

ROADMAP FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN THE WESTERN BALKANS (2021–2025): SUMMARY

European Programme of Work (2020–2025) – “United Action for Better Health”

The Roadmap for Health and Well-being in the Western Balkans (2021–2025) (hereinafter, the Roadmap) establishes an innovative and customized strategic framework that centres country/area-level health goals and priorities, and targets investment into critical areas of health systems across the subregion. The Roadmap scopes the following countries and area: the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina², Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, the Republic of Serbia, and Kosovo¹ – hereinafter, the Western Balkans (WBs). Building on the individual health goals and priorities of the WBs through the lens of the European Programme of Work (2020–2025) – “United Action for Better Health” (EPW), the Roadmap identifies shared priorities and potential synergistic

actions within and across the subregion. It aims to align efforts and foster cooperation with regional, subregional and country/area partners to pursue political, investment and technical objectives that deliver on the core priorities of the EPW to target the root causes of ill health and key weaknesses of health systems. Therefore, the Roadmap presents a cornerstone for health progress over the next five years by helping to accelerate progress towards EPW implementation, achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and European Union (EU) accession. Additionally, the Roadmap is intended to function as a mechanism to re-build the economies of the WBs and promote an environment in which people thrive in their communities and have their health needs met.

WHY THE ROADMAP?

1

In the WBs, the WHO Regional Office for Europe is focused on individuals, communities and partnerships for solidarity to close the health gap with the EU. **Now is the optimal time for political action and investment** to facilitate cross-border collaboration and technical advice that will benefit the entire subregion: as the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically shown, **we need to work together – now more than ever – and there is ample political capital to do so.**

2

Health is inherently linked to the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. **Action is urgently needed to address the widening health and sustainable development gaps between the WBs and the EU**, which place countries increasingly at risk of rescinding the progress they made before the COVID-19 pandemic (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1

Synergizing for Health in the Western Balkans



* All references to “area” in this document should be understood as Kosovo¹

¹ All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood to be in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

² Corrigendum, 28.10.2021: the phrase “(Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republic of Srpska)” was removed.

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We envisage the **WBs moving jointly and efficiently in the next five years** towards:

1. Continuing to increase average life expectancy in the subregion, which has risen from 74.5 years in 2010 to 76.1 years in 2019, but which remains well beneath the EU's 2019 average of 81.0 years;
2. Combating mortality attributable to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in the subregion, which is substantially higher in the WBs than in the EU. In 2019, average mortality relating to NCDs represented 94.64% of all mortality in WBs versus 89.92% of all mortality, on average, in the EU;
3. Significantly decreasing infant mortality, under-five mortality, and maternal mortality, which are currently, on average, 71%, 34% and 40% higher in the WBs than in the EU, respectively;
4. Expanding access to universal health coverage and reducing the financial hardship associated with health-care services in the subregion. The average percentage of health expenditure covered by out-of-pocket payments is 80% higher in the WBs than in the EU;
5. Strengthening human resources for health and health systems' capacities, both within and across borders. Currently, there are 139 fewer hospital beds and 110 fewer physicians per 100 000 population in the WBs than in the EU;
6. Decreasing the mortality attributable to household and ambient air pollution, which in most countries/area of the WBs is twice as high (or even higher) per 100 000 population than the average for the WHO European region.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has taught important lessons in the WBs. The following areas must be strengthened in partnership, solidarity and unity to build back better:

- **primary health care** and essential services to better sustain periods of crisis;
- **health and social protection** of marginalized and vulnerable groups;
- **governance** and administration mechanisms;
- **digital technologies** driving health system performance.

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Despite subregional progress towards achieving the SDGs, the WBs have significant progress to make on the following SDG 3 targets:

- **3.4** By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being;
- **3.5** Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol;
- **3.7** By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes;
- **3.8** Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all;
- **3.9** By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination;
- **3.a** Strengthen the implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Deliberate and targeted action is needed by the WBs' and partners to achieve the three objectives of the Roadmap (Fig. 2).

- 1) Political: Prioritizing health in the WBs' political agendas and intergovernmental processes, and ensuring it is an integrative part of the subregion's economic development and investment plans.** The Roadmap calls for positioning health high atop growth and development agendas and intergovernmental processes in the subregion. It aims to: 1) align policies with the EPW's core health priorities and integrate efforts at all levels and sectors among the WBs and partners; 2) facilitate inclusive and coherent policy and operational approaches for health and well-being in COVID-19 response and recovery; and 3) accelerate engagement of the WBs and partners to close the health gap.
- 2) Investment: Increasing investments for health.** The Roadmap calls for investment in health from within and beyond the subregion and to synergize resource mobilization by the WBs and partners. It helps the WBs identify domestic and partner-based investment opportunities; ensure impact-oriented initiatives; support the strengthening of monitoring, transparent reporting, and evaluation systems; and increase investment value by combining the resources of the WBs and partners in health.
- 3) Technical: Focusing on and investing in fundamental, technically-sound projects that have the potential to address the critical points in WBs' health systems and tackle the root causes of ill health.** The Roadmap calls on technical cooperation and mutual exchange of experience and expertise between WBs and partners to steer the development of health systems in the subregion, implement health initiatives to accelerate COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery; close the health gap between the WBs and the EU; and build back better health systems that are resilient to future health emergencies and crises.

Fig. 2



WHAT IS THE ROADMAP?

The Roadmap is:

- **an innovative, multilateral approach** that promotes synergistic action for health and well-being across the WBs to build back better and leave no one behind;
- **a country/area-owned framework** that identifies areas for synergistic, subregional action based on the self-defined health and sustainable development priorities of countries/areas;
- **an implementation tool for the EPW in the WBs** that respects prior global, regional, and local commitments across the subregion and helps the WBs progress towards EU accession, achieve the SDGs and close health gaps within the subregion and with the EU.

The Roadmap identifies:

- **health and sustainable development priorities for each country/area in the subregion**, supported by country/area-specific analytical briefs and evidence;
- **10 High Impact Action Areas and 17 Reform Initiatives for subregional synergistic action.**

The Roadmap's modes of implementation:

- **the activities of the Roadmap Council of the WBs and partners** to support keeping health high atop the political agendas of all governments and actors to better strategize for health;
- **the activities of the Roadmap Investment Group of the WBs and partners** to support investing in health as an intrinsic part of development, building a community of strategic partners to close the health gap between the WBs and the EU, and establishing joint efforts to mobilize resources and support; and
- **the design and execution of impactful projects** with defined and monitored measurable goals, and transparent reporting.

The Roadmap outlines the role of the WHO Regional Office for Europe and partners, including strong subregional networks and the EU

Strategic partnerships and collaborations are a cornerstone for health progress. Partners contribute vital perspectives, expertise, and resources that allow the WBs to realize their individual and collective goals in health and sustainable development.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe has played a vital role in subregional cooperation for health in the WBs. Along with direct country/area-level support, an enhanced country/area focus critically relies on strengthening regional and subregional linkages.

The Roadmap defines the WHO Regional Office for Europe's trajectory of engagement in the WBs and calls on the ongoing support of leading subregional networks such as the Regional Cooperation Council for South East Europe and the South-eastern Europe Health Network, in partnership with the EU:

- to provide a safe space for dialogue and advice to guide collaborative subregional efforts;
- to actively align, support, and coordinate United Nations (UN), EU, and other partners' engagement in the WBs to reach health-related SDGs and targets.
- to facilitate fair and effective interagency collaboration, including joint advocacy, analysis, policy coordination and country/area support, aimed at synchronizing, finding synergies and pooling efforts and experiences across the WBs, and
- by integrating health into the broader UN development agenda, the WHO Regional Office for Europe is committed to 'delivering as one'.

THE ROADMAP'S 10 HIGH IMPACT ACTION AREAS AND 17 REFORM INITIATIVES.

The High Impact Action Areas and Reform Initiatives (Table 1) are the implementation arm of the Roadmap. After extensive collaboration with WHO Representatives, Country Offices, Ministries of Health, health authorities and partners in the WBs, as well as subsequent rounds of interdivisional consultations within WHO, the Roadmap's High Impact Action Areas and Reform Initiatives were formed to guide united subregional action for health and sustainable development in the WBs (Fig. 3). **These Action Areas and Initiatives centre the shared health and sustainable development priorities of the WBs, advance the three objectives of the Roadmap, and fortify health systems in the subregion on the way of building back better and achieving the SDGs.**

Fig. 3

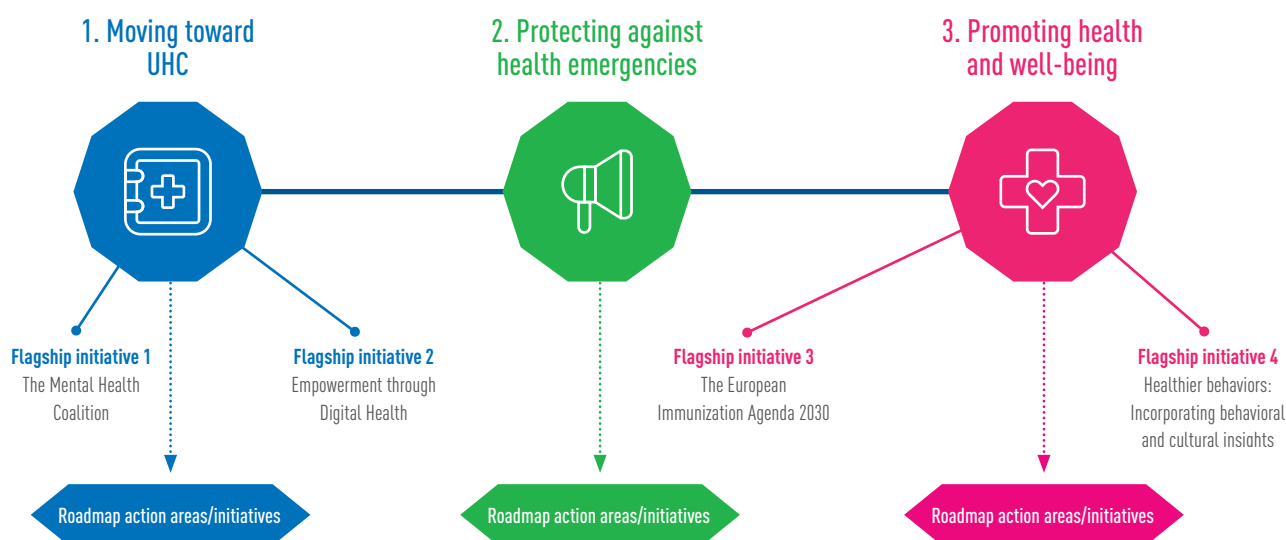


Table 1. ACT FOR IMPACT: Reforming Health Systems in WBs to close the health gap between the WBs and the EU High Impact Action Areas and Reform Initiatives

ACTION AREA 1: INCREASE RESILIENCE TO HEALTH EMERGENCIES	
Initiative 1.1	Western Balkans' Platform for Leadership and Governance for Emergency Preparedness and Response
Overall objective	Enable Health Emergency Preparedness and Response reform through capable transformational and transactional leadership, governance, and management
KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. western Balkans Platform for transactional, transformational and intersectoral leadership to increase whole-of-government investment and coordination for health security, including effective linkages between health systems, public health services, disaster management and One Health; 2. lessons learned from COVID-19 used to review and redesign, finance, cost and implement National Action Plans for Health Security and Health Systems Resilience; 3. platform for strengthened cross-border coordination in risk assessment, mitigation and information sharing based on streamlined national regulatory frameworks, health information systems, point-of-entry dialogues and joint simulation exercises; 4. upgraded capacities and tools for evidence-based emergency governance and policy-making based on direct technical assistance to countries to improve health emergency management cycle and support to International Health Regulations (IHR) National Focal Points and IHR monitoring and evaluation framework. 5. systematic assessment of vulnerabilities based on shared approaches, tools and expertise.

Initiative 1.2 Western Balkans' Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Capacity Building Initiative

Overall objective Enhance country/area abilities to respond in health emergencies based on increased capacity in critical elements of emergency response

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. improved access to people centred, affordable care for the acutely ill and injured, in emergencies including through adequate emergency care policies and capacities, and a Western Balkans Network of Emergency Medical Teams and enhanced hospital safety;
2. strengthened the Western Balkans (WBs)' rapid assessment and response capacities by expanding the contribution of the WB network of technical institutions to the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN);
3. enhance laboratory capacities based on WBs' participation in the European Regional Laboratory Task Force for High Threat Pathogens and sharing of expertise and resources at the subregional level, including for genetic sequencing;
4. subregional network and increased capacity, coordination and information sharing by Emergency Operations Centres;
5. increased emergency logistic response capacities based on a national assessment of logistics capacities and subregional sharing of knowledge and materials;
6. strengthened risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) based on the roll-out of revamped RCCE capacity building package and established Infodemic Management Systems.

ACTION AREA 2: ENSURE FINANCIAL PROTECTION AND ACCESS TO MEDICINES

Initiative 2.1 Western Balkans' Initiative on Financial Protection for Universal Health Coverage

Overall objective Reduce financial hardship and unmet need for health care, particularly for people most in need of protection, based on evidence and policy dialogue for detecting gaps and targeted investment

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. financial protection monitoring tools and observatory established, and comparative assessments conducted;
2. financial Protection Forum established, and policy dialogues held to identify and build consensus on policy responses;
3. WBs supported to develop domestic roadmaps to realise Universal Health Coverage (UHC) through financial protection;
4. WBs' capacities for implementation developed based on subregional specific WHO Health Financing Course.

Initiative 2.2 Western Balkans' Medicines and Medical Supplies Collaborative Initiative

Overall objective Reform regulatory and procurement systems to enable equal access to medicines and medical supplies and advance European Union (EU) regulatory alignment

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. good governance assessment of pharmaceutical policies; maturity of the regulatory, procurement and supply management systems; alignment with EU medicines legislation;
2. targeted reform package developed, implemented, and supported by an established network of experts in pharmaceutical policies and regulations within the WBs and EU Member States;
3. voluntary collaborations across the WBs in areas such as horizon scanning, health technology assessments, joint negotiations, local production and pooled procurement.

ACTION AREA 3: STRENGTHEN PRIMARY HEALTH CARE THROUGH DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Initiative 3.1 Western Balkans' Primary Health Care Reform Initiative

Overall objective Realising potential of primary health care (PHC) by reforming the PHC model to better respond to population health needs and bridge the gap in health between the WBs and the EU

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. state of PHC in WBs reviewed, and a tailored PHC model developed based on inter-country/area policy dialogue;
2. reform of PHC models of care towards multidisciplinary, integrated and networked care, based on country/area specific technical support and a WBs' PHC collaborative platform;
3. full potential of PHC leveraged for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), healthy ageing, population health management, and an optimized role for nursing;
4. legislative changes adopted to support continuity-of-care and coordination between different care levels and PHC providers, and PHC performance measurement systems and capacities built.

Initiative 3.2 Western Balkans' Initiative for Digital Health Transformation in Primary Health Care

Overall objective Digital transformation of the Western Balkans' health sector accelerated with a focus on supporting patient and population health management and telemedicine in PHC

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. WBs' platform for horizon scanning established to assess digital maturity and digital readiness, and to enhance digital literacy in health-care professionals and the population at large;
2. an Electronic Health Record (EHR) developed and introduced to serve as a catalyst for multidisciplinary teamwork, decision support for NCDs, and as the basis for population health management with specific interfaces for risk stratification;
3. telemedicine and other digital solutions expanded compatibly with EHR.

ACTION AREA 4: SAFEGUARD QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE AND PATIENT SAFETY

Initiative 4.1 Western Balkans' Innovation Hub for Quality of Care and Provider Performance

Overall objective Improved patient safety and quality of care throughout the WBs based on innovation and leadership for quality of care, including value-based care, and provider performance

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. quality of care and patient safety capacity building hub established and running;
2. national quality of care strategies and frameworks established and running;
3. provider quality assurance programmes and monitoring implemented;
4. health data coding and exchange standards implemented, and data repositories digitalized, including on quality of care and patient safety;
5. population health surveillance and policy-relevant monitoring frameworks revised and reformed;
6. health information systems to collect, analyse and use health information and data, including quality data indicators fully digitalized to enable impact-oriented policy and legislation development and implementation at all levels.

ACTION AREA 5: PROMOTE MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

Initiative 5.1 Western Balkans' Mental Health and Social Care Leadership Coalition

Overall objective Mental health and social care reformed through services and policy development, prevention, advocacy, communication and identification of good practices, and behavioural and cultural change

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. subregional mental health coalition established and running for leadership and service transformation, including an Annual Western Balkans' Mental Health and Social Care Leadership Coalition Conference;
2. reform need and capacity assessment performed for community-based mental health care, including at PHC level and on de-institutionalization (policy and legislation, standards of service delivery and health workforce, financing and costing, indicators and monitoring);
3. human Capital for Mental Health training kit established to enable service transformation and the building of communities and behaviours resilient to adversities, health emergencies, and man-made disasters.

ACTION AREA 6: PRESERVE HUMAN CAPITAL FOR HEALTH

Initiative 6.1 Western Balkans' Initiative to Expand and Retain Human Capital for Health

Overall objective Reform human capital for health (HCH) planning in line with evidence-based stock taking and analyses of the health labour market, health workforce planning, and implementation of International Code of Practice to ensure health-care workforce security and control health worker migration

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. subregional, intersectoral forum and policy dialogue on health worker migration and promotion of appropriate bilateral, and multilateral discussions and agreements with destination countries for win-win outcomes within the context of local requirements, regional movements and political realities/international bodies (treaties);
2. HCH data systems, tools and capacities in the WBs developed and used to assess the impact of emigration outflows and to perform health labour market analyses and health workforce planning;
3. individualized, country/area specific health workforce plans and development, and implementation of retention policies to mitigate against preventable health-care workforce losses and determine the policy levers required for sustainability of workforce supply.

Initiative 6.2 Western Balkans' Initiative for Health Worker Education

Overall objective Reform HCH education and training through adaptive/responsive curriculums in medical education, and high standard quality of care training, including in accreditation

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. domestic curricular content baselining performed against applicable regional and international standards, including in accreditation;
2. reformed domestic curricular content in pre- and in-service medical education, and quality of care training regarding health priorities and innovative learning methods;
3. HCH accreditation systems in WBs harmonized in line with applicable regional and international standards.

ACTION AREA 7: COMBAT AVOIDABLE NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES

Initiative 7.1 Western Balkans' Taxation, Legislation and Regulation Initiative for Health

Overall objectives Leverage the potential of taxation, legislation and health promotion and behavioural interventions for enhancing healthy behaviours, reducing NCD risk factors (tobacco, alcohol and nutrition) and increasing government revenue for health

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. regional platform established for intersectoral dialogue between health and finance on the value and cost-effectiveness of taxation, legislation and regulation, including the modelling of different scenarios and their impact on health and revenue, for alcohol, tobacco and nutritional products;
2. increased country/area leadership and capacities on 'best buys' in tobacco, alcohol and nutrition;
3. harmonized approach to increasing tobacco and alcohol taxes and development of country/area specific approach to taxation, and control of the illicit trade of, tobacco (including through enforcement of WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control Protocol), Electronic nicotine delivery systems and/or electronic non-nicotine delivery systems, and alcohol;
4. nutrition policies in WBs that include sustainability targets based on domestic policy dialogues;
5. reduced salt intake, eliminated use of industrially produced trans-fatty acids and increased implementation of Childhood Obesity Policies (The six Ending Childhood Obesity priority areas) through policy dialogue, targeted technical assistance and capacity building;
6. Behavioural insight (BI) approaches leveraged for promoting healthy choices based on a subregional BI platform to develop tools and capacities across the WBs.

Initiative 7.2 Western Balkans noncommunicable disease Targets and Data Network

Overall objective Set NCD targets and monitor trends based on accurate and comparable data on NCDs and their risk factors

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS

1. health information systems enabled to generate relevant NCD information, including through regular implementation of the STEPwise Approach to NCD Risk Factor Surveillance surveys (STEPS);
2. subregional platform, policy dialogue and capacity built, and counties/area supported to set NCD related targets aligned with WHO guidance and SDGs;
3. annual WBs' NCD progress conference of countries/area's networks, established and held to support implementation strategies.

ACTION AREA 8: CREATE HEALTHY AND GREEN ENVIRONMENTS

Initiative 8.1 Western Balkans' Platform for Climate, Environment and Health

Overall objective Reform the capacities and intersectoral policy infrastructure in and across the WBs for assessing, monitoring, and acting upon shared environment and health challenges, including climate change

KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. enhanced green and climate change awareness among leadership and the broader public, and engagement of private and public actors at all levels of governance; 2. improved data systems and evidence on the environmental and climate impact on health, based on a joint platform for monitoring, capacity building and dialogue, and support for regular governmental reporting on health and the environment; 3. enhanced policy infrastructure for assessing, monitoring and acting upon environment and health challenges, based on collaboration across policy and geographical boundaries, collaboration with international partners and the establishment of subregional communities of practice; 4. environmental standards set, including regular air quality monitoring, reduced air pollution and universal access to clean water and sanitation, through policy dialogues, strengthened capacities and better designed and applied legislation and regulation.
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Initiative 8.2 Western Balkans' Road Safety Initiative

Overall objective	Effective prevention and control of road traffic injuries through innovation, capacity building and institutional and technical cooperation
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KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. improved road safety data and systems through implementation of a Western Balkans' Road Safety Observatory; 2. WBs' "communities of good practice" on road safety established involving key governmental representatives and technical experts to facilitate cross-border exchange and learning; 3. increased leadership and inter-sectoral collaboration on road safety and improved legal and policy frameworks for whole-of-government implementation including implementation of the Transport Community Western Balkans' Action Plan for Road Safety; 4. national intersectoral road safety policy dialogues, plans and implementation capacities for road policing, monitoring and evaluation, public engagement, advocacy and post-crash response.
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ACTION AREA 9: EXTEND VACCINATION BENEFITS ACROSS LIFE COURSE

Initiative 9.1 Western Balkans' Immunization Agenda

Overall objective	WBs' led immunization agenda (IA) to extend the benefits of vaccines to everyone, everywhere and converge vaccination coverage between WBs and the EU
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KEY STRATEGIC RESULTS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. WBs immunization policies, programmes, and service delivery tailored to the needs of individuals and communities based on data-enabled informed decisions, and in line with the European Immunization Agenda 2030 goals and targets; 2. policy and programme implementation plans revised to foster innovation and support efforts to improve health security, UHC, access and equity for immunization; 3. Western Balkans' Vaccination Action Plan (VAP) developed, with specific subregional targets set, based on the countries/area VAPs; 4. broad partnerships for vaccination and IA Network of WBs' institutions established, including participants from other sectors and inter-country/area partnerships.
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ACTION AREA 10: COMBAT ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

Initiative 10.1 Western Balkans' initiative for intersectoral AMR leadership and governance

Overall objective	Effective implementation of national AMR action plans through functional intersectoral coordination and focus on high impact policies and actions
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Key strategic results	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. National AMR action plan in place with dedicated funding and defined national targets and indicators for monitoring and evaluation of implementation progress; 2. Functional AMR intersectoral coordination mechanism (ICM) providing leadership and coordination for AMR action plan implementation; 3. National AMR action plans focus on high impact policies and actions; 4. Subregional, intersectoral forum established for exchange of experience related to national AMR action plan implementation and policy impact.
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Initiative 10.2 Western Balkan's integrated Antimicrobial Stewardship Programme initiative in healthcare facilities

Overall objective	Improved patient safety and quality of care through focused, integrated antimicrobial stewardship programmes in healthcare facilities, strengthened reference functions, and enhanced quality of surveillance systems
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Key strategic results	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quality of care in healthcare facilities improved through integrated implementation of AMR-related programmes, i.e. antimicrobial stewardship, diagnostic stewardship, infection prevention and control, point prevalence surveys, AWaRe classification, WASH¹; 2. Western Balkans Leadership capacity for antimicrobial stewardship developed; 3. Curricula and training for healthcare professionals on AMR strengthened; 4. Subregional network of National AMR Reference Laboratories that implement laboratory quality management and fulfil reference functions to further enhance AMR surveillance in Western Balkans; 5. Western Balkan countries contribute high quality antimicrobial resistance and consumption surveillance data to the CAESAR, WHO AMC and GLASS networks²;
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¹ Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

² CAESAR: Central Asian and European Surveillance of Antimicrobial Resistance network; WHO AMC: WHO Antimicrobial Medicines Consumption network; GLASS: Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Use Surveillance System.