

Reducing health inequalities from a regional perspective

What works, what doesn't work?

Annual Conference: Closing session

Regions for Health Network

WHO-EURO



State of the art

- There are major health inequalities within and between countries in the WHO European Region.
- **Urgent action** is needed, or these gaps between and within countries will increase.
- A clear and strong **social gradient** is identified.
- The lower a person's social position, the worse his or her health is. **Inequality in health arises from inequalities in the social determinants of health**
- Current inequalities are intolerable. People are dying and being damaged for life by circumstances that we can choose to change.



Action is needed

- Health inequalities result from and impact on the wider social determinants of health which operate at many levels.
- Reduction is likely to **require action across the whole of society** and require **a multifaceted approach across sectors**.
- This calls for a **clear understanding** of the situation and likely causes, and for a vision and strategy based on national and international evidence, and for engagement with actors outside the health system.



Intersectoral and Multi-level

- Intersectoral **cooperation** is essential to overcome fragmentation. The role of for example the minister of finance (e.g. through taxation policy) can be decisive.
- Keeping equity in health on the intersectoral agenda is important in times of economic recession.
- Ensuring consistency of efforts and coherence at different levels of governance requires bolstering and fully using the **capacity of the subnational level**.
- **Communities** are **key actors** in improving living and working conditions.



Major options

- **Choose** to address a confined, limited problem, which you are able to solve – target a group with a specific problem and a chosen strategy –cfr Semenza
- Aim to change the macro-level influences e.g. taxes, benefits, skills cfr Marmot
- Give the community confidence to change itself and get to a new (natural) balance (autoregulation): destabilise, set order generating rules, stand back and allow new structures to emerge (cfr Burns)



Basic conditions

- Basic conditions for a successful approach, whatever the strategy :
 - Identify the problem clearly
 - Get the evidence, 'translate' it and use it
 - Involve the community
 - **Proportionate Universalism:** «actions must be universal but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage»



Learn from what you do

- **Evaluate** the impact; evaluation is not expensive but is in fact cost saving. But: it is also complex!
- **Monitoring** average impact is not good enough: interventions should be assessed for their **differential impact** on different social groups in the population
- **Policy evaluation** at short, intermediate and long term, should take into account the differential impacts of policies on children and families of different socio-economic groups and include ways to assess the causal pathways leading to differential impacts.

