health is thus a **driver** and **beneficiary** of well-being economies (Fig. 2). Now is the time for shared action across the health, finance and economic development sectors in pursuing these goals.

**FIG. 2**  
 Health as a driver and beneficiary of well-being economies



## Health and welfare systems are under strain and health inequalities are widening

Recent crises have led to significant pressures on health systems due to a greater burden of mental ill health, unmet need among those with long-term conditions, and decreases in immunization rates, among other reasons. In this context, growing waiting lists, difficulties in access to essential medicines, and workforce pressures further threaten the delivery of quality health care. These exacerbate pre-existing issues, including:

- ageing societies – by 2050, those aged 65 years and over are expected to make up one quarter of the population in the WHO European Region;
- gender inequalities – among several pressing issues around gender equity in the workforce, the gender pay gap is key; this is calculated to be 20% in the health and care sector, compared with 12% in other sectors. Additionally, a higher proportion of women than men act as informal carers, who carry out the majority of long-term care in Europe.

Many countries in the Region had insufficient numbers of health and care workers prior to COVID-19; following the pandemic, the resulting pressures on this workforce have led to the risk that existing shortages will be amplified yet further. It has become increasingly clear that siloed solutions cannot deliver health and well-being sustainably.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe report, *Transforming the health and social equity landscape: promoting socially just and inclusive growth to improve resilience, solidarity and peace*,<sup>2</sup> has shown that recent crises have transformed the health equity landscape, while policy responses have not been sufficient to address vulnerabilities. Inequities threaten solidarity, peace and social justice, and health and welfare systems are under severe strain to cope with the effects of people living insecure lives.

<sup>2</sup> Transforming the health and social equity landscape: promoting socially just and inclusive growth to improve resilience, solidarity and peace. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/370945>).

Examples of downward trends in well-being to date include:

- people living on low incomes now being three times more likely to report low levels of well-being compared with those on high incomes – a gap that has widened by 50% since the pandemic;
- poverty increasing by 5% in the EU and significantly more in some central Asian countries;
- disadvantaged areas having on average 20% fewer doctors in proportion to their population, compared with the national average;
- 64% of people aged 18–34 years having a low WHO-5 score<sup>3</sup> (2021 data) and, therefore, considered at risk of depression; and
- an additional 14 per 1000 people with unmet need for health care in a direct comparison of before and after the pandemic.

These deepening inequities are avoidable and threaten the development of cohesive societies. Recognition is growing of the need to shape economic models and markets to deliver well-being. Ensuring resilience requires a wide range of actions, including:

- safeguarding solidarity and social cohesion by investing in UHC, the health and care workforce, One Health, and healthy public policies (for example, decent working conditions);
- investing in health emergency preparedness and response systems as an insurance policy against health threats, to protect health, economies and societies;
- modernizing and future-proofing health and welfare systems;
- shifting to fairer economic development approaches that focus on delivering inclusion and sustainability; and
- emphasizing reducing economic and social insecurity by investing in new employment, income and social protection models and policies that deliver well-being.

### How the Forum addressed these challenges

Session 2 outlined the political imperatives for shifting to well-being economies and showcased how countries are shaping the economy to deliver healthier, fairer and more prosperous societies.

## Health as a driver and beneficiary of well-being economies

UHC – all people having “access to the full range of quality health services they need, when and where they need them, and without financial hardship” (the widely accepted WHO definition) – is a vital component of a well-being economy.

The health sector is a key economic sector with strong return on investment. For example, in 2020 health and social work accounted for on average 10% of employment in the WHO European Region (although data are not available for all countries).

It is one of the most resilient sectors during economic recessions, with a higher-than-average multiplier effect. The health sector can make significant contributions to well-being economies, for example by:

- prioritizing primary care, community development and integration with other services, such as employment services, playing a key role in developing social capital, and addressing the determinants of health at individual level;

<sup>3</sup> The WHO-5 Well-being Index is a commonly used tool to assess well-being through five questions that aim to establish how the respondent has felt over the prior 2 weeks.

- developing environmentally sustainable health care facilities and services, such as green hospitals;
- mitigating financial hardship on households by limiting the use of out-of-pocket (OOP) payments to finance health care and ensuring those households most at risk of financial hardship are exempt from OOP payments; and
- partnering with other sectors to tackle significant challenges that cannot be solved by any single sector – such as addressing human, animal and environmental health in an integrated manner (One Health approach, European Environment and Health Process (EHP)), along with the mental health and inclusion of young people.

#### How the Forum addressed these challenges

Session 4 considered how health systems can contribute to a well-being economy.

Parallel sessions 5A, 5B and 5C considered key issues, such as gender equality and the health and care workforce, healthy environments and how to create healthy, caring economies and societies.

## Unlocking investments today for healthy, fairer, prosperous societies

Improving health today, while also tackling longer term societal challenges is vital to achieving inclusive and sustainable development; it is also essential for the resilience of health systems and for developing prosperous societies. For example, reducing inequities in life expectancy between social groups by 50% could lead to benefits of 0.3–4.3% of GDP.

The recent crises have shown that efforts to protect and improve health and well-being are not costs, but are core investments in producing peace and security, as well as resilient people, economies and societies. This includes significant returns on investment and multiplier effects from investing in health and public health. Health, public health goods and health systems are the cornerstones of well-being. Public health policies are those that create the conditions for healthy lives for all, and public health goods are those essential services or products that people need to thrive. Examples of these are shown in Fig. 3.

**FIG. 3**

*The conditions for healthy lives for all*



Source: adapted from the work of the WHO Health Equity Status Report Initiative (HESRI).



Yet, despite the tremendous costs of health issues for society, health systems, public health goods and policies – as well as the distribution of health outcomes – are not systematically or concretely included in mainstream investment priorities, frameworks and tools.

During the pandemic, 600 000 excess deaths in the WHO European Region were attributable to low human development and health system investment. Unlocking investment into health and well-being requires relevant indicators around well-being domains, along with these essential health and public health policies, goods and services to be incorporated into economic models and decision-making. Governments, private investors, central banks and international financial institutions have key roles to play in enabling these investments.

The High-level Forum presented a range of mechanisms that countries and partners are using to shift investment towards well-being economies and to create healthy, resilient and fairer societies.

These include:

- laws and regulations, such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales;
- investment frameworks, for example those that take into account the environmental, social and governance (ESG) impact of investments or the social return on investment and, specifically, the considerable economic and social benefits of health systems;
- tax and fiscal measures, such as those used to promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- innovative instruments, including social impact bonds and debt swaps;
- budgeting approaches, such as well-being and gender budgeting;
- political bodies, including dedicated cross-party committees, steering groups and councils, and defining ministries' roles in shaping well-being economies (e.g. the Prime Minister's Office in Iceland);
- incentive mechanisms for business practices that improve health and equity;
- innovation – both technological and service innovation, such as the integration of health services with services to meet people's wider social and economic needs;
- public consultations and dialogues, for example public engagement on the cost of living (e.g. in Wales);
- behavioural and cultural insights, and lived experience methods; and
- well-being indicator frameworks and surveys, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) well-being framework.

### **How the Forum addressed these challenges**

Session 3 – the Well-being Economy Knowledge Marketplace – offered the opportunity to discover tools and methods that are being used to shift investment, spending and resources into well-being.

Session 6 considered the response to increases in the cost of living, and how well-being can be a guide to frame the response.

Session 7 provided a chance to hear from Professor Mario Monti, Chair of the recent Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development that had a strong focus on healing social fractures as well as unlocking the investments needed for health and sustainable development.

## Protecting trust and social cohesion

Trust in others, participation and social cohesion make significant contributions to healthy, fair and prosperous societies. Trust in institutions is key to implementing successful, healthy public policies, and can improve democratic participation. Trust in others is significantly associated with self-rated health.

Deepening and exacerbated health inequities – owing to recent crises – threaten social cohesion and trust, creating the risk of increasing tensions between social groups and aggravating fractures in society. During the cost-of-living crisis, when the rate of inflation is putting pressure on many households and businesses across much of the WHO European Region, trust in institutions may suffer. This is particularly the case if people feel they do not benefit from government policies and investments, as this can create a sense that they do not matter, further undermining this trust. With 84% of Europeans believing that inequality in incomes was too high before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the current situation presents a major risk. In EU countries, certain trends have been seen, including:

- a widening gap in trust in others, with those earning low incomes reporting 40% lower trust in others than those on high incomes;
- trust in governments decreasing as a result of the pandemic; and
- people living in rural areas having lower levels of trust in institutions compared with city residents, in part driven by local demographic, labour market and education issues, alongside infrastructure challenges.

The (public) health sector is vital in building human and economic resilience by creating fairer and secure jobs, as well as through its role in procuring goods and services in a fair and sustainable way. This sector is already innovating to design services and policies that engage people in decision-making, such as the Caring neighbourhoods initiative in the Flanders region in Belgium and the Village Health Committees in Kyrgyzstan – thus contributing to promoting inclusion, participation and trust.

The health sector is also increasingly seen as a key factor in rural policy, as accessible health services can contribute to population retention in rural areas, local economic stability and human capital development – thus contributing to cohesion within and between geographic areas.

### How the Forum addressed these challenges

Session 8 considered how public investments in well-being can help to build trust and social cohesion by increasing the existing fiscal space and using it to better effect to leave no one behind.

Parallel sessions 9A, 9B and 9C considered key issues such as rural-proofing policies for health and development, age-friendly well-being economies to support healthy ageing and mental health over the life-course, and how the health and economic sectors can work together to tackle development challenges.

## Conclusions

It is clear that achieving well-being economies will necessitate sustained and synergistic action across the health, finance and economy sectors. It will also require research to develop new indicators and study innovative policies, as well as experimentation and continued dialogue. The outcomes proposed from the Regional High-level Forum were:

- a policy initiative to support countries to implement well-being economies; and
- convening a regular high-level event, bringing together stakeholders from across the health, finance and economy sectors to take forward this work.

## Further reading

Below is a short list of important background materials and evidence underpinning this briefing note, which sits alongside the body of evidence contained and referred to in the background paper to the High-level Forum.<sup>4</sup>

- Giordano GN, Merlo J, Ohlsson H, Rosvall M, Lindstrom M. Testing the association between social capital and health over time: a family-based design. *BMC Public Health*. 2013;13(665) (<https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-13-665>).
- Grönlund K, Setälä M. Political trust, satisfaction and voter turnout. *Comp Eur Politics*. 2007;5:400–422 (<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cep.6110113>).
- McEldowney J. Long-term vision for rural areas: European Commission communication. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service; 2021 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698027/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)698027\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698027/EPRS_BRI(2021)698027_EN.pdf)).
- OECD guidelines on measuring trust. Paris: OECD Publishing; 2017 (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264278219-en>).
- Strategic mapping of public perceptions of health equity. What the public think is important to live a healthy prosperous life. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/329379>).
- Transforming the health and social equity landscape: promoting socially just and inclusive growth to improve resilience, solidarity and peace. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/366213>).
- UNDP launches a new initiative to help countries leverage taxation to make progress on the Sustainable Development Goals [website]. New York (NY): United Nations Development Programme; 2022 (<https://www.undp.org/press-releases/undp-launches-new-initiative-help-countries-leverage-taxation-make-progress-sustainable-development-goals#:~:text=The%20new%20Tax%20for%20SDGs%20-Initiative%20helps%20governments,%E2%80%93%20aiming%20to%20accelerate%20p>).
- WHO guidance for climate resilient and environmentally sustainable health care facilities. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/335909>).

4 Health in the well-being economy. Background paper: working together to achieve healthy, fairer, prosperous societies across the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/366228>).

URLs (including in footnotes) were accessed on 17 February 2023

**The WHO Regional Office for Europe**

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

**World Health Organization  
Regional Office for Europe**

UN City, Marmorvej 51,  
DK-2100 Copenhagen Ø, Denmark  
Tel.: +45 45 33 70 00 Fax: +45 45 33 70 01  
Email: [eurocontact@who.int](mailto:eurocontact@who.int)  
Website: [www.who.int/europe](http://www.who.int/europe)