

## Good public health and social well-being are indispensable for our societies to thrive

**A Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being report to the 7<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Heads of Governments of the Baltic Sea States, 3-4 June 2008, Riga, Latvia**

This report briefly outlines major achievements of the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS) since the Baltic Sea States Summit in 2006. Further, with reference to the reports developed by the NDPHS Expert Groups, it addresses to the attention of the Heads of Government several challenges and gaps coupled with recommendations and, finally, summarizes the role that the NDPHS plans to play in tackling them.

### Introduction

Today the countries in the Baltic Sea region are interconnected and interdependent as never before. Combined with fast economic growth and societal changes taking place in our region, these developments not only offer myriad opportunities to our societies, but also bring about a growing number of challenges, not least to public health and social well-being. Some of them require increased cooperation and coordination at an international level.

It is in the recognition of this need that “**social welfare and health care**, including prevention of communicable diseases and life-style related diseases and promotion of cooperation between health and social services” have been included as **one of the priority sectors in the new Northern Dimension policy** jointly adopted by the EU, Iceland, Norway and Russia. The **NDPHS, which operates within the framework of the Northern Dimension policy, provides a platform to further advance work in this sector.**

### A unique Partnership

Established in 2003 and currently chaired by Norway and co-chaired by Russia, the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being involves **13 governments, the European Commission and 8 international organizations** (cf. Annex). Its broad and diverse membership as well as solid structure provide a unique platform for concerted action to tackle challenges to health and social well-being in the Northern Dimension area, and foremost in north-west Russia, through increased cooperation and enhanced coordination of international activities in the region.

The Partnership's policy-making and project-based activities focus on **two main priority areas**:

- The reduction of major communicable diseases and the prevention of lifestyle related, non-communicable diseases;
- The enhancement and promotion of healthy and socially rewarding lifestyles with focus on health and social well-being.

The Partnership **operates at several levels**, the most important being the Partnership Annual Conference (meets at a ministerial level every second year), the Committee of Senior Representatives, four Expert Groups and two Associated Expert Groups, and the NDPHS Secretariat. In their work all of them...

### **... focus on delivering concrete and pragmatic activities and achieving tangible results**

Partnership's activities are guided by annual work plans, which set targets, define action lines and specify concrete activities. Boosted by funding provided by Partners, during the last two years the **Partnership made a rapid progress and delivered tangible results by running a wide array of concrete and pragmatic activities** ranging from – high-level ministerial dialogue, policy development, project development and implementation, networking solidification, expertise exchange, information production and dissemination, advocacy to – administrative and organizational issues.

The following are examples of accomplishments that highlight the progress made to advance the Northern Dimension policy since the Baltic Sea States Summit in 2006:

- The Partnership has developed several important tools forming its **Coordinating and Financing Mechanism**;
- All NDPHS Expert Groups actively work, hold regular meetings and organize conferences and seminars, enjoy committed leadership and actively contribute toward the NDPHS goals and objectives. All of them have developed so-called thematic reports. These **reports identify gaps and challenges for increased attention of politicians and decision-makers as well as recommend actions to be taken** (cf. next page). Also, most of the Expert Groups have initiated and are running **regional projects** involving a variety of stakeholders;
- The Partnership developed and **adopted during its ministerial-level conference in 2007 a “Partnership Strategy on Health at Work”** aimed to reduce non-communicable diseases to benefit the health and well-being of women and men in the work environment.

On the other hand, the work of the Partnership is troubled, *inter alia*, by some Partners' not allocating sufficient resources for its work. In this respect it should be stressed that, in accordance with the new Northern Dimension policy, **the Northern Dimension Partners have a common responsibility for the Partnership and should contribute to it based on the principle of co-financing**.

A detailed record of achievements as well as challenges faced by the Partnership is provided in its annually produced progress reports. Further, the NDPHS website ([www.ndphs.org](http://www.ndphs.org)) offers comprehensive and up-to-date information about the Partnership and its work.

## There are challenges and gaps, and the Partnership works to help address them

Good public health and social well-being are indispensable for our societies to thrive. Various sectors such as trade, tourism, access to goods and services, etc. are directly dependent on public health. Indisputably, **public health is an important factor in economic and demographic stability in our countries and an indispensable part of the efforts to achieve sustainable development in our region.** The Partnership contributes to these efforts by supporting regional initiatives and policy development as well as through stimulating and initiating project-based activities.

In late 2007 and in the beginning of 2008, in order to establish a solid knowledge-based basis for Partnership's future activities, the NDPHS Expert Groups produced **four thematic reports.** These reports **evaluate the developments and trends** in the region for each selected thematic and geographical area and **identify challenges and gaps** that require increased attention and action. In an attempt to help address these challenges and gaps, the four reports also present a variety of **recommendations** concerning policy- and project-based interventions. A number of recommended **best practices** are also included in the reports.

## HIV/AIDS is one of the most serious soft security threats in our region

### Challenges and gaps:

- The spread of HIV/AIDS does not only contribute to a major health problem plundering our societies. It also has far-reaching consequences for the political, economic and social development of the countries in our region and beyond it;
- Most experts believe that the future demographic development will be severely affected by HIV in the worst hit countries in our region, which are Estonia and Russia. The disease may cause a reduction in the population, reduce the working power and directly and indirectly snap off several percent units from the GNP;
- Nordic countries now face a continuous rise in the annual numbers of reported HIV/AIDS cases. This can be attributed to both in-country developments as well as the increased immigration from endemic countries and regions.

### Examples of actions recommended by the NDPHS HIV/AIDS Expert Group:

- Collecting precise and up-to-date information about the dynamics of the spread of the HIV/AIDS in our region, its underlying risk factors, and the social and political consequences for the area;
- Implementing projects aimed at identifying: (i) the needs of and opportunities for cooperation and joint cross-border activities between areas with similar epidemiological situations, and (ii) opportunities for the establishment and promotion of effective counselling and testing procedures.

## Better primary health care for better health of the people

### Challenges and gaps:

- More and better trained primary care doctors and nurses are needed;
- Unhealthy life styles and risk behavior are a big burden in all our countries;
- There is a gap in the availability and the quality of home care and different forms of institutional care for elderly people (nursing homes, shelters, elderly houses).

### Examples of actions recommended by the NDPHS Primary Health Care (PHC) Expert Group:

- Improving cooperation between PHC and secondary health care;
- Uniform distribution of primary care staff and PHC facilities in the rural areas and economically deprived territories should be ensured;
- Sharing between the countries the tools on proper motivational counseling in the primary care settings and support of the modern informational materials on quitting smoking, cutting down alcohol, diet and exercise.

## Women's health in prison requires increased attention

### Challenges and gaps:

- Tremendous health-related problems in prisons are HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. At the same time HIV prevalence rates are generally higher among women in prisons because of the very close association between illicit drug use and imprisonment;
- There are few all-female prisons, which means that women have more challenges to face than men do while in prison;
- An exceptionally vulnerable group in prisons includes pregnant detainees and female detainees accompanied by their children. At the same time, the needs of this group of prisoners are often neglected in many countries in our region.

### Examples of actions recommended by the NDPHS Prison Health (PH) Expert Group:

- Social-economic background screening of every woman entering the prison for the first time with a view of setting up a standardized questionnaire/template to collect data on the female prisoners' social and economic backgrounds, and their health status;
- Implementing a regional project monitoring the opportunities and consequences for the child's development in prison;
- Implementing projects examining different models of education, social rehabilitation, and post-release opportunities for women in prison.

## Improving occupational safety and health of men and women

### Challenges and gaps:

- Great differences in working conditions between and inside the countries in the region and, in some areas, lack of preventive occupational health services are important sources of enormous inequities in health;
- In spite of some positive developments, which have taken place in many countries in our region within the past years, the situation is in need of further improvement. Even in some Nordic countries the occupational hazards have increased within the past decade. For example, in Norway and in Finland the number of occupational accidents shows an upwards trend.

### Examples of actions recommended by the NDPHS Occupation Safety and Health (OSH) Expert Sub-group of the Expert Group on Social Inclusion, Healthy Lifestyles and Work Ability:

- The governments, trade unions, employers and preventive health organizations need to work together in raising awareness and knowledge of occupational health and safety issues among employers, employees, and the public in general;
- Introducing OSH management systems at enterprises and provide occupational health services linked to public health;
- Introducing of new, simple and inexpensive methods in risk management in the micro-companies and the small and medium size enterprises.

**The Partnership plans to encourage and support regional efforts to make the presented recommendations a reality. This will be done through initiating and implementing relevant demonstration projects as well as providing policy advice. Also, the Expert Groups will continue monitoring the situation in the region and will periodically issue evaluations and recommendations for further action and stimulate political dialogue on the issues of critical importance. However, in order to be successful in its efforts, the Partnership needs to enjoy a commitment of all its Partners, which should be reflected through their active involvement coupled with the provision of ample resources. Governments have an imperative role to play in this respect.**

## **Partners and Associate Partners in the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being**

### **Partner and Associate Partner Countries**

- Canada (Associate Partner)
- Denmark
- Estonia
- Finland
- France (Associate Partner)
- Germany (Associate Partner)
- Iceland
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Norway
- Poland
- Russia
- Sweden

### **European Commission**

### **Partner Organizations**

- Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC)
- Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC)
- Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)
- International Labour Organisation (ILO)
- International Organisation for Migration (IOM)
- Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM)
- Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
- World Health Organization (WHO)