

# THE HEALTHY LIFESTYLES FOR EUROPE'S COMMUNITY BUILDING CONFERENCE:

*Advancing Cross-Sectoral Collaborations for Healthy Lifestyles Across Europe*



On 5 November 2024 in Brussels, the **Healthy Lifestyles for Europe (HL4EU)** Community Building Conference gathered a broad range of stakeholders and representatives to discuss the need to advance cross-sectoral collaborations to enable greater access, and adoption of, healthy and active lifestyles. The programme and audience were composed of policymakers, researchers and representatives from the health, physical activity, mobility, outdoor, and sport sectors, all of whom share a common interest in tackling the continent's current and future health challenges. Co-organised by EuropeActive, FESI and the HL4EU consortium, the event served as an opportunity to share ideas about how to tackle cross-sectoral collaboration to promote healthier living and reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) across Europe.



# HL4EU: Shaping a Healthier Future for Europe Through Physical Activity

Master of ceremony, **Kiera Wason** (EU Affairs Manager, EuropeActive) welcomed attendees and notably highlighted the urgent need to tackle Europe's "alarmingly high" rates of physical inactivity in her opening remarks.

Building on this, **Alina Chebes** (Senior Policy Officer, EuropeActive) provided a stark overview of the implications of inactivity. Data reveals that 45% of Europeans never engage in physical activity or exercise, a troubling trend linked to severe health and economic consequences. Physical inactivity is a leading risk factor for NCDs such as cardiovascular diseases, Type 2 diabetes, and cancer. It also worsens mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline. The economic cost is equally striking, with inactivity costing the EU €80 billion annually in healthcare expenses and productivity losses.

To address this crisis from a cross-sectoral perspective, Chebes introduced the [HL4EU project](#), **co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union** and running from January 2024 to June 2026. Bringing together a consortium of leading NGOs and sector representative bodies from the physical activity (EuropeActive), outdoor (ENOS, IGOT), sport (FESI), mobility (POLIS), health (Exercise is Medicine), patient and caregiver communities (ELPA, EPIONI), the HL4EU project aims to promote active and healthy lifestyles across Europe and access across policies and sectors.

Aligned with the policy objectives of the European Commission and the World Health Organisation (WHO), the project seeks to reduce health disparities and alleviate the growing burden of NCDs. The project aspires to **strengthen connections between sectoral networks**, foster lasting partnerships, and inspire new collaborations that endure beyond its timeline.

**Chebes** also unveiled the [HL4EU Call for Action](#), which has garnered the support of over 80 organisations and individuals across Europe. She announced the forthcoming launch of a cross-sectoral platform to **gather and disseminate best practices**, set to debut at the end of November, with finalisation anticipated by February.

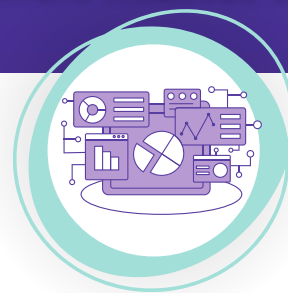
# Highlighting Good Practices in Promoting Healthy Lifestyles: A Methodological Approach

**Luz Divina De La Cruz** (Science Manager, European Initiative for Exercise in Medicine), presented a structured approach to identifying and cataloguing good practices that promote healthy lifestyles through physical activity. She introduced the **desk research methodology**, designed to uncover cross-sectoral collaborations that successfully drive health outcomes.

The process, known as **S-2F-2C** (Search, Find, Filter, Characterise, Categorise), forms the backbone of the desk research. The methodology employs filtering criteria to ensure that selected practices seek to promote healthy lifestyles via physical activity, demonstrate cross-sectoral collaboration, and provide clear, measurable outcomes. Additional characterisation criteria—such as public-private partnerships, European focus, and impact or sustainability—further refine the selection. Innovative approaches, whether technological, methodological, or social, are also considered as a useful advantage.

This comprehensive database seeks to deliver valuable, actionable information about effective cross-sectoral practices in Europe and beyond. By leveraging high-quality examples, policymakers can better design and implement initiatives that encourage healthy lifestyles.

To date, the project has gathered 50 practices from its partners, with the following distribution:



- 86% based in Europe
- 55% led by public entities
- 4% driven by private organisations
- 41% involving public-private partnerships

Looking ahead, a **Good Practice Platform** will be launched on the HL4EU website. This resource will continuously integrate high-quality examples, categorised by epidemiological evidence supporting their effectiveness. Additionally, a **Call for Best Practice Sharing** will run from February to October 2025, aiming to expand the database. This ongoing effort underscores the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration in shaping sustainable policies for healthier lifestyles across Europe.

# European Commission's Commitment to Healthier Lifestyles

**Florencia Van Houdt** (Head of the Sport Unit, European Commission) reflected on the lessons learned from the [#HealthyLifestyle4All campaign](#), which ran from 2021 to 2023. Centered around three pillars, the campaign achieved notable results, reaching 183,700 people, producing 145 promotional videos, and delivering 30 education and training modules.

- **Raising awareness:** With over 50 pledges, the campaign successfully engaged multiple generations to promote the benefits of physical activity.
- **Improving access:** 33 pledges specifically address inclusivity and non-discrimination, ensuring that disadvantaged groups can participate in physical activity.
- **Holistic well-being:** 19 pledges support an integrated approach to health, food, and sport.

Van Houdt underscored the importance of partnerships, patience in achieving meaningful policy change, and the power of showcasing concrete success stories to inspire action. She highlighted **gamification tools** as an innovative means to encourage healthier lifestyles and emphasised the role of events in bringing communities together to share knowledge and promote sports. **“Creating a sense of belonging and inclusion through sport,”** she noted, “is vital for well-being.”

Looking ahead, Van Houdt confirmed the Commission's continued commitment to the campaign's goals, with a focus on providing funding information, promoting best practices, fostering networking opportunities, and offering training to scale up efforts.





# A Global Perspective: WHO's Vision for Physical Activity

**Juana Willumsen** (Technical Officer, WHO's Physical Activity Unit) delivered a comprehensive presentation on the [Global Action Plan on Physical Activity \(GAPPA\) 2018–2030](#). She revealed troubling trends, including a steep rise in inactivity among older adults and persistent disparities between genders and income groups.

Willumsen noted that only 7 of the 26 policy indicators outlined in the WHO's [Global Status Report on Physical Activity 2022](#) are being implemented effectively in most countries. However, room for optimism was made by highlighting the success of 22 countries, primarily in Europe, in reducing inactivity rates through systemic approaches that integrate communication, sustainability, and inclusion.

Among her recommendations were:

- **Building community-level support systems:** Strengthening local networks and providing accessible opportunities for physical activity.
- **Advocating for active ageing:** Promoting physical activity as a priority for older adults to combat inactivity in later life stages.
- **Bridging the policy-implementation gap:** Ensuring that global commitments translate into local actions.

Willumsen also highlighted the economic benefits of prevention. A recent WHO analysis estimates that **500 million new cases of preventable diseases** could be avoided by increasing physical activity levels, underscoring the critical importance of immediate action.

**Willumsen** also highlighted the critical need for data-driven action to combat insufficient physical activity, which affects **31% of adults worldwide**. The WHO has **set a target to reduce insufficient physical activity prevalence by 15%** relative to 2010 levels by 2030. Unfortunately, most countries are off track. Should trends continue, 35% of adults globally will fall short of recommended activity levels by 2030, with **inactivity expected to rise in most regions**, except Western countries, sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania. The data reveal key disparities: women are consistently less active than men, especially in high-income Western countries, and inactivity sharply increases among those aged 60 and older, particularly among women.

Willumsen called attention to the **policy-implementation gap**, noting that successful countries have reduced inactivity levels by **adopting holistic, system-wide approaches**. These nations focus on creating active societies, environments, and systems rather than relying on isolated interventions.

To meet global targets, Willumsen urged **prioritisation of policies that target women, older adults, and underserved communities**. She advocated for sustainable, long-term programmes that connect people to community-based opportunities for physical activity, supported by cross-government collaboration. The message is clear: bold and coordinated action is essential to address physical inactivity and its far-reaching health and economic consequences.

## Michele Cecchini: The Economic and Health Imperatives of Physical Activity



**Michele Cecchini** (Head of Public Health, OECD) stressed the significant burden that physical inactivity places on EU Member States and their citizens, while emphasising **the economic and health benefits of promoting physical activity**. The OECD/WHO's recent report, [\*Step Up! Tackling the Burden of Insufficient Physical Activity in Europe\*](#), revealed that meeting the minimum recommended levels of physical activity could **increase life expectancy** by eight months for insufficiently active individuals, and by up to 16 months if higher levels are achieved. Furthermore, it could prevent 11.5 million new cases of NCDs by 2050 and save EU/EEA countries €8 billion annually in health expenditures.

The OECD's work on cross-sectoral collaboration for disease prevention and health promotion focuses on **making the economic case for adopting best practices in public health**. For instance, their Guidebook on [\*Best Practices in Public Health\*](#) and [\*Healthy Eating & Active Lifestyle\*](#) booklets highlight selected best practices, including:

- A multimodal exercise-based programme in Iceland targeting individuals aged 65 and older.
- A combined lifestyle intervention in the Netherlands offering dietary advice, training, and behaviour-change counselling over two years.

The OECD's evaluation showed that, **if scaled across Europe**, these practices could reduce NCD prevalence by up to 15%, decrease public health expenditures, and generate savings of up to €3 per capita annually.

A second area of the OECD's intervention focused on **co-benefits that may arise by redesigning urban environment**. Cecchini presented the urban redesign project of Barcelona's superblocks, which pedestrianise streets and transform them into urban gardens. Scaling this intervention is projected to increase physical activity by 20% overall and by 75% for transport-related activity, reduce pollution levels by 10–61%, and yield substantial health and environmental co-benefits.

Looking ahead, Cecchini stressed the importance of demonstrating the **wide-ranging impacts of physical activity policies**, from reducing NCDs-related productivity losses to lowering CO2 emissions through active transport. He concluded with a clear message: "We know what works, and it's a good investment." Showcasing co-benefits is key to supporting the implementation of these proven strategies.

## Joint Action: Tackling NCDs with Coordinated Efforts



**Knut-Inge Klepp**, Scientific Coordinator of the [Joint Action Prevent Non-Communicable Diseases project \(JA PreventNCD\)](#) (Norwegian Institute of Public Health) outlined the initiative's ambitious approach to reducing the burden of cancer and NCDs across Europe. Highlighting the significant fragmentation in EU-level prevention efforts, Klepp stressed that NCDs remain a major public health issue and the leading cause of death, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged populations.

The project, running from January 2024 to December 2027, spans across 25 countries, unites 106 partners, and operates with a budget of €95.5 million. Its goals include enhancing the capacity of Member States to implement prevention policies, improving monitoring systems, reducing social inequalities, and engaging diverse stakeholders such as policymakers, civil society, and patient groups.

With a focus on creating healthier environments, the project integrates innovative strategies such as digital tools for auditing playgrounds, car-free city evaluations, and web-based self-care programmes for adults diagnosed with cancer. Specific tasks address key risk factors by promoting physical activity, monitoring sedentary behaviour, and strengthening regulations on environmental exposures. Case studies, such as redesigning outdoor areas, demonstrate practical applications of these efforts.

Klepp emphasised the importance of collaboration with other joint actions and international actors, balancing individual-targeted interventions with population-wide policies, and securing meaningful engagement with youth and vulnerable groups. By identifying leverage points for cross-sector policy change, such as improving air quality standards, the initiative seeks to drive a cohesive and impactful response to Europe's cancer and NCD burden.



## Panel Discussion: Cross-Sectoral Collaboration for Healthy Lifestyles

The panel discussion, moderated by Jerome Pero (Secretary General, FESI), brought together high-level panellists: Kitti Almer (Public Health Attaché, Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union), Dr Ashley Ridout (Consultant in Sport & Exercise Medicine, Faculty of Sport & Exercise Medicine, UK), Stefano Pintus (Policy Officer, Sport Unit, DG EAC, European Commission), and Juana Willumsen (Technical Officer, Physical Activity Unit, WHO). Together, they exchanged ideas on innovative strategies and cross-sectoral approaches to promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles.





### ***Stefano Pintus: The Role of Cross-Sectoral Collaboration in EU Policies***

Stefano Pintus emphasised the importance of a **multi-sectoral approach** to integrate physical activity into broader health and environmental strategies. He highlighted the European Commission's **#HealthyLifestyle4All** initiative as a cornerstone for fostering collaboration between diverse sectors, ranging from education and health to urban planning. Pintus also shared the successes of **SHARE 2.0**, a European platform with over 350 members, which has been instrumental in exploring how sport and physical activity can support mental health and resilience in youth, as well as improving urban planning to encourage physical activity. On the other hand, he acknowledged the challenges of breaking down silos within the Commission, given its topic-based working structure. He highlighted the importance of community engagement in sport, as "sport happens locally", and emphasised the need for grassroots involvement to maximise impact. Additionally, he proposed leveraging **regional funds** to invest in sports infrastructure, advocating for a bottom-up approach to policy implementation.

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### ***Kitti Almer: A Policy Perspective from the Hungarian Presidency***

Representing the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Kitti Almer shared insights into the Presidency's priorities, particularly the promotion of cardiovascular health and the inclusion of health promotion in treatment strategies. She eagerly anticipated the upcoming Council Conclusions of 3 December, which aim to advance these objectives.



Almer stressed the importance of addressing health inequalities, particularly among vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, through inclusive access to physical activity and sports. She called for enhanced collaboration among Member States to align efforts in health promotion and to systematically embed physical activity into **public health and education policies**.

### *Juana Willumsen: Bridging the Policy-Implementation Gap*

Offering a global perspective, Juana Willumsen highlighted the persistent **policy-implementation gap** as a significant barrier to reducing physical inactivity worldwide. Referring to the **GAPPA**, she noted that while 36 policy indicators have been identified, only a small number of countries excel in implementing them.

Willumsen underscored the need for a **holistic approach** that connects physical activity promotion to sustainability, inclusivity, and gender equity. For instance, she pointed out that inactivity levels are notably higher among women and older adults, necessitating targeted strategies.

Drawing inspiration from local initiatives, she shared examples such as **temporary car-free zones in South America**, which have successfully encouraged community-level physical activity. Willumsen also emphasised the importance of **sustained advocacy**, capitalising on political moments to amplify the message and ensure that physical activity becomes integral to daily life as people age.

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### *Dr Ashley Ridout: Embedding Prevention into Healthcare Systems*

Dr Ashley Ridout brought a medical lens to the discussion, advocating for the integration of physical activity as a **preventative healthcare measure**. She stressed the importance of equipping healthcare professionals with tools to engage patients in conversations about physical activity. "Empowering individuals to understand the benefits of movement can transform perceptions of health and risk," she stated.

Dr Ridout discussed the need to address the **hidden population**—individuals who may not access traditional healthcare or fitness facilities. She called for **innovative outreach strategies**, such as gamification tools and community-led initiatives, to ensure these populations are included in health promotion efforts.

Additionally, Dr Ridout highlighted the role of **peer-to-peer learning** and experience sharing among healthcare providers, policymakers, and civil society. "Systematic change requires collaboration and the pooling of knowledge across disciplines," she said. She also referenced successful campaigns, such as the "Unbeatable Campaign," which demonstrates how storytelling and role models can inspire behavioural change at scale.



# Closing Remarks and Future Directions

In his closing remarks, **EuropeActive's CEO Kai Troll** reflected on the common goal that room shared, despite representing different sectors and entities: promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles. He highlighted how the conference, by bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders, demonstrated the crucial role of cross-sectoral collaboration in driving meaningful change. Troll also called for a shift in perspective, advocating for greater recognition of fitness and physical activity as an integral health solution.



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