



12/05/2026

The Council of Europe Coalition on Health Literacy and Human Rights

Background and Rationale

- Health protection is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democracy and social justice. Despite remarkable advancements in health systems, substantial gaps remain in ensuring that all individuals, particularly those in vulnerable situations, can access health information and services equitably.
- In this connection, health literacy forms an integral part of health protection by enabling people and groups to seek, understand, and use health information and services, for informed decision-making and improved health outcomes.

Aim and objective

- Responding to these challenges, the Council of Europe is leveraging its unique normative framework and convening power, to launch – with the support of Italy - the Government-Led Coalition on Health Literacy and Human Rights - for region-wide, rights-based, action on health literacy.
- The Coalition aims to support the work of the Council of Europe in integrating health literacy into its broader human rights agenda and operational framework¹.

Membership

- Members of the Coalition will contribute, through experience and expertise, to the Council of Europe's ongoing efforts to promote human rights-based approaches in health communication, healthcare service delivery, and public health governance.
- This will involve the exchange of good practices, the development of effective health literacy pathways, and the reduction of health inequalities and discrimination.

Key Areas of Focus

1. Advancing national frameworks for health literacy and human rights
 - Embed health literacy and human rights into national legal and policy frameworks.
 - Promote the translation of human rights commitments to health protection into practical actions to enhance health outcomes for all.
2. Fostering cross-sector collaboration for equitable access to healthcare
 - Enhance collaboration between government sectors, local authorities, and other relevant entities.
 - Develop and implement rights-based strategies and action plans dedicated to building health literacy at all societal levels.

¹ See Appendix

3. Promoting inclusive health communication for trust between people and institutions
 - Champion transparent, accessible, and inclusive communication strategies.
 - Strengthen public trust in health systems and reinforce democratic resilience.

Strategic Alignment

This initiative is firmly rooted in the unique mandate and operational structures of the Council of Europe. It seeks to translate high-level commitments on the right to health protection into tangible, operational measures. The goal is to empower individuals as health rights-holders to effectively access, understand, and use health information and services.

Conclusion

The Coalition advances health literacy as a human rights enabler, as a determinant of public health, and as a pillar of democratic resilience. This reaffirms the commitment to ensuring the highest attainable standard of health for all, particularly those in vulnerable situations. Collaborative action, rooted in rights-based approaches, will be essential for realising equitable health systems and outcomes across member states.

For more information

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Appendix

Council of Europe's work on Health Literacy

Health protection is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democracy and social justice across Europe. Achieving this right in practice depends not only on legal guarantees, but on individuals' and communities' ability to access, understand, appraise, and use health information and services in their daily lives.

Health literacy is thus both an individual and a health system competence, underpinning informed decision-making, participation in care, and resilience to disinformation. Nearly half of Europe's population currently demonstrates limited health literacy, with significant consequences for health outcomes, public trust, and the sustainability of health systems. Low levels of health literacy are estimated to cost Council of Europe member states billions of euros annually (3-5% of health expenditure), further compounded by social, economic, digital, and linguistic divides, and heightened system complexity.

Limited health literacy constitutes a structural barrier, reinforcing inequalities, stigma, and discrimination—especially for those in situations of vulnerability, such as older persons, migrants, persons with disabilities, Roma communities, and people experiencing homelessness. Strengthening health literacy is therefore both a prerequisite for effective health protection and a driver of democratic resilience and crisis preparedness.

The Council of Europe serves as a platform for member states to operationalise their commitment to health protection, notably to:

- **Reduce health inequalities**, by addressing the needs of those in vulnerable situations.
- **Accelerate “health literacy pathways”**, integrating legal and political commitments with practical implementation.
- **Strengthen health protection** communication between people and institutions.

In this connection, the Council of Europe's objectives are to:

- **Support** the creation, rollout, and review of government-led, rights-based strategies and action plans for health literacy and human rights.
- **Facilitate strong collaboration** across ministries, civil society, academia, health and social care, local authorities, etc.
- **Pledge commitment** to addressing exclusion and barriers that reinforce stigma, discrimination, and health inequalities.
- **Champion** honest, effective, and accessible health communication, both online and in person.

The unique features of the Council of Europe's work on health literacy and human rights are:

Human rights at the core: Health literacy and human rights as a joined-up goal which enables equitable healthcare access, informed consent, and health protection for all, underscored by the Council's legal standards.

- **Policy to practice:** Supporting the operationalisation of member states' legal and political commitments to health protection as they pertain to health literacy;

interconnecting health, social affairs, education, local authorities and other relevant bodies with the people they serve through practical, real-world “health literacy pathways”.

- **Equity and inclusion focus:** Efforts to address low health literacy in populations experiencing vulnerability, discrimination, or exclusion (Roma, migrants, disabled persons, etc.).
- **Trust and democratic resilience:** Advancing clear, compassionate communication which fosters public trust and accountability, reinforcing the New Democratic Pact across Europe.

The expected outcomes of the Council of Europe’s work on health literacy and human rights, include:

- Development and review of national health literacy pathways embedded in human rights-based frameworks;
- Accelerated uptake of practical tools, good-practice models, and health literacy capacity building initiatives, both in and beyond health settings;
- Tangible progress in advancing equitable access to healthcare, especially for those in vulnerable situations;
- Strengthened trust between people and health institutions – a living “New Democratic Pact” across Council of Europe societies.