

IMHPA Network Response to EU Green Paper on Mental Health

Imhpa, the European Network for Mental Health Promotion and Mental Disorder Prevention welcomes and supports the EC proposal for the development of an EU strategy for mental health.

The EU strategy will be crucial to the implementation across EU Member States of a more comprehensive approach to public mental health.

With its document: *“Mental Health Promotion and Mental Disorder Prevention: A Policy for Europe”*, Imhpa proposed the inclusion of prevention and promotion of mental health as part of the public health approach to action on mental health. This document sets out, as the main priority, the need to develop country based action plans for mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention which would include the allocation of resources to mental health in proportion with the burden of mental health problems. The EU strategy, as presented in the green paper, is a vital step in the strengthening process of working towards this aim.

Imhpa responds to the questions posed by the European Commission as part of the consultation process below:

1. How relevant is the mental health of the population for EU’s strategic policy objectives?

In its various documents, Imhpa follows and supports the WHO Declaration and Action Plan for mental health, highlighting the relevance of mental health for the individual, social and economic development of European countries and the Community. In further response to the importance of mental health for the EU’s strategic policy objectives, the network supports the definition of positive mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”¹; In *“A policy for Europe”*, the statement follows underlining that: “mental health is a global public good; it is an integral part of the health and well-being of the citizens of Europe and a fundamental human right; it is a prerequisite for a viable, socially responsible and productive Europe as envisaged in the Lisbon strategy²; mental health also enhances social cohesion and social capital and improves safety in the living environment, all of which are in line with the EU’s strategic policy objectives”.

2. Would an EU strategy add value to existing and envisaged actions and are the proposed priorities adequate?

Added value

The development of an EU Strategy is crucial in supporting current initiatives, such as those of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, and developing them further by encouraging and supporting effective implementation across Europe, increasing cooperation and coherence

¹ http://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/en/promoting_mhh.pdf

² Lisbon strategy: http://europa.eu.int/comm/lisbon_strategy/index_en.html

between Member States, and across different sectors of society, including among others, education, employment, criminal justice, environment and housing.

Are proposed priorities adequate?

The priorities identified by the Green Paper: emphasising the promotion of the mental health of all; addressing mental ill health through preventive action; improving the quality of life of people with mental ill health or disability through social inclusion and the protection of their rights and dignity; and developing a mental health information, research and knowledge system for the EU, are supported by the Imhpa network as adequately addressing the needs of the Community to develop a comprehensive and multi-sectoral mental health strategy which would include, but not be limited to, the social and economic dimensions of mental health.

1. Promotion and prevention are necessary priorities if the mental health and well-being of the Community population is to be pursued, as positive mental health cannot be gained by treating mental disorders alone. Imhpa, through the "collection of country stories" across 31 European countries has identified other key issues in this area which are not completely reflected in the green paper and which are crucial for the development of the proposed actions. These which could be further strengthened, and include:

- The need for capacity building in European member states, especially those with few professionals and little infrastructure in prevention and promotion. As suggested by the Collection of Country stories, the degree to which professionals working in promotion and prevention are trained, supported and have the possibility to dedicate their time to this varies greatly between member states, and is in general low. The workforce for mental health includes health (e.g., mental health, health promotion, etc.) and other sectors' professionals (e.g., teachers, social workers, etc.) who should be supported in the different professionals' educational curricula, including identifying the centrality of mental health, evaluation methods, advocacy and improving the quality of existing initiatives.

- The need to increase the role of other sectors is crucial if positive mental health is to be achieved. Although this issue is touched on in the Green Paper and the European Platform aims to strengthen the role of other sectors in mental health, this could be highlighted and made more visible in the green paper. Also the European Community could ensure that structures and processes exist at all levels to facilitate the harmonized collaboration of all actors and sectors in mental health development. More systematic collaboration should be supported by developing mechanisms that would bring partners together in specific co-operation, including the private and public sectors.

2. A comprehensive and far-reaching mental health information, research and knowledge system is crucial in supporting effective action to improve and ensure mental health. Insufficient information about what could be implemented, trained workforce for implementation, as well as lack of evaluation were identified in the Imhpa country stories as some of the important reasons for lack of action in many countries.

Important topics which should form a part of this information and knowledge system, and could be strengthened in the green paper, include:

- training opportunities, needed to build capacity across member states or at the Community level;
- dissemination of evidence-based practices; increase networking and communication through a systematic approach;
- evaluation and monitoring of mental health interventions, especially the assessment of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of promotion and prevention interventions and the impact of health and public policies on mental health (mental health impact assessment). Evaluation research of mental health programmes and policies is only part of the public health culture in a small minority of European countries, as identified in the "Country stories". This evaluation research, using appropriate high quality methodologies, should focus on understanding the determinants and risk-factors of

mental ill-health and positive mental health, and provide information on the impact, effectiveness and cost effectiveness of programmes and policies including long term follow ups, all of which will enable better decisions in the field of mental health in the Community.

3. Are the proposed initiatives appropriate to support the co-ordination between member states, to promote the integration of mental health into health and non-health policies and stakeholder action, and to better liaise research and policy on mental health aspects?

The initiatives outlined in the Green Paper are welcomed and are thought to be highly appropriate in achieving the stated aims. However, more detail in these areas could be useful.

Coordination between Member States.

An EU strategy and a platform on mental health would provide greater opportunities for networking between Member States, sharing of information, and partnership working. Care should be taken that these opportunities are open, transparent and inclusive. Given the different starting points for implementation of an effective mental health strategy in different Member States, it is important that attention is given to develop tailored and culturally sensitive action plans and building capacity across Europe, which these networking opportunities could support. The role of other sectors could be strengthened in the co-ordination between member states, an area which has so far been hardly developed. Initiatives to support the development of intersectoral collaboration should also be made a priority within this section as this should not be separated from the coordination between member states. It would be beneficial for both the dialogue with member states and the EU platform to address all the priorities outlined in the green paper, in a cooperative manner.

Mental health in health and non-health policies and stakeholder action.

The "Country stories" and other projects identify the lack of understanding of public health and few initiatives to engage in inter-sectoral approaches as one of the common challenges facing Member States in developing effective national strategies. There is also a lack of communication and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental stakeholder organisations in mental health. Specialist training and support of the workforce for mental health (which comprises many different professionals in varied sectors) are crucial and determines the quality of the outcomes of plans which are implemented. The EU platform, working with the initiatives proposed in the green paper, should focus on tackling these issues in all member states and identify policy level actions to be implemented also at the Community level.

There is a growing realisation that policies that tackle poverty and the lack of social inclusion are important to prevent mental disorders and to promote mental health. Mental health impact assessments that formally identify and measure the impact of broader social and public policies on mental health outcomes are needed to argue for the development and implementation of such policies. These should feature in the mental health information system and thereby be disseminated throughout Europe to promote the integration of mental health in non-health policy making.

Liaising between research and policy.

Evaluation is one area that should be strengthened in the green paper. As highlighted in different documents developed by EC Projects, including the country stories, the lack of research infrastructure and lack of evidence-based policy culture, means that the number of

European randomized controlled trials or high quality evaluations of interventions in prevention and promotion in mental health is very low. Even more scarce are evaluations dealing with the cost-effectiveness of these programmes or evaluating the impact of policy on mental health. Evaluations of this kind and their synthesis are the critical link between research and policy.

It seems important that the three proposed initiatives for coordination should be integrated into one, with its different foci, but still in one coherent coordination and cooperation effort.

In summary, the Imhpa network welcomes and looks forward to the development of an EU strategy on mental health and the formation of an EU platform on mental health. Capacity building, evaluation and the integration of mental health in other policies are the three main areas that Imhpa would recommend strengthening in the development of a possible future EU Strategy on Mental Health and the accompanying co-ordination initiatives, which should be integrated into one comprehensive working approach.