RIGHT TO HEALTH:
WHAT CAN LOCAL AND REGIONAL POLITICIANS DO?

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

THE CONGRESS
LE CONGRÈS
COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH: WHAT IT IS ABOUT?

Health is a human right, not just a matter of public policy.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being", going beyond the mere absence of disease. This broad definition encompasses mental health, environmental health and the social determinants of health.

"The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being, without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."

Constitution of the World Health Organisation

WHY THIS RIGHT MATTERS FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES?

Protecting health is not solely the responsibility of the national level. Local and regional authorities can play a key role in making this right a reality:

- They are often responsible for planning, financing, delivering and coordinating health services on the ground.
- They manage public spaces, run social services, regulate urban environments, housing, transport, pollution, food access, and they promote social inclusion, all of which impact the quality of health protection for millions of people.
- They are also uniquely placed to ensure address the socio-economic determinants of health-related inequalities such as poverty, unemployment and the quality of education.

With their detailed knowledge of the needs and challenges within their communities, local and regional authorities are best placed to design and deliver health services and interventions that are tailored to local needs.

WHICH STANDARDS SHOULD LOCAL AND REGIONAL POLICIES AIM TO GUARANTEE?

Health-related policies at local and regional level should aim to ensure:

Availability:

Health facilities, goods, and services must be evenly distributed beyond urban centres. Local analysis can help identifying "healthcare deserts" and take action to fill service gaps.

Accessibility:

The right to health must be enjoyed without discrimination. A human-rights-based approach helps address inequalities based on socioeconomic status, gender, origin, disability, or age, ensuring that services are physically accessible for all, and financially affordable.

Acceptability:

Services must respect medical ethics, be culturally sensitive, and treat people with dignity, without barriers based on stereotypes, language or background.

Quality:

Quality health services are those that deliver timely, effective, and evidence-based care that is safe for patients and responsive to individuals' needs. Achieving quality health care requires prevention campaigns, strong first-line services, a good ratio of health professionals and efficiency in maximising resources and health outcomes.

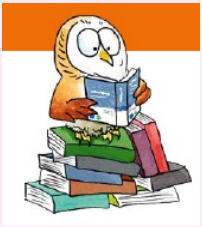
WHAT OTHER ISSUES SHOULD LOCAL AND REGIONAL POLICIES ADDRESS?

Mental health: Funding community centres, training dedicated staff, running anti-stereotypes campaigns and coordinating with schools on prevention to ensure that mental health is not disregarded.

Ageing populations: Developing age-friendly cities, supporting home-based care, improving coordination among health and social services, and addressing staff shortages through better working conditions helps locally elected officials to deal with this major local challenge[1].

Environmental health: Carrying out health impact assessments prior to taking urban planning decisions helps local authorities deal with air quality, noise, green spaces, and environmental risks, all fields for which they bear responsibility.

1. See Congress Recommendation 517 (2024) on ageing communities



Crisis preparedness and resilience:

Covid-19 highlighted the greater flexibility of local and regional authorities in quickly adapting services to respond to emergency situations. The local emergency plans[2] should be adapted to cover health crises, through stockpiling resources, providing specific training to emergency services, communicating with residents and ensuring continuity of care for the most vulnerable during crises.

Don't forget: multilevel governance also matter!

Good and effective health care requires local and regional governments active involvement in the design and implementation of health protection policies and strategies. Congress Recommendation 528 (2025) "The role of local and regional authorities in protecting and promoting social rights and fostering social development" calls on national governments to recognise local and regional authorities as key partners in delivering social rights, including the right to health.

MY CHECKLIST FOR HEALTH-RELATED DECISIONS

In our daily work as elected official, we will regularly face decisions that affect the health of our residents, from budget allocations to urban planning, from social service contracts to public space management. Here is a practical checklist.

- Does this decision affect access to health services? Does it improve, maintain, or restrict residents' ability to reach health facilities?
- Are health services non-discriminatory? Ensure that no resident is excluded from quality health care on grounds of nationality, language, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, or other characteristics. Language should never be a barrier to access health care.
- Does this decision address health inequalities, including gender-based inequalities? Who benefits and who might be disadvantaged from it?
- Are the needs of older persons addressed? Are long-term care services adequate? Is the territory age-friendly, protecting the autonomy and dignity of older persons?
- Are social determinants of health (such as housing, education, poverty, employment, transport and urban planning) being addressed?
- Are the environmental determinants of health (eg. air quality, green space, noise, water and waste management) being considered?
- Is mental health sufficiently considered? Are mental health services accessible? Are prejudice and stereotypes around mental health being actively challenged?
- Is your authority prepared for health crises? Review emergency preparedness plans, ensure communication channels are ready, and check that the most vulnerable are specifically protected in crisis scenarios.

2. See Congress Resolution 500 (2024) on responses to natural disasters

THE EUROPEAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK

European Social Charter (Revised, 1996) — Article 11

The core reference for the right to health in Europe, Article 11, requires States Parties to remove causes of ill-health, emphasising access to care, disease prevention, and environmental health.

European Convention on Human Rights — Articles 2 and 3

The right to life (Article 2) and the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment (Article 3) generate positive obligations on public authorities, including a regulatory framework requiring hospitals and care providers to protect patients' lives and ensure access to emergency care.

Other Council of Europe related standards include:

Medicrime Convention: the first international legally binding treaty to tackle the problem of falsified medicine and medical products.

Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs: to combat the international trade in human organs.

Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine: the world's first and only legally binding treaty to protect the dignity and identity of all human beings.

You still need to get inspired? Volume II of the Congress Human Rights Handbooks series contains a chapter on health with a lot of good practices and recommendations.

"Health protection is a living reality only when it is rooted in the territory. We, as local and regional elected officials, are the bridge between the rights guaranteed on paper and the lived experience of our residents. By investing in accessible primary care, age-friendly environments, mental health services, and healthy urban spaces, we make the right to health real for everyone in our communities."

Peter Drenth, Netherlands (R, EPP/CCE), Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights, Martine Dieschburg-Nickels, Luxembourg (L, ILDG) Deputy Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, Austria (L, SOC/G/PD), Deputy Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has a long-standing commitment to human rights promotion and protection, by supporting local and regional elected officials to shape environments where citizens can enjoy their human rights every day. Rooting human rights at the local level further reinforces good governance, creates stronger relationships with the community, and helps building trust in political and public institutions.

In 2023, the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavík marked a pivotal moment where member states explicitly recognised the Congress unique role in human rights promotion and protection at local level, and called on national authorities for a better sharing of responsibilities in defending human rights in the territories.

Since then, the Congress adopted a new Human Rights Strategy to:

- promote a culture of human rights at local and regional levels;
- mainstream and address human rights in all Congress work;
- facilitate stronger political dialogue and cooperation.

www.coe.int/en/web/congress/human-rights

PREMS 150926

ENG

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member States, including all members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 612 elected officials representing more than 130 000 local and regional authorities.

THE CONGRESS
LE CONGRÈS

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE