



THE BARENTS WORKING GROUPS

ANNUAL REPORT 2020

Name of the Working Group: **Joint Working Group in Health and Social Issues (JWGHS)**

The current Chair and the Chairmanship period: **Sweden-Republic of Karelia 2020 – 2021**

1. Priorities of the Chairmanship

With reference to the public health and related social situation in the Barents region, the JWGHS has identified the following main priority areas for cooperation, as stated in the 6th Framework Programme for Cooperation on Health and Related Social Issues in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region 2020-2023:

- Prevention and control of communicable diseases
- Improved health and increased access to health care in sparsely populated areas
- Improved environment for growth and development of children and youth

In 2020, the JWGHS oversaw three expert programmes. These are:

- Barents HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis Programme,
- Barents Programme on New Technology and Methods in Health Care in Sparsely Populated Areas,
- Barents Programme on Children and Youth at Risk (CYAR)

2. Meetings

The JWGHS usually meets twice a year with 1 ½ days meetings including study visits. This has not been possible due to the pandemic, but still two shorter meetings was carried out in June and November. Both meetings were held online, due to restrictive measures related to the spread of coronavirus infection around the world.

On the JWGHS meetings, various relevant topics has been discussed such as reporting from the prioritised programmes and presentations on current themes. There has also been presentations from

the BEAC Chair as well as the Chair of the Regional Council. The second meeting, with a broader representation by the member states and regions than the first meeting, also included a discussion on the challenges faced by regional health systems in the pandemic of COVID-19. The reporting and presentations have been highly relevant in relation to the priorities of the working group such as prevention and control of communicable diseases, improved health and increased access to health care in sparsely populated areas and improved environment for growth and development of children and youth.

3. Other activities

JWGHS recognizes the importance of prevention of and combat against HIV and tuberculosis as critical areas, addressed by a particular programme. The HIV/TB Programme serves as a cooperative framework for intensification of response to HIV, TB and associated infections. The Programme seeks to improve patient-oriented approaches, health education and training, and also to promote exchange of information and experiences. The Steering Group was able to conduct two meetings during 2020, both in the digital format. Norway continues bilateral cooperation with the Russian Barents regions with focus on TB control. Also, Finland started in 2020 a bilateral project aimed at infectious disease control in the NW Russia, with focus on health worker training. The Barents HIV/TB Programme acted as a partner in organizing the zoom-conference “COVID-19 pandemic implications for HIV and TB services in the Baltic Sea Region and NW Russia” on 17-18 December 2020.

Rural areas in the Barents region face specific challenges in the provision of high quality, coherent, and comprehensive health services. The objectives of the Barents Programme on New Technology and Methods in Health Care in Sparsely Populated Areas aim to collect and exchange information on best practices to meet unmet health care needs in the rural areas and to share models for introducing health information technology in different fields of health and care systems. The Steering Committee of the Programme carried out two online meetings during 2020. During the year, the Programme initiated a brief assessment "Barometer of digital transformation for citizens with chronic diseases" aiming to assess the trends and challenges the Barents regions are facing in the field of digital health. The assessment also covered how the pandemic affected the usage of digital solutions. The result of the assessment has been presented on several meetings and seminars, like the Joint National and Regional High-Level Meeting hosted by the BEAC and the BRC Chairs, E-health seminar on technology for better health care in the Barents region and the IV arctic conference on Telemedicine.

While many children and young people in the Barents Region grow up in a safe, healthy and positive environment, vulnerable groups of children and young people continue to lack adequate protection. The Barents CYAR Programme prioritizes a sustainable and comprehensive approach to support children, young people, and families at risk in the Barents Region with the overall aim to promote the well-being of these groups. The CYAR Programme was prepared during 2020 and will start up its work in 2021.

4. Results of the year

There has been activities carried out in all the JWGHS programmes, but it has been a challenge since many of the stakeholders have been involved in the management of the COVID 19 situation in their respective countries and regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive measures caused drops in HIV and TB testing, reduced significantly face-to-face consultations, disrupted follow-up, banned all mass campaigns and actions, shattered therapy adherence of many from the key populations, and worked negatively on mental health of both patients and professionals. The effects will start to be seen in the epidemiological situation in 1-2 years. The COVID-19 pandemic also called much healthcare sector resources into urgent response. Many of the experts involved into the Barents HIV/TB Programme had to move to COVID-19 response teams and had practically no time to dedicate to the Barents HIV/TB Programme. The projects continued but with major delays timewise and only in the virtual mode, which hampers certain planned actions.

The assessment "Barometer of digital transformation for citizens with chronic diseases" was carried in 2020. The results will be analyzed to develop possible project proposals. The SC of the Program New Technology and Methods in Health Care in sparsely populated areas, has established contact with the Expert Group on Primary Health (PHC EG) of the NDPHS.

As a new initiative it was decided to invite the Nenets Autonomous region to participate in the work of the JWGHS, whose representative took part in the first meeting of 2020 and made a report on the experience of using telemedicine technologies.

5. Youth involvement – nothing to report.

6. Evaluation of the work

The JWGHS enjoys strong support among the member countries and regions, and the level of commitment to the collaboration is high. The two-level structure of the collaboration is reflected in the JWGHS, where representatives of the national and regional health authorities meet twice a year to discuss relevant issues.

This year, the JWGHS-meetings and the implementation of the programs was a challenge. Restrictions caused by the spread of coronavirus infections affected the format of planned events and activities that was implemented online or by correspondence.

The year 2020 also showed the importance of joint efforts in the healthcare sector, especially in the fighting against infectious diseases. The development of telemedicine technologies and services to the population living in hard-to-reach areas has confirmed its relevance and necessity.

The digital meetings in the working group cannot be compared to physical meetings. There have also been some technical challenges. It was only possible to organize shorter meetings on-line and therefore a lack of possibility to arrange for in-depth regional reporting, review and discussions of the programs we run and no possibility to jointly conduct study visits. Still, there has been some relevant reporting and discussion during the meetings. On-line meetings have taught us a partly

new way of communicating across national borders we have not used before. That is a positive experience to developed in the future.

The COVID 19 pandemic had a significant impact on the activities on New Technology and Methods in Health Care in sparsely populated areas. The stakeholders were deeply involved in the management of the COVID 19 situation in their respective countries and regions. Therefore, not much time was left for active involvement in the Program. At the same time, the on-line platforms allowing more frequent meetings of the experts to discuss the ongoing issues. The pandemic is moving digital technology strategy into an even more central position for many organizations. The COVID-19 emergency seems to have opened the door to digital technologies being used more widely to advance public health. The program New Technology and Methods in Health Care in sparsely populated areas, getting now more interest from the politicians and the decision-makers and therefore opens opportunities to initiate exciting and important projects in the coming years.

The experts of the Barents HIV/TB Programme express their commitment, but the workload caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns impede sustainability and coherence of international cooperation in the HIV and TB sector.