



Note for the press

Baltic health officials and international experts meet in Riga to discuss the economic crisis and its impact on health

Riga, 12–13 November 2009

For the sixth time, the Ministers of Health together with senior officials and policy-makers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are meeting to discuss the challenges that they currently face in moving health and health systems forward in their countries.

For this year's meeting, which is taking place in Riga (Latvia), the central theme of the discussions is the economic crisis and its effects on the health of the population as well as on the health sector. It is commonly known that the Baltic States are among the countries most severely hit by the global economic downturn. International evidence reveals the negative long-term effect of economic recessions on people's health caused by growing uncertainty, soaring unemployment and shrinking household budgets. The more vulnerable groups in society are particularly under threat. At a time when the support and protection of publicly funded health systems are most needed, financial resources risk falling short as a result of budget cuts imposed by the decrease in fiscal revenues.

Together with experts from the World Health Organization, the European Commission, the World Bank and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, the delegations from the three countries will explore ways of addressing the situation in order not to lose – but rather build further on – the health gains and health system improvements acquired over the years. Experts from Finland and Sweden will share their experience in this field, as their countries faced a similar economic downturn in the 1990s.

Referring to the resolution that the WHO Regional Committee for Europe adopted in September 2009, Enis Barış, Director of the Division of Country Health Systems at the WHO Regional Office for Europe said one of the soundest investments any European Member State could make in times of crisis to boost the economy was to invest in population health: “Along with other measures of social protection and human development, it is a sure way to build wealth in the longer run. At the same time, crises offer an opportunity to critically review the performance of our health systems and to take the necessary steps to get better value for our investment in health, improve our accountability to taxpayers and increase our ability to respond to their needs and preferences.”

Hosting the meeting, Latvia's Health Minister, Mrs Baiba Rozentale welcomed the opportunity to exchange views with her counterparts from Estonia and Lithuania as well as with international experts: “We are facing serious challenges and we need to take a long-term perspective on how we can best respond to them. Overall, structural reforms are needed and we are happy to count on the support of WHO and others.” Estonia's Social Affairs Minister, Hanno Pevkur emphasized the need to ensure access to health care during difficult times: “Access to a well-performing health system and especially to primary health care for all population groups is essential at a time of increasing unemployment and higher health needs. Our task is to make sure that our health systems are sustainable both today, when we face economic constraints, and in the future”. Mrs Janina Kumpienė, Lithuanian Vice-minister of Health added: “We also need to stimulate more healthy lifestyles and educate citizens to take more responsibility for their own health”.

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