

Joint statement – Operating Grants for health NGOs

Operating Grants are crucial for health NGOs to continue playing their essential role in EU policymaking processes. While Operating Grants were reinstated and their value recognized within the EU4Health Work Programme 2022, so far, there is no formal commitment to continue this vital source of funding beyond 2022. In September 2022, this lack of visibility leaves health NGOs with serious concerns for their long-term sustainability and capacity to play their role, and, for some, with concerns over their very survival.

As we wait for the publication of the EU4Health 2023 Work Programme, members of the EU4Health Civil Society Alliance call on the European Commission to include Operating Grants for health NGOs in the 2023 Work Programme. We are also calling for Operating Grants to be reinstated through a multi-annual process to ensure better and timelier strategic planning.

EU Operating Grants are the sole financial mechanism that enables health NGOs to play an independent, constructive, and meaningful role in the EU policy processes, and to respond to external developments, while ensuring that the voices of the civil society groups they represent, such as professionals, patients, and citizens, are heard. These activities are key to safeguard the democratic legitimacy of EU's policy processes. Furthermore, Operating Grants are key for health NGOs to keep supporting the achievement of the EU4Health programme's objectives.

In recognition of such an essential role, most of the EU funding programmes and European Commission's DGs have continued to strengthen their support for NGOs through Operating Grants across policy areas such as environment, social and civil rights, equality, disability, and citizens' participation, with substantial increments in funding rate to help civil society overcome the difficulties during the pandemic. As there is no justification for health NGOs to be treated differently, it is essential that the EU4Health programme and DG SANTE continue to support health NGOs with Operating Grants in the spirit of consistency across the European Commission. Continuous support will also enable trust-building, efficient and inclusive policymaking. Operating Grants are key to support health NGOs as they:

- Help to **ensure people's voices are heard** in EU health policymaking and **preserve the expertise** that civil society has built up in the field of public health over the past decades. Given the prolific engagement of private commercial interests in European policy processes (commercial determinants of health), Operating Grants are also key to support the capacities of public interest organisations, levelling the playing field.
- Relieve organisations **from seeking other sources of funding** thereby preserving **their independence** and the democratic legitimacy in the EU's policy process. In this context, we highlight that the exclusion of NGOs from applying to the 2022 Operating Grants based on financial independence criteria going back two years is also undermining the overall objective of supporting an independent voice of civil society.
- Guarantee **financial certainty and sustainability for health NGOs**, ensuring they will preserve and grow their capacity to rapidly engage in response to the needs of society.
- Ensure that health NGOs continue to stand ready to help and offer their **permanent support to citizens during regular and crisis times**. Operating Grants allow flexibility to develop activities in support of EU and neighbouring countries' citizens and patients, which could not be the case with Action Grants alone.

To maximise the value and minimise the burdens of this funding mechanism for both health NGOs and the Commission, it is paramount to ensure the principle of providing Operating Grants to health NGOs

in the EU4Health Work Programme 2023, through a multi-annual framework agreement. Year-to-year funding makes it difficult for NGOs to plan their activities in the long term and each year requires additional time and resources from both NGOs and the Commission. Furthermore, other Commission DGs have introduced a legal basis allowing multi annual process, showing how essential this framework is for all NGOs. A 3–4-year multi-annual framework programme agreement in the EU4Health Work Programme 2023 would provide a higher level of quality due to increased certainty and sustainability for NGOs, as well as the needed resources for health NGOs to focus and contribute to the EU4Health policy objectives.

Our organisations therefore call on the European Commission to include Operating Grants as a financing mechanism to provide a strong foundation for the contribution of health NGOs as part of the 2023 Work Programme and beyond.

