

Interim evaluation of the EU4Health Programme 2021-2027

January 8th, 2024

As the largest EU health programme ever implemented, the EU4Health programme represents a unique opportunity to make a significant contribution to the post-COVID-19 recovery and build stronger, more resilient, and patient-centred health systems. The programme has the potential to boost cooperation in health and pave the way for a true European Health Union that provides real added value to all patients.

Since 2021, EU4Health Work Programmes have enabled meaningful progress in areas where there is EU added value such as digitalisation, the fight against chronic diseases, and strengthening of the EU's preparedness and response capabilities. Moving forward, we support continued efforts in these areas as well as increased emphasis on health literacy and patient information, which are essential in the fight against many cross-border health threats and in achieving sustainable, well-functioning healthcare systems.

Most importantly, one area where the Programme needs considerable strengthening is support and sustainable funding to patient organisations and other health-focused civil society organisations (CSOs) to allow them to fulfil their core public health mission.

A sustainable, accessible, and transparent funding scheme such as Operating Grants is essential to ensure that patient organisations can play their role in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of public health policies. Patient organisations channel the voice of patients by representing their communities' interests and needs, thereby achieving more relevant and effective policies. They also provide invaluable information, communication, services, and capacity building to patients, and can also actively participate in research activities.

The current system for Operating Grants under the EU4Health Programme must be strengthened in several ways:

- **Improved predictability:** the lack of formal commitment that Operating Grants will be maintained from one year to the next puts NGOs in a very precarious situation and leads to constant workplace uncertainty. The 2024 Work Programme is the first WP under EU4Health that provides for framework partnership agreements, albeit limited to two years. Year-to-year funding makes longer-term planning difficult and forces all parties to dedicate significant time and resources every year to redraft and review proposals, which could be allocated to more impactful activities. A 3–4-year framework agreement would increase certainty and sustainability for NGOs, allow them to plan ahead and to fully contribute to the EU4Health policy objectives.
- **Less restrictive and no retroactive eligibility criteria:** The requirement to demonstrate financial independence for the last two years, defined as not more than 30% or – under certain conditions - 50% of the organisation's core funding from private sector donors, automatically excluded many organisations from applying to the 2021, 2022, 2023 Operating Grants. This put them at a disadvantage and deprived them of the opportunity to diversify their funding, thereby undermining the Programme's objective to support an independent voice of civil society.

- Of note, it is the lack of predictability and of sustainable public funding, including at national level, that forced and continues to force patient organisations to seek private sector funding in the first place.
- **Longer and more predictable timelines:** the call for proposals to support health NGOs with Operating Grants in the 2024 Work Programme was published on 5 December 2023 with a deadline of 31 January, which is very short considering NGOs' lack of capacity at the end of the year, the extent of the information that must be provided, and conflicting deadlines to finalise reporting under ongoing grant agreements. In addition, the Commission decision on the grant is only expected in April with no prefinancing before contract signature, which means that NGOs must find other sources of funding to function in the meantime. A fixed date for publication of the Work Programme, with longer deadlines, would help NGOs plan their work around this milestone.
 - Beyond Operating Grants, short timelines are also a challenge under other calls for proposals and call for tenders under the EU4Health Programmes, especially considering the need to create multi-country consortia and to develop high quality proposals in an extremely competitive environment.
- **Lower levels of co-funding:** the coverage limit of 60 % of eligible costs by an Operating Grant does not provide sufficient financial certainty to NGOs and still forces them to dedicate significant resources to fundraising, which impacts their ability to deliver on core priorities. It also does not reflect the challenges of the post-Covid economic environment, where funding opportunities in both public and private sectors are constrained.

A well-functioning and predictable Operating Grants scheme under the EU4Health Programme would empower patient organisations to build and sustain continuous and independent operations. These grants would give them the necessary resources and stability to contribute to the European Commission's strategic objectives, especially as the 2024 Work Programme recognises that "*NGOs expertise and contribution is expected to be of added value*" in a number of priority areas. The EU institutions increasingly involve health-focused CSOs in a number of EU activities, forums, and expert/stakeholder groups, which is positive from a democratic perspective but cannot happen without adequate financial support.

As the EU seeks to develop stronger action in the field of health and maintain a high focus on health beyond the pandemic, it is essential that patient organisations are recognised as an integral part of EU health policy and supported accordingly. This would also improve consistency with other policy areas, including environment, social and civil rights, and citizens' participation, where Commission DGs have strengthened their grants' mechanisms for NGOs. The European Patients' Forum is ready to support the EU in achieving key objectives, including the "*need to protect people in vulnerable situations, including those suffering from (...) non-communicable diseases*", and to help bridge the gap between institutions and patients, as highlighted in the EU4Health 2024 Work Programme released in December 2023.