

**Equal opportunities for health: action for development**

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**Context**

Health is a fundamental and universally recognised human right, essential in order to achieve human beings' full potential, as well as for the physical, intellectual and emotional growth of each individual. It is also crucial for the development of the productive and learning abilities needed to guarantee personal economic well-being and social progress – both essential to avoid the rising of inequities and consequential social conflicts. Differences and inequities in health, both within societies and between States, are significant indicators of the lack of fulfilment of this right. This appears to be incompatible with today available knowledge and resources, and neither politically nor ethically acceptable.

Education has proved to be one of the most effective investments in tackling the obstacles hindering the achievement of the right to health. Indeed, informed health workers can be effective opinion makers and “global health advocates” to promote equity, justice, development and peace.

**Objective**

Considering these premises, the EU funded project “*Equal opportunities for health: action for development*” aims to raise awareness on global health and health equity as strategies to establish more equitable North-South relations and in turn reduce poverty and social exclusion in developing countries. The two-year project (May 2007 – April 2009) is implemented by 29 partners<sup>2</sup> and associates<sup>3</sup> representative of the health community from 6 European Member States (Italy, Germany, Poland, United Kingdom, Spain, Belgium), in order to promote effective sharing of knowledge, experiences and good practices. In fact another aim of the project is to create the necessary consensus to promote political and institutional support for more equitable health policies.

A key aim of the project is to improve the level of awareness about international and global health of health professionals by improving the quality of medical education and updating the current *curricula*, so that health workers can better face current globalization challenges and fully respond to their role as global health advocates. The target of this project is represented by the wide health community: teachers and students of the Faculties of Medicine, representatives of local health institutions and authorities, research centres, scientific societies, representatives of non-governmental organizations and health workers. In fact, the health community is the main moving spirit behind health policies and activities and should be more aware of the importance of a global health equity approach and therefore educated

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accordingly. The modern healthcare workers should have a clear understanding of social, cultural and environmental determinants of health and should be aware of medicine ability and responsibility to influence them. Healthcare workers - both as individuals and as members of public or private organizations - are increasingly asked to promote healthcare globally and to become real "health advocates" worldwide, not only by improving citizens' life styles but also having an impact on health policies. Present and future health workers are directly involved in this project, whose aim is to develop and strengthen their expertise and abilities in order to face the challenges, both social and professional, imposed by the global world organization. On the other hand, due to their social and professional role, and to their involvement in different contexts, health workers can play the important role of opinion makers and multipliers of information. In other words, they can act to promote a global approach to health and influence the development of fairer health policies, becoming advocates for the promotion of the right to health.

At the same time, other specific objectives of the project are:

- establishing and strengthening strategic partnerships among universities, scientific societies, research and education centres, health institutions, non governmental organizations and public institutions in order to create a public national and international consensus to promote the definition of more fair and effective health policies.
- Improving the level of awareness about global health equity within the civil society.

### Activities

The activities implemented by the project are related to education, public awareness, lobbying, advocacy and communication.

Concerning training activities, the first step of the project has been a survey on global health and health equity teaching in the Italian Faculties of Medicine. Particularly, from June to September 2007, 40 Italian Universities offering medical degrees carried out a mapping of undergraduate courses in Global and International Health. The survey was conducted through the Faculties websites or other resources (for example Students' associations). The eligible courses were:

2. Courses with a clear component of international health
3. Courses offered in undergraduate degree programmes of Medical Faculties
4. Courses of at least 1 university credit<sup>4</sup>

Having identified the courses, the responsible Professors were contacted and provided with mapping tools (a questionnaire regarding course organization, teaching and evaluation methods, programme, training material, etc.) and the related instructions. Finally the questionnaires were collected and the data were transferred to the computer-based platform.

The mapping activity confirmed that the Italian medical students curriculum does not presently include international health and related subjects, and teaching in this field is left to the good will of few professors, often as optional or extra-curricular activity.

<sup>4</sup> A university credit is the unit of measure used to evaluate the amount of individual work completed.

In general 1 credit corresponds to 25 hours of individual work, depending on the faculty. A full year of study leads to an average gain of 60 credits.



Fig. 1 Geographical distribution of courses on Global Health, Italy 2007

27 eligible courses were found in 11 Universities (27,5% of the sample) particularly in Northern and Central Italy. 26 of the 27 mapped courses were optional activities. Classroom lessons were the primary teaching method except in one case of a residential course. 20 of the 27 mapped courses were still available in Academic year 2006/2007; 4 started in a.y. 2007/2008. The oldest course started in a.y. 1995/1996 in the University of Bologna Nursing School. There was a high variability in the number and the age of students accepted in each course. 19 University Professors were titular of the courses and 8 of these belonged to the Hygiene and Public Health sector.

Through the mapping activity, it was possible to assess ongoing training experiences and to highlight possible openings for future activities. Moreover, training needs and objectives were identified. Through active collaboration between project partners and associates a standard curriculum on global health was defined, with the aim to harmonize training on global health and to promote the inclusion of these topics into the *core curriculum* of the Faculties of Medicine.

The training objectives of the standard curriculum are:

1. To identify distal and proximal determinants of health in a national and local context.
2. To describe the historical evolution of health systems identifying the constitutive elements of major models of health organization.
3. To assess the impact of globalisation on health by identifying the main links between health and development.
4. To describe inequalities in health and in health assistance.
5. To delineate the actual migration trends by identifying the main implications for health.
6. To show the potentialities of international health cooperation in contrasting inequities in health.

On the basis of the curriculum developed, the project has promoted training courses and educational activities: a training of trainers course, optional courses within the Faculties of Medicine, a distance learning course, training seminars at local health institutions and dedicated sessions in scientific societies' congresses.

In order to harmonize training on global health in accordance with the proposed curriculum and to stimulate sharing of information and experiences as well as identification of good practices, a training of trainers was realized on September 2008. The training was attended by 40 participants, among whom 24 University teachers involved in global health courses and 10 Doctors with Africa CUAMM trainers responsible for delivering the module in International

health and development. The training focused on contents included in the standard curriculum, namely: Globalization and health; Health systems; Inequalities in health; Health as a Human Right; Health and Migration. Besides plenary sessions, participants were also involved in working groups and in a roundtable on global health.

Based on the standard curriculum, which was validated within the project, 21 new optional undergraduate courses on global health and health equity will start in the academic year 2008/2009 and some Universities, which are already delivering courses on global health, will harmonize their contents in accordance with the standard curriculum.

Moreover, other activities foreseen by the project concern public awareness, lobbying, advocacy and communication. Awareness raising activities include: training of local promoters, organization of workshops and advocacy activities in the community, and organization of a "Global Health Equity Day" in the Faculties of Medicine. Finally, in order to spread information about the project and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge among partners and associates, a web page was created on the website of Doctors with Africa CUAMM and awareness materials and reports were produced and published.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusions

The project "*Equal opportunities for health: action for development*" was born with the aim to improve the level of awareness and quality of education about international and global health within medical community. The project is based on the involvement of the target population in order to better identify training needs, teaching materials and methods useful to improve the competences of health professionals on global health issues.

In particular, the project uses a bottom-up strategy in order to sensitize health professionals about the importance of introducing global health and health equity items into the *core curriculum* of the Faculties of Medicine, in order to offer a comprehensive training. At the same time, partnerships with national and international experts in the field of global health create the fundamental consensus in order to implement effective and radical innovations in university education and health policies.

Moreover, an international conference on global health is being organized for creating and strengthening synergies, partnerships, networks within the health community and outline a plan of action to advocate and teach global health. The event will take place in Padua on April 2009 and bring to the elaboration a commitment paper for future actions, initiatives and partnerships to promote global health.

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<sup>5</sup> Update information on the activities of the project, together with useful links and bibliographical suggestions may be found on the website page related to the project [www.mediciconlafrica.org/globalhealth](http://www.mediciconlafrica.org/globalhealth).