

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health policy on international and EU cooperation for 2024–2027

The policies of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health on international and EU cooperation for 2024–2027 guide the Ministry and its administrative branch in international and EU matters. These policies form a strategic package and set priorities that help direct the Ministry and the entire concern's dwindling resources cost-effectively towards Finland's core issues. The policies focus on forward-looking, horizontally coherent influence.

According to the Government Act (173/2003) and the Government Rules of Procedure (262/2003), each Ministry handles international matters that fall into its administrative branch. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health handles the treaties and other international duties, as well as matters decided in the EU, that fall under its administrative branch. The Ministry participates actively in the collaboration with key cross-sectoral and international organisations, as well as in matters regarding their development. The Ministry considers the requirements arising from EU law and general international law in all its national legislative work.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and health is responsible for Finland's position and representation in various international organisations that fall into its administrative branch. The Ministry's core global responsibilities are to the WHO, the UN Commission for Social Development (CSocD), the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the ILO, UNAIDS, the International Vaccine Institute (IVI) and the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). At the regional level, the Ministry's partners, in addition to the EU, include the European Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the EU Northern Dimension partnership, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), WHO/EURO, and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies. Our other core partners include the OECD, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the Joint Health Group of the NATO Resilience Committee.

Significant changes in the operating environment

In some respects, there has been progress in global development. For example, life expectancy in developing countries has increased, and maternal-child mortality has fallen. However, the international operating environment is facing remarkable changes, and there are significant challenges ahead for international cooperation. International policy has become unpredictable. Conflicts between great powers have come to a head, building international agreements has become more difficult, developmental gaps are widening, and sustainable development is faltering. The divide between the global north and south has grown. Russia's illegal war of aggression in Ukraine has significantly impacted the activities of international organisations through the tension between the EU, its allies and Russia, posing significant difficulties for decision making.

The values we hold as universal from a global perspective, such as democracy, transparency and human rights, are no longer progressing as expected. Opposition to gender equality and the rights of women and girls, as well as gender and sexual minorities, is growing. Challenges in global cooperation are emblematic of the age. The EU must respond to significant structural challenges such as EU expansion, which may have a significant effect on the Union's operations. Digitalisation is changing how we operate at an unprecedented pace, bringing with it both challenges and great opportunities. Health security risks, including the increase in antimicrobial resistance, have an effect on the ability of health systems to function.

The effects of climate change on health and wellbeing have risen to the agenda of global cooperation. Growing extreme weather conditions and the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems have an increasing effect on the lives, livelihoods, equality, wellbeing, physical and psychological health of people, as well as the endurance of health systems.

Functioning social and health systems are core to the stability of society, sustainable development, the wellbeing of the population, and health security. The wellbeing of the population, as well as productivity, economic growth and macroeconomic stability, are inter-linked and form an important building block of sustainable development in both low- and high-income nations.

Approach and priorities of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is an active operator in both the EU and globally, and we take our international duties into account in our activities. The Ministry focuses its use of resources in EU and international matters on promoting these priorities, while taking the duties that are borne of memberships of international organisations, as well as the preparation of EU law with a direct or indirect effect on the sector, into account.

To achieve our goals, the Ministry will continue to develop its internal preparatory work and support the strengthening of the Ministry's leadership's and experts' international competence. The focus of the entire concern and making use of its entire pool of skills in international and EU matters is vitally important for exerting our influence. The strength of a small country's influence is based on forming partnerships, as well as timely, well-prepared influence on a wide scale. It is vitally important to exert our influence as early as the preparatory phase of policy outlines or proposals, i.e. to focus on proactive influence. Justified arguments, scientific evidence and coordinated activities in all stages of cooperation at international and EU levels are key to achieve results and ensure the cost-effective use of resources.

The Ministry promotes good governance and better predictability of financing in international organisations. It focuses on the EU as the key framework for its global activities. The Ministry emphasises close cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic countries and actively seeks partnerships with like-minded countries on wider themes. The Ministry's influence is carried out through well-prepared and coordinated positions in various international contexts and through proactive strategic influence, and taking into account the wider context also in individual matters.

The Ministry's priorities in European and international cooperation in 2024–2027 are:

- Comprehensive security and resilience
- Wellbeing economy
- Gender equality, non-discrimination and human rights
- Universal health coverage and social protection
- Digitalisation

Focus areas

1) Comprehensive security and resilience

- The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health stresses the impact of resilient health systems, primary health care, and social protection that counters poverty and promotes inclusion for resilience, societal stability, trust and comprehensive security.
- Both international cooperation and each country's duty to prepare for, prevent, detect and respond to health threats are important for the Ministry.
- The Ministry participates in and influences activities that attempt to prevent and mitigate the effects of climate change on health, as well as social and health systems, taking into account the gender and mental health effects of climate change.

Policies and structures in place during normal time to support health and wellbeing, as well as to prevent poverty and marginalisation bolster resilience, i.e. societal stability, trust and crisis tolerance, as well as the people and systems' ability to adapt and respond to changes and crises, and to flexibly recover from crises to restore the normal social order. The strengthening of social and health systems, with a particular focus on primary health care, is a requirement for future pandemic response. The readiness of all nations, particularly developing ones, to prevent, detect and respond to national and cross-border health threats must be strengthened through cross-sectoral international cooperation. Sufficient health workforce and psychosocial resilience have become important during prolonged crisis response.

The Ministry intends to remain a frontrunner in the international development of health system performance assessment (HSPA) and resilience assessment methods and comparisons.

The EU's preparedness and readiness must also be strengthened with a view to the comprehensive, whole-of-governance approach to security. Finland considers it necessary to strengthen the EU's global role and influence and wants to develop the European Union into an even more influential global operator.

The Ministry deems it important that the availability of medicines, medical devices, blood transfusion products and materials is ensured in both normal and crisis time. The EU's open, strategic autonomy and global role must be balanced. The EU must strive to reduce its harmful dependencies, find new partners, and strengthen its own production capacity

for critical material such as vaccines, medicines, medical devices and the required raw materials. At the same time, it is important for the EU to promote the regional capacity to manufacture medicines and vaccines – for example, in cooperation with the African Union – to ensure equitable access in developing nations. The antimicrobial resistance situation is a severe cross-border problem, which puts people everywhere at significant risk. International cooperation to improve the antimicrobial resistance situation is vital for comprehensive security.

The *One Health* approach considers the link of people, animals and the environment, including antimicrobial resistance, biodiversity, food safety and climate change. Poverty is a threat to health and health security everywhere, influencing the development of zoonoses, among other things. According to the WHO, climate change is the single largest threat to global health and the reduction of poverty. It will cause an increase in diseases, disrupt the achievement of universal health coverage, and result in 250,000 additional deaths every year. At worst, climate change will contribute to inequality both between and within countries. It is the Ministry's view that the effects of climate change, which directly and indirectly affect human health and wellbeing, gender equality, and health systems, require action.

2) Economy of Wellbeing

- The Ministry promotes the economy of wellbeing that is based on stable and sustainable financial policy horizontally in its international and EU work.
- The Ministry promotes effective and influential wellbeing policy actions and structures that support economic growth, productivity, and macroeconomic stability.
- The Ministry exerts its influence internationally and in the EU to strengthen the balance between financial, ecological and social sustainability.

The economy of wellbeing is based on stable and sustainable financial policy. The economy of wellbeing is a horizontal operating model that is based on cross-sectoral cooperation between different political branches, emphasizing the mutually reinforcing nature of economic and wellbeing policies. It aims for a balance between economic, ecological and social sustainability that links the wellbeing economy to Agenda 2030 and the goals of sustainable development.

The economy of wellbeing emphasizes the importance of effective and efficient policy measures and structures that support wellbeing in strengthening employment and sustainable economic growth. People with good functional and work ability, education, skills and

gender equality promote economic growth and improve productivity. Preventive actions by the social and health sector, including occupational health and safety, as well as measures that promote health and wellbeing, may significantly strengthen the long-term fiscal sustainability.

One of the core parts of the economy of wellbeing is the care economy. Structures of the care economy have a significant impact on gender equality and women's position in the labour market, and more widely on the productivity, competitiveness and sustainability of the national economy.

Promotion of mental health has a significant connection to the economy of wellbeing and to resilience. Finland supports a holistic mental health approach, the starting point of which is the promotion of mental health across sector borders.

Finland works with the WHO on improving the consideration of the mutually reinforcing impact of health and the economy both locally and globally. Under Finland's leadership, a health and economy resolution has been introduced to the WHO General Assembly for approval asking the WHO to create an action plan around this theme. The economy of wellbeing is a key theme in Finland's influence work on the UN *Social Summit 2025* preparations through the CSocD, WHO, ILO and UNRISD.

It is important to develop tools to assist performance assessment that can be used to measure the influence of wellbeing policy on the economy, as well as how economic decisions influence the wellbeing of the people and inequality between population groups and regions. The Ministry monitors, supports and makes use of the OECD and UN Statistical Commission's work on developing assessment tools for the economy of wellbeing.

The Finnish wellbeing model is a success story that is of great interest in the UN, EU and international markets. Finland is a global leader in sustainable wellbeing.

3) Gender equality, non-discrimination and human rights

- The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health promotes the realisation of the rights set forth in the UN human rights treaties. The Ministry's work includes a particular focus on economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR), which include the right to health and social protection.

- The Ministry promotes and defends gender equality and the rights of women and girls, as well as those of sexual and gender minorities. Special measures are taken to promote gender equality, and the gender perspective is part of all decision making and preparation.
- The Ministry promotes non-discrimination and takes persons in vulnerable positions into account.

Opposition to gender equality and the rights of women and girls, as well as those of gender and sexual minorities, is growing in the EU and globally. Finland promotes gender equality and the rights of girls and women wherever they intersect with its international activities. Finland continues to take positive action to improve gender equality, as well as the rights of girls and women, including sexual and reproductive health, and those of gender and sexual minorities. Finland works to prevent the undermining of gender equality and the rights of gender and sexual minorities.

Finland includes gender and equality perspectives in all aspects of its international human rights treaty reporting and the achievement of the UN's sustainable development Agenda 2030 targets. The international system of treaties and human rights requirements are an important foundation for promoting gender equality at both the national and global levels. Supporting them is vital for achieving gender equality, as is the implementation and monitoring of Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Finland takes the initiative in promoting gender equality and the rights of women and girls, as well as human rights in the EU and in international cooperation. Its core themes are equality in working life, including pay equality, the equal distribution of care, the prevention of gendered violence, and equality in decision making. It is also equally relevant to strengthen the structures that mainstream the gender perspective and gender-aware budgeting.

Sexual violence towards children, particularly online and social media predation, has seen alarming global growth. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires action on a wide scale to promote the rights of children.

Finland promotes non-discrimination and takes persons in vulnerable positions into account. Finland plays an active role in the EU and internationally to promote the rights of the disabled. Requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Disabled must be considered in our influence, preparatory work and decision making. It is particularly important

that public authority gives disabled action groups the right and opportunity to introduce their views and competence to develop society so that everyone can participate. This is a principle that must also be implemented in crisis situations. In international NGOs and the EU, Finland supports work to promote the rights of the Roma people.

4) Universal health coverage and social protection

- The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health supports the goals of sustainable development for the universal health coverage and social protection as human rights.
- The Ministry focuses on basic-level services (incl. SRHR) which reduce inequality and poverty while reinforcing social stability and requirements for development. They reinforce the resilience of societies and their people, i.e. their adaptability to change and respond to crises, including health security crises.
- The Ministry continues to promote the Health in all Policies principle.

Social protection that covers the entire population, including high-quality social and health services, are an effective method of reducing poverty, discrimination and marginalisation, and leveraging everyone's input in building the country and its economy. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health supports the goals of sustainable development for the universal health coverage and social protection (UHC and USP) as human rights. The goals of sustainable development include universal access to necessary services that support wellbeing, promote and protect health and prevent illnesses, without being placed under undue financial distress for their use.

It is key to focus on basic-level services (incl. SRHR) that reduce inequality and poverty while reinforcing social stability and requirements for development. They reinforce the resilience of societies and their people, i.e. their adaptability to change and respond to crises and recover from them. This is vitally important in responding to crises caused by pandemics, among other things.

Health and wellbeing are a sum of many parts. According to the Health in All Policies principle (HIAP), it is possible to make choices that promote health and wellbeing in all sectors of society. Finland introduced the concept to the European and global arena in 2006. The Ministry continues to promote this principle.

In the EU and international forums for which the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is responsible, it is important to promote these themes and participate in supporting global and

regional development through expert inputs. The Ministry's financial input in various international forums consists almost completely of Finland's assessed contributions. Funding that is earmarked for specific policy actions by international organisations is not something that the Ministry has a great deal of in any of the sectors under its responsibility.

Finland's active focus on particularly the UN structure is important. Although there has been long-term progress in the SDG targets in the social dimension, significant challenges remain in this respect. After the added burden of the pandemic, in the current global situation, the achievement of sustainable development goals, including those of health and wellbeing (SDG 3) by 2030, is in jeopardy because of various concurrent crises. The key difficulty in achieving the UHC and USP goals is inequality: an estimated 3.5 billion people, that is, slightly under half the global population, lack sufficient access to necessary health services. Roughly two billion people face catastrophic or poverty-inducing health expenses. The World Health Organisation recommends an overhaul of the health systems with a focus on basic healthcare. A majority (90%) of the core UHC measures can be implemented through the basic healthcare approach.

5) Digitalisation

- The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health continues to be an active influencer in the EU's and global arena's sectors of the data economy and digital transformation.
- The Ministry uses Finland's position as a country with unique data banks and as a frontrunner in health data regulation, as well as an attractive development platform and trading partner for technology and medicines.

Finland has long been a pioneer in the primary use of health data, whose expert role and maintenance of influence in promoting digital transformation remains relevant in the global and EU contexts. In the area of primary use, Finland's participation focuses on strengthening the interoperability of data and citizen participation.

The Ministry continues to work actively with the EU on primary and secondary use of health data, as well as on partnership in the EU's genome regulation and genome data mobility and usage. Finland continues to work actively with the WHO on digitalisation and innovation. The Ministry has supported the operations of the WHO's Innovation Hub in Geneva. Finland participates in various artificial intelligence projects on the implementation of the UN Secretary General's digital and artificial intelligence roadmap.

According to the growth strategy for research and innovation in the health sector, the goal remains to improve Finland's position as an internationally established forerunner in research, innovation, investment and new business in the health sector. As a whole, the health sector is one of the fastest growing in the world. Governments and the public sector play a significant role in determining the business environment, particularly in Europe and Asia. Finland has built a reputation as a country with a high level of technology, digitalisation and usage of comprehensive data banks and health data.

Finland supports the strengthening of digitalisation in coordinating social security systems, as well as facilitating the free movement of people within Europe. This is part of a wider goal of promoting the digital transition, reducing the administrative burden, and improving the functioning of the Single Market and the competitiveness of Europe's economy.

Finland's competitiveness is built on specialisation, high competence, and international co-operation. Strategic partnership with third countries is also a significant opportunity for Finland. For example, technological innovations around ageing, early diagnostics, personalised medicine and the development of governance of services provide a natural interface with many countries. It will be important to consider the rapidly growing health markets of developing countries in RDI activities and export promotion in Africa, Asia and South America (G7, G20 commitments) and the EU's Global Gateway programme.