

#vaccinaction
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Active citizens in Europe advocate for (adult) vaccination

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Introduction

Mariano Votta, Director, Active Citizenship Network (ACN)

Good afternoon and welcome to everyone.

It is always a pleasure to meet in these closed meetings, which are necessary to discuss topics of particular importance to us. I hope you all had a pleasant journey.

Today I see familiar faces - representatives of associations that have been linked to our network for years - but also new faces, so let me take a moment to introduce my organisation.

My name is Mariano Votta and I work for an NGO that is very committed to health issues, "Cittadinanzattiva", founded in Italy in 1978, when the National Health System was established in my country. Citizens decided to organise themselves to reduce health inequalities. As Italian citizens, on paper, we all have the same rights, but - depending on whether we live in the North or the South of the country - we may be faced with different quality standards, different access to care, different numbers of health workers, hospitals, etc. This is the cornerstone of my organisation, which does not focus on a specific disease or health condition, but on the need to strengthen and protect the rights of all citizens, starting with those of patients.

As Head of EU Affairs of Cittadinanzattiva and Director of our EU branch called "Active Citizenship Network", together with my team - partly here in Brussels and partly at our headquarters in Rome - we are engaged before the relevant institutions and stakeholders at EU level to increase the promotion of civic activism and participation in the political arena, and to better protect the rights of citizens and patients, which are the strength and uniqueness of ACN.

The organisation we work for is founded on the following 6 principles: participation, equality, dialogue, transparency, acceptance, and the centrality of the person. And I hope that, at the end of this two-day event, you will have felt our effort to put these values into practice.

Why we are here today

Today's initiative - as you know - is addressed to you as representatives and leaders of civic organisations and patient advocacy groups (PAGs) working at local and national level to protect patients' rights. The meeting is part of the activities carried out in the framework of the European project "#VaccinAction 2024: Protecting the value of vaccination after the COVID-19 pandemic across Europe: impact, experiences and perspectives of citizen & patient advocacy groups" promoted by Cittadinanzattiva-Active Citizenship Network and supported for the fourth year in a row by the companies GSK, MSD, Pfizer, Sanofi, whom I thank for their continued trust.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank today's two media partners, VaccinesToday and TrendSanità-Policy and Procurement in HealthCare.

Our #VaccinAction project remains committed to strengthening adult immunisation in Europe, safeguarding the benefits of routine immunisation and mobilising stakeholders to actively engage with European institutions. Specifically, with regard to vaccination policy, we are dedicated to contributing to the improvement of vaccination coverage levels in line with the health priorities outlined in the 2022 Council Conclusion on Vaccination, focusing on two areas of action: addressing vaccination hesitancy and preparing for upcoming challenges through EU cooperation.¹

¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/09/vaccination-council-calls-for-combatting-vaccine-hesitancy-and-closer-eu-cooperation/#:~:text=2022%2012%3A20-.Vaccination%3A%20Council%20calls%20for%20combatting%20vaccine%20hesitancy%20and%20closer%20EU,disease%20and%20improving%20public%20health>.

Our role is to widen the pool of civil society organisations and patient advocacy groups working on this important issue.

By offering opportunities like today's to the leaders and members of these associations, we aim to create a positive multiplier effect by connecting professionals with those involved in advocacy. As we have already seen on similar occasions, participants have always been eager to actively participate in their respective contexts in vaccination policy-making, offering their support to institutions and contributing to the implementation of national immunisation plans. As we all know, the pandemic has underlined the importance of considering vaccinations as a fundamental pillar of any modern and resilient healthcare system within the EU. Vaccinations prove to be effective and meaningful at all stages of life, providing protection not only to individuals but also to families, communities and the healthcare system as a whole.

We are here today to emphasise that vaccinations should not be reserved for children and adolescents, as recently reiterated in the Council Conclusions on Vaccination of December 2022. As the population of the European Union continues to age, it is increasingly necessary to prioritise adult vaccination, as well as paediatric one. Older people run a higher risk of contracting vaccine-preventable diseases due to age-related immune system decline and the presence of chronic diseases. It is crucial to cultivate and maintain an appropriate level of confidence in vaccines among all populations.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has emphasised the importance of rebuilding trust in institutions, leadership and science, addressing the 'crisis of confidence' that emerged during the pandemic.²

What we will talk about in today's training session

Thanks to the independent experts, whom I would like to thank once again, a common set of up-to-date information will be provided today.

The choice of topics we will address today is closely linked to the recent Council Conclusions. In particular, Active Citizenship Network welcomes the adoption - in January 2024 - of the Council

² WHO: Strategic Preparedness, Readiness and Response Plan to end the global covid-19 emergency in 2022". https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who_sprp_2022_v1_dsc.pdf?sfvrsn=7350c44b_5

Conclusions "EU Global Health Strategy: Better Health for All in a Changing World"³ after a year of negotiations⁴, reaffirming the leading role of the EU and its Member States in promoting global health, which must remain at the top of the international agenda.

Global health requires effective multilateralism and inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships, and is an essential pillar of the EU's external policy.

The three complementary priorities of the EU Global Health Strategy, as a pillar of Global Gateway and the European Health Union, should guide these efforts

- improving the health and well-being of people throughout their lives
- strengthen health systems and promote universal health coverage
- prevent and combat health threats, including pandemics, by applying a One Health approach.

From these conclusions, we asked ourselves: what is the importance of immunisation in global health? What role do immunisation policies play in global health? This is an increasingly topical issue also in light of what we are reading these days.

At the European level, for example, it was just a few days ago that Hera, the European Commission's Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority, signed a contract for the supply of 665,000 doses of vaccine for human use against the transmission of avian influenza.

15 EU countries will benefit (Italy is not among them)⁵: why are some countries yes and others no, given that the one just purchased is the only preventive vaccine against zoonotic avian influenza currently authorised in the EU?

Ahead of the holiday and international trips season, for example, Italian health authorities inform us that in 2024 there were 259 cases of dengue⁶ (the tropical disease transmitted by the Aedes A

³ https://www.oke.gr/sites/default/files/2024-1-29_en.pdf

⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/01/29/eu-global-health-strategy-council-approves-conclusions/#gsc-main-content>

⁵ I Paesi sono: Danimarca, Lettonia, Francia, Cipro, Lituania, Malta, Paesi Bassi, Austria, Portogallo, Slovenia, Finlandia, Grecia, Irlanda, Islanda e Norvegia. Cfr: <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/06/ue-firma-maxi-contratto-per-vaccino-contro-aviaria-665mila-dosi-di-vaccino-hera-societa-farmaceutica-inglese-seqirus-56532e0f-6bff-4514-9790-78376a30c9e7.html>

⁶ https://www.iss.it/-/dengue-da-inizio-anno-259-casi-tutti-importati?wkrh_tabs1=properties

Egypti mosquito) in our country, all associated with foreign trips⁷, which in some cases triggered urgent disinfestations⁸ and special measures at airports⁹.

In other areas of the world, the situation is much more serious, just think of Brazil, where the dengue epidemic recorded more than 4 million cases in 2024: this is four times the number of infections recorded in the same period last year (902,174) and almost three times the number of cases for the whole of 2023 (1,658,816), according to local health authorities¹⁰. Are there precautions to follow and prevention measures to use, starting with vaccines?

To find out more, we invited an expert on the subject, a friend of Cittadinanzattiva, who recently helped us write 'The Civic Charter of Global Health, 13 Rights and 60 Actions to Promote Global Health from a Civic Perspective'¹¹.

Certainly, when it comes to global health, it is necessary for the European institutions, as stated in the Council conclusions, to strengthen multilateral cooperation with the World Health Organisation (WHO).

In this regard, today we also have the pleasure of having two representatives of the WHO, whom we have asked to illustrate to us a new topic that is still little debated, but which we believe should be known especially by those who, like us, promote vaccination policies with conviction through concrete actions aimed at changing policies.

After an overview of vaccination policies in Europe, WHO experts will explain the potential in using behavioural knowledge to increase vaccine uptake.

Throughout Europe, thanks to an EU-funded project¹², we have already experienced the application of behavioural science in other fields of action and are interested in extending the so-called 'nudging metology' to vaccination policy as well.

⁷ https://www.quotidianosanita.it/studi-e-analisi/articolo.php?articolo_id=121513#:~:text=In%20Italia%2C%20come%20nel%20resto,a%20fronte%20degli%2082%20autoctoni).

⁸ Come a Busto Arsizio nel Varesotto a Marzo 2024. Cfr.: <https://www.rainews.it/tgr/lombardia/video/2024/03/un-caso-di-dengue-a-busto-arsizio-scatta-la-disinfestazione-urgente-e046d212-78ca-4b08-8572-f70142687bd1.html>

⁹ https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2024/02/14/a-fiumicino-controlli-anti-dengue-aerei-disinfettati_f26b8e74-ada9-4d00-946d-347da3f9365a.html

¹⁰ [https://tg24.sky.it/mondo/2024/04/30/dengue-brasile-epidemia-casi-2024#:~:text=Il%20Brasile%20ha%20superato%20i,2023%20\(1.658.816\)](https://tg24.sky.it/mondo/2024/04/30/dengue-brasile-epidemia-casi-2024#:~:text=Il%20Brasile%20ha%20superato%20i,2023%20(1.658.816)).

¹¹ <https://www.activecitizenship.net/multimedia/files/clippings-interviews-web-press-articles/2023/JCIMCR-v4-2551.pdf>

¹² <https://www.nudgeproject.eu/>

As always, we ask you to make the most of this opportunity by interacting and not hesitating to ask questions. We need to feel comfortable this afternoon and if you have any special needs, please do not hesitate to let us know. We look forward to learning more because, as always, being well-informed and up-to-date is often the best prerequisite for promoting greater activism. Thank you again for your participation.

I wish you a fruitful event.