

## Finland: Reducing health inequalities – the National Action Plan

In 2008, Finland launched a National Action Plan to reduce health inequalities. The plan includes 17 action proposals which focus on initiatives relating to welfare, education, health and the social service sector. It was prepared by a range of research and policy actors, eg. ministries, local authorities and the joint research project TEROKA in order to strengthen the knowledge base for reducing health inequalities.

### Why an Action Plan to Reduce Health Inequalities?

Since the 1980s, closing the health gap between socioeconomic groups is a priority of Finnish health policy. But despite continuous policy effort, health inequalities have partly even grown over the past 25 years. The Action Plan launched in 2008 aims at

channelling many ongoing programs and projects which address health inequalities (see figure). In particular, the Action Plan is supposed to realize the Health 2015 Program that aims to reduce mortality differences between genders, groups with different educational backgrounds, and different vocational groups by a fifth by 2015.

### The National Action Plan – linking policies to reduce health inequalities



### 17 action proposals

The Action Plan includes 17 action proposals which specify actions in three priority areas. Examples are:

#### Social policy measures:

- Reducing poverty
- Promoting the health and well-being of youth at schools
- Providing work for the long-term unemployed and those living on disability pensions

#### Influencing lifestyles through policy:

- Reducing excessive drinking
- Reducing smoking
- Promoting a healthy diet and exercise

#### Developing social welfare and healthcare services

- Safeguarding health services that support the working ability of the long-term unemployed
- Developing and strengthening mental health services
- Ensuring equal services for older people and immigrants

### Challenges to reducing health inequalities

Although the TEROKA project, a long-term collaboration between researchers and decision-makers, and government research institutes are providing systematic support, there are challenges to the implementation of the Action Plan:

- promoting patience and persistence: Changes in population health and structural changes take time to materialize, so a long-term perspective beyond the present government term needs to be maintained.
- reinforcing Health in All Policies: Certain policy lines contradict the aims of the Action Plan, such as the raise of user fees in municipal health services, the reduction of personnel in public health services and a liberal alcohol and alcohol tax policy.

### The Finnish Action Plan – A good example of evidence-based policy

- **translating research evidence into policy:** For over a decade, the TEROKA project is successfully communicating research evidence to policy makers. Most recently, a memorandum by TEROKA researchers demonstrated the widening health gap in Finland. The report increased awareness of the need for better exchange between existing programs and convinced policy makers to promote a National Action Plan.
- **monitoring and evaluation:** A situation analysis of the implementation of the Action Plan will be made in 2010, before the end of the term of the present government. The situation analysis is supposed to measure the impact of the Action Plan in reducing the scope of health inequalities and in reversing negative health trends.

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#### Full report:

Sihto, Marita and Hannele Palosuo. „Reducing socioeconomic inequalities in health II“. HealthPolicyMonitor, October 2008. Available at [www.hpm.org/survey/fi/a12/1](http://www.hpm.org/survey/fi/a12/1)

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Contact the HealthPolicyMonitor Team at + 49 (0) 5241 81-81226 or [info@hpm.org](mailto:info@hpm.org)