



Predsednica Republike Slovenije

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**Address by the President of the Republic of Slovenia at High-level Dialogue  
“Social Participation as a Driver of Health Equity and Resilient Societies”**

New York, 21. September 2025

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and pleasure to welcome you today to this High-level Dialogue on Social Participation and Health Equity.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to President William Samoei Ruto and Katrin Jakobsdottir, former prime minister of Iceland, and to all the countries co-sponsoring this important event. By taking part in this initiative, we are demonstrating a political will to work more closely with our communities.

I would also like to thank the World Health Organization and Dr Hans Kluge for their strong support, which ensures that this initiative is grounded in science, based on the exchange of best practices and subject to continuous monitoring.

It is encouraging to see so many representatives of civil society here today. Your involvement will enrich our discussions and help ensure that this initiative grows into a long-lasting movement, promoting meaningful collaboration between governments, professionals and the public.

Over the past five years, the world has faced unprecedented challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, economic instability and widespread misinformation. These crises have tested us as our societies rapidly digitalise, age and become more polarised. Armed conflicts, cuts in international aid and shifting priorities away from social commitments towards defence investments further add to the risks we face in achieving development goals, including those in health. At the same time, the integrity of global architecture and the principles of multilateralism are being questioned.

This complex context has increased vulnerabilities and exposed deep inequalities. People rightly expect governments to act and ensure healthy, safe communities where well-being is central to policymaking. When adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, governments pledged to leave no one behind, whether due to social or economic insecurity, environmental risks, discrimination or mistrust in institutions. Yet, international reports show that progress is not unfolding as expected.

We must act differently and seek resources in places we have traditionally overlooked.

In my country, we have invested for decades in institutionalising social participation in health, harnessing the potential of both civil society at large and non-governmental organisations.

Our approach has included:

- establishing a legal bases for citizen's participation in decision making;
- co-financing civil society and non-profit organisations through public tenders; and
- creating platforms for the exchange of best practices.

We have insisted on close cooperation between civil society organisations and professionals to ensure that their work is evidence-based. To build trust, we established a dedicated department within our public health institute to provide training, facilitate communication and promote social participation across civil society, professional groups, communities and the media.

Allow me to share four successful examples from Slovenia:

#### *HIV Prevention*

In the 1990s, unlike some neighbouring countries where infection rates among intravenous drug users reached up to 60%, Slovenia avoided an HIV epidemic, even within these high-risk and hidden populations. This success was largely due to public investment in NGOs working closely with communities and supported by addiction centres in primary healthcare. They promoted needle exchange, anonymous testing and methadone maintenance programmes – critical measures in preventing transmission of the virus.

#### *Colon Cancer Screening*

Reaching men for colon cancer screening proved to be another challenge. Initially, only about 40% of men participated, compared with around 60% of women. To increase participation, we partnered with trusted NGOs such as volunteer firefighters and professional associations of policemen, hunters and hairdressers. This approach boosted men's participation by nearly 10% – from 44.8% in 2009 to 54.3% in the first half of 2025.

#### *Mental Health after Natural Disaster*

More recently, in 2023, Slovenia was struck by extreme weather events, when floods devastated many homes. Well-organised mental health organisations, co-financed from the public budget, provided timely support to the traumatised population. Their intervention helped ease the burden on families and reduced pressure on the health system.

#### *Youth Participation*

Last, though by no means least, is the example of youth participation. Supported by the government and professionals, organised youth groups have for years promoted healthy lifestyles among their peers. They have successfully advocated for stronger tobacco, alcohol and nutrition policies, and their efforts have been recognised by both the EU and WHO. I am very proud that our youth are not only advocating for a healthier future in Slovenia, but have also launched the Youth Health Organisation, which has been welcomed into the Youth

Council of the World Health Organization. This shows the commitment of young people when they are given the chance to shape a healthier future.

Encouraged by these positive results, we have joined forces with Thailand and other countries to bring social participation to the global stage. Last year, we proposed a resolution at the World Health Assembly, which was adopted and calls for its full implementation. By engaging the WHO, we aim to monitor the impact of this approach, share innovative solutions and develop necessary training and tools.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To meet the expectations of our citizens and secure a prosperous future for our youth, we must act with urgency and ambition. As we address health challenges, we must protect the most vulnerable and ensure no one is left behind. By empowering and institutionalising social participation and inclusive policymaking, we can build more trust in our health systems and align services with the needs of diverse communities. Evidence shows that this approach delivers better outcomes, improves compliance and drives innovation at every level.

Today's event brings together countries, UN agencies, civil society and youth to advocate for action and policy solutions, placing health, equity and well-being at the heart of decision-making. We stand united by the principles of participation, solidarity and multilateralism, building momentum together in anticipation of this week's UN events and the 2nd Summit for Social Development in Qatar later this year.

I hope this forum will generate political support for prioritising health equity and social participation, strengthen international partnerships and promote equity-driven approaches at all levels.

Let us walk this path together to secure a more resilient future for all.

Thank you.