



All Policies for a Healthy Europe

Improving citizens' well-being

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Zero-Pollution Ambition

Prioritising citizens' health & well-being

All Policies for a Healthy Europe is a multi-stakeholder initiative geared towards **putting people's well-being at the centre of all areas of EU policy-making.**

The coalition brings together a diverse group of NGOs, think-tanks, associations, companies, and individuals to support the European Commission's vision for a healthy, climate-neutral and socially inclusive Europe.

All Policies for a Healthy Europe is organised around three Working Groups focusing

on strategic clusters that reflect the priorities of the European Union: **Environment, Digital** and the **Economy**.

The Working Groups actively establish synergies between their work.

“ **Health is a cross-sectoral, inter-sectoral and holistic issue.** ”

—
Vytenis Andriukaitis
former Commissioner
for Health & Food Safety

The **Environment Working Group** is proud to present its 2020 Policy Paper, focusing on how the Commission's Zero-Pollution Ambition can protect citizens' health & well-being.

The Environment Working Group is chaired by Tsvetelina Filipova, Lead on Governance and SDGs, Senior Policy Analyst at the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP).

1. Introduction

‘A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of Union policies and activities’.

As clearly stated in Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (EU), the health & well-being of citizens should be protected across all areas of EU policy-making.

To uphold this provision of the Treaty, the EU should systematically take into account the health implications of all policy decisions.

Environmental health and human health are intrinsically connected. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of the interlinkages between the degradation of our ecosystems and the health of our planet and societies. To better manage health risks and anticipate health crises, European policies need to connect the dots between the functioning of ecosystems, climate action and citizens’ health & well-being.¹

“ **In a sick planet we cannot have healthy people.** ”

–
MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen
(EPP, FI)

Focusing on how a clean and healthy environment fosters human health, this Policy Paper proposes that all future European environmental policies should holistically address the determinants of health and systematically include the assessment and advancement of health outcomes.

Air, water and soil pollution, as well as the use of hazardous chemicals, can undermine the health of all citizens. As stated in the **UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, environmental policies should contribute to reducing the number of deaths and illnesses linked to pollution and hazardous chemicals (SDG 3).² Preventive measures and better health-enabling conditions should be prioritised.



78% of Europeans agree that environmental issues have a direct effect on their daily life and on their health.³

To tackle pollution across the board and address the environmental determinants of health, actions beyond the healthcare sector are needed.

It is essential to take a cross-sectoral approach to create health-enabling environments and ensure the health-proofing of all policies. All Policies for a Healthy Europe thus advocates for the development of concrete synergies between human health and environmental health, in policies at European level and beyond.

There is currently no overarching framework at EU level that can address complex interlinkages across policy domains relevant to environment and health.⁴

Therefore, we call for the adoption of a comprehensive Environmental Health Strategy, to streamline health requirements across relevant EU policy proposals. The strategy would provide a coherent framework for environment-related public health threats, including air, water and soil pollution, unhealthy and unsustainable food consumption, as well as the adverse effects of biodiversity loss on citizens' well-being. Environmental factors contribute significantly to the burden of premature death and disease in Europe.

Only by improving environmental conditions can the health & well-being of European citizens improve.⁵ The first step in developing and adopting such a strategy based on a **'Health in all policies'** approach is to address all health-related environmental threats in the upcoming **Zero-Pollution Action Plan for Air, Water and Soil**.

This Policy Paper thus focuses on how this Action Plan can effectively address environmental pressures on public health. Particular attention is also given to how health requirements complement the related policy proposals already shared by the European Commission, namely the **Europe's Beating Cancer Plan**, the **Farm to Fork Strategy**, and the EU's **2030 Biodiversity Strategy**.

2. Policy recommendations

Environmental pollution & citizens' well-being

To ensure the health & well-being of all Europeans citizens, EU policies need to address the effects of environmental pollution as well as ecosystem destruction on human health. Large-scale environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, water and air pollution, as well as soil degradation have wide-ranging, long-term, and irreversible impacts on human health.

Pollution is associated with the development of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including heart disease, stroke, and cancer. In fact, **90% of deaths attributable to the environment result from NCDs.⁶**

According to the medical journal The Lancet, environmental degradation 'threatens to undermine the last half century of gains in development and global health'.

Aggressively tackling the problem of climate change and air pollution could thus be 'the greatest global health opportunity of this century'.⁷

“ Air pollution is the single largest environmental health risk in Europe. ”

– **François Wakenhut**

DG ENV, Directorate for Clean Air, Director

Environmental health is a critical human health issue which requires collaboration between private and public actors, in cooperation with NGOs and the scientific community.

EU policies must ensure the accessibility, availability and affordability of improved health outcomes for all European citizens.



2a. Environmental risk factors and disease prevention - Impact of pollution on NCDs

Creating a healthier environment is key to addressing NCDs and supports the objectives of the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.

Tellingly, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified outdoor air pollution as one of the main carcinogens.⁸ In 2016, over 112 000 deaths in the EU were caused by ischaemic heart disease attributable to air pollution-induced NCDs.⁹ Pollution-induced cases of NCDs have striking economic impacts, shortening lives, increasing medical expenses and reducing productivity.¹⁰

The Zero-Pollution Action Plan is an opportunity to devise a strategic framework to both prevent and reduce the prevalence of NCDs by fostering a health-enabling environment.

Reducing environmental health risks from conception onwards would greatly reduce the vast and growing burden of NCDs. This would be a crucial step in progressing towards achieving the SDG3 of reducing premature mortality from NCDs by one-third by 2030.

Moreover, the **European recovery from the COVID-19 crisis** should promote social resilience from interconnected threats, including the impact of environmental pollution on human health. The Zero-Pollution Action Plan should thus enable a toxic-free environment in order to support both the economic recovery and the improvement of citizens' well-being.¹¹ It should focus on implementing wide-ranging policy changes to address environmental risk factors and prevent NCDs.

All Policies for a Healthy Europe calls on the European Commission to:

- 1. Define a set of minimum requirements for a health & well-being impact assessment of environmental policies** to ensure the health-proofing of all relevant policies, particularly as part of the current reform of the European Semester.
- 2. Review scientific evidence** to identify, list and monitor measures to prevent all known causes of NCDs stemming from environmental pollution in order to deliver ambitious proposals through the Zero-Pollution Action Plan and the Chemical Strategy for Sustainability:
 - a.** Ensure that the effects of all carcinogenic substances released in the environment are effectively regulated according to the **REACH regulation, Restriction of Hazardous Substances (RoHS) Directive and other sectoral policies such as the pesticides and biocides regulation or the cosmetics legislation**, with their impact on human health & well-being monitored over time;
 - b.** Develop **Extended Producer Responsibility** schemes on environmental pollution, implementing and enforcing the 'polluter pays' principle - outlining how to define a 'polluter', developing a formula for who pays with balanced impact models accounting for social and environmental impact;
 - c.** **Better inform citizens** about the known relationship between environmental pollution and human health, engaging citizens in the Zero-Pollution Ambition Action Plan by providing clear explanatory material, e.g. infographics and diagrams, in particular on occupational exposure to environmental or chemical threats.
- 3. Adopt an EU strategic framework for the prevention of NCDs**, developing a series of action plans to pursue EU flagship initiatives in areas of clear co-benefits between NCDs prevention and other policy areas.
- 4. Review air quality standards** to align them with the WHO recommendations, specifically drawing attention to the impact of air pollution as a risk factor for NCDs.
 - a.** **Encourage area-specific actions**, prioritising actions based on specific sources of air pollution, as well as on key characteristics of income, size, density and climate. **Engage with all levels of government, as well as private sector and civil society partners** to successfully drive action, align efforts and share best practices.
 - b.** Following the conclusions of the Fitness Check of the Ambient Air Quality Directives,¹² **align the standards reporting the state of air quality** across the Member States and embed an impact assessment of air quality on human health & well-being.
- 5. Systematically evaluate the life-cycle of hazardous substances** and their impact on air, soil and water resources, upstream and downstream, to carry out a holistic, evidence-based well-being impact assessment of legislative proposals, and to consider the social, environmental and economic benefits of such an approach.

2b. Sustainability of food production chains – Impact of healthy food on the environment & well-being

Rapid population growth, together with demand for food and changes in dietary habits create challenges in providing universal access to healthy and affordable food without creating negative environmental, economic, and social impacts. There is an urgent need to develop and implement policies and practices that provide access to healthy food choices, lowering the prevalence of NCDs whilst also reducing the environmental footprint of the global food system.

It is important to understand and assess the degree to which **current regulatory practices and approaches underestimate risks related to pollution and chemicals exposure in food production systems and how these adverse effects could be dealt with** through a more targeted policy framework.

Food systems have a major environmental impact. Unsustainable food production is partly responsible for land degradation, deforestation, loss of habitats and biodiversity, depletion of natural resources, as well as contamination of air, soil and water.

Moreover, food production accounts for about one-fourth of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and agricultural production accounts for 70% of global freshwater withdrawals.¹³

“ **Human health considerations should be a mandatory part of the policy impact assessments.** ”

–
MEP Jutta Paulus
(Greens/EFA, DE)

Sustainable diets should therefore be:

- a. protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems;
- b. accessible, economically fair and affordable,
- c. nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy;
- d. tailored to optimize natural and human resources and contribute to human health & well-being.

There is a range of changes to be made within the food production and consumption chains to minimise the environmental burden, ensure economic profitability and equity and improve citizens' health & well-being. It is important to inform citizens on health impacts and environmental effects, as well as to address the specific problem of pollution and contamination of environmental resources, especially water and soil.



The Zero-Pollution Action Plan is an opportunity to complement the 'Farm to Fork' Strategy by fostering innovative, systemic zero-pollution solutions to protect food systems from pollution and hazardous chemicals and to ensure citizens have access to toxic-free options.

All Policies for a Healthy Europe calls on the European Commission to:

- 1. Define and minimise the direct and indirect immediate and long-term effects of the unsafe use of fertilisers and pesticides** in agriculture on human health, and address how the Zero-Pollution Ambition and the 'Farm to Fork' Strategy can support one another's goals.
- 2. Conduct research on the impact of unsustainable and poor nutrition on citizens' health & well-being in the EU.** Define concrete objectives in reducing the mortality rates from NCDs related to unequal access to affordable, healthy, environmentally-friendly and sustainable food, and specify how those objectives will be achieved.
- 3. Ensure the swift implementation of the sustainable labelling framework as stipulated in the 'Farm to Fork' Strategy,** pinning down the environmental effects of unsustainable food production and its relation to EU citizens' health & well-being, thus empowering consumers to make informed, healthy and sustainable food choices.

2c. Adverse effects of biodiversity loss on human health – Preserving the environment

As highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis, damaged ecosystems make our societies more vulnerable to extreme events and new diseases.¹⁴

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and soil/land degradation can impact human well-being by threatening the delivery of ecosystem services, such as access to freshwater and healthy food.

“ There is a broad panorama of possibilities to use digital instruments following the Zero-Pollution goal. ”

– Vytenis Andriukaitis

former Commissioner for Health & Food Safety

Nature also sustains our mental and physical well-being and is key to our society's ability to cope with climate change, health threats and natural disasters.¹⁵

Good quality natural environments provide basic needs, in terms of clean air and water, as well as fertile land for food production. Green infrastructure also serves to regulate climate, sequester carbon and prevent flooding. Access to green and blue spaces thus provides important recreation opportunities and supports well-being.¹⁶





Protecting and restoring biodiversity are key for a healthy society.

Protecting natural habitats is essential to securing the health, well-being and future of all species. This is no small ambition and, as the European Commission points out, achieving it demands active participation and cooperation from all actors in society.¹⁷

In this regard, the use of digital tools to better monitor and assess biodiversity challenges should be encouraged.

Pollution is a key driver of biodiversity loss and has a harmful impact on our health and on the environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic makes the need to protect and restore nature all the more urgent.

Protecting and restoring biodiversity and well-functioning ecosystems is key to boosting our resilience and preventing the occurrence of large-scale health crises in the future.¹⁸

Biodiversity collapse is being accelerated by the 'release of nutrients, chemical pesticides, hazardous chemicals, urban and industrial wastewater, and other waste including litter and plastics. All of these pressures must be reduced'.¹⁹

All Policies for a Healthy Europe calls on the European Commission to:

- 1. Put the intrinsic link between environmental health and human health at the centre of the implementation of the EU's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy,** addressing the threats to human health & well-being resulting from the loss of biodiversity. Such a focus on health is now missing from the Commission's Communication on the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy.²⁰
- 2. Ensure a sustainable approach to the post-COVID-19 recovery, putting the protection of biodiversity at the centre of the EU economic recovery,** to rebuild a healthy society and healthy economy and ensure that the Green Deal objectives are held-up.
- 3. Foster the use of digital tools** to enable high-quality data collection and EU-wide research on biodiversity loss and its adverse effects on human health, to improve the protection of both environmental and human health.



3. Conclusion

The time is right for the EU to address the adverse effects of environmental pollution, unsustainable food production systems and biodiversity loss on human health & well-being.

To break away from silos and take a holistic approach to this issue, All Policies for a Healthy Europe is calling on the Commission to adopt an **Environmental Health Strategy**, which would serve as a comprehensive framework for implementing the health-proofing of all policies by ensuring that new policy actions both consider and monitor progress towards public health objectives.

The **Environmental Health Strategy** would create a framework affecting all related policy proposals, notably the Europe's **Beating Cancer Plan**, the **Farm to Fork Strategy** and the **2030 Biodiversity Strategy**, and would contribute to a sound implementation of the **Zero-Pollution Action Plan for Air, Water and Soil**, which will be adopted by the Commission in 2021. It would also act as a foundation for future economic reforms and recovery initiatives.



Although the above-mentioned policies address different policy areas, they all relate to the Commission's commitment to a zero-pollution, toxic-free environment. This underpins the need to take a cross-sectoral approach in solving the interconnected problems between environmental health and human health & well-being. All Policies for a Healthy Europe therefore calls on the Commission to put this link at the heart of the implementation of all current and future environmental policies.

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Note: The quotes featured in this paper are taken from the Virtual Roundtable Event (Zero-Pollution Ambition: Prioritising citizens' health & well-being) organised by the All Policies for a Healthy Europe initiative, which took place on 29 June 2020.



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