



The Social Protection Committee The Secretariat

Thematic review on Access to Healthcare on the basis of JAFH

~Summary of the discussion~

Ensuring access to adequate, affordable and quality healthcare is a key objective of the social protection systems across Europe and a shared commitment under the healthcare strand of the Open Social Method of Coordination (Social OMC). This is also reflected in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which recognizes the right of everyone to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality.

To deliver on its treaty-based mandate to monitor the development of social protection policies in Europe, the Social Protection Committee (SPC) developed the Joint Assessment Framework on Health (JAF Health), as an analytical tool for policies within the area of healthcare from a social protection perspective. Based on the extensive material, available in JAF Health, on 28 November 2018 the Committee held an in-depth thematic review dedicated to the subject of “Access to healthcare”.

The review started with presentations by ESPN, Eurohealthnet, Finland and Sweden. The ESPN presentation showed that despite the overall improvement of access to healthcare services across the EU, important inequalities persist, both between and within countries. Large shares of the EU population, in particular vulnerable groups, face multiple obstacles and therefore do not obtain the care they need. Eurohealthnet focused on the role of social factors in defining the health outcomes and concluded that improving access to health and ensuring high standards of care for everyone must involve social investments in other related areas. Finland presented its universal health care system and emphasized the importance of preventive approaches and of behavioral and life-style factors as determinants of health outcomes. Sweden outlined their experience with some recent measures to increase population access to health care, including through restructuring the national health care sector, investing in the health work force and promoting the use of digital solutions.

During the ensuing plenary discussion, fifteen Member States shared their national experiences in guaranteeing access to healthcare. Many expressed appreciation of the existing JAFH analytical material.

A number of interventions supported the notion that despite the near-universal coverage of health insurance and national health systems in most Member States, health inequalities across regions and socio-economic groups persist in a number of Member States. Many SPC delegates highlighted inadequate resources to meet the health needs of the population as a key challenge. In a number of countries, this contributes to shortages of medical professionals and their uneven distribution across the country; long waiting times (especially for specialist services); and high user charges (including informal payments), which impact particularly the low-income families or other vulnerable groups. Several member states also reported on the challenge of fragmented health insurance providers and highlighted that the existence of parallel health systems might lead to preferential treatment and differentiated access for certain population groups.

Several policy responses were discussed. Those included mobilizing additional financial resources to provide increased incentives for medical staff; efforts to promote healthier habits; focus on prevention and primary care provision; and increased use of electronic services, such as on-line or video consultations. Experience in some Member States also showed that in addition to measures aiming to ensure healthcare access for all, targeted measures are needed to improve the coverage and access for the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups. The integrated delivery of health and social services was identified as particularly effective in addressing groups that face multiple barriers to access to healthcare. It was also highlighted that access to healthcare can be affected by policies beyond the health systems, such as policies related to labour markets, income protection, education and health services.

A wide agreement emerged from the discussion that while each Member State defines its own health policy and the measures required to address health-related challenges, continuous monitoring and dialogue support the design of adequate policy response. To that end, JAF Health proves to be a useful indicator based tool that supports the monitoring activities of the SPC within the area of healthcare.