

Integrating climate, health, and equity for a climate-resilient Europe

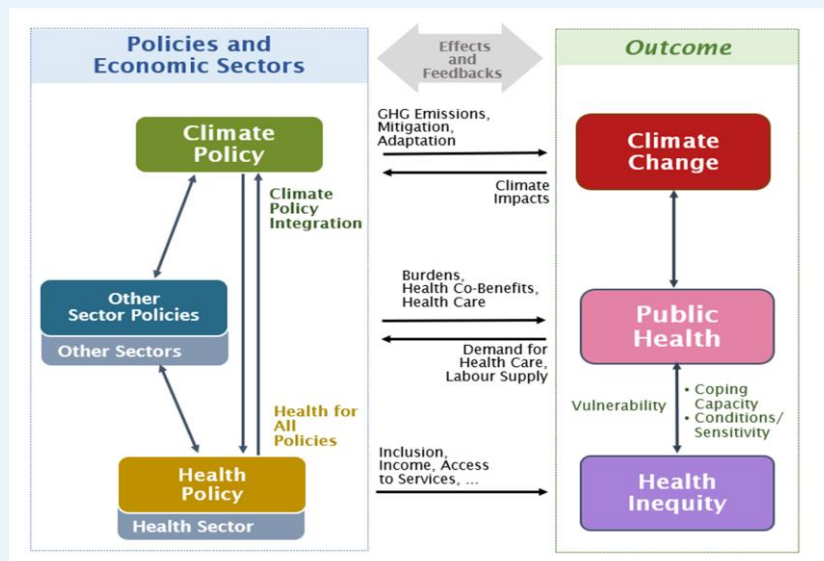
Foresight informed policy factsheet

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I. Key messages

1. The **climate crisis** constitutes an urgent and **major threat to public health** in the 21st century¹, for which health (information) systems need to be prepared.
2. **Mitigating climate change** is key to achieving **good health for all**.
3. It is important to acknowledge and reduce **greenhouse gas emissions** (GHG) in the **health sector as well as considering co-benefits** between **climate change mitigation** and **health promotion** and **greening hospitals**.
4. Applying principles of transformational governance allows for integrated outcomes **towards a healthy, equal, and climate-resilient** future, overcoming a silo mentality. Breaking down silos **takes time, effort, and accountability**.
5. **Tackling** climate change is an important building block towards a **joint European Health Union**².

The interplay between climate change, public health, health inequity, and other policy sectors



II. Key actions

1. Establish a platform for systemic exchange facilitating a knowledge exchange between governance areas, including work exchanges between different departments.
2. Establish a systematic evaluation of policies on the climate-health-equity nexus. Additionally organize workshops that aim to overcome trade-offs and conflicts between the sectors and related actors.
3. Integrate the perspectives from vulnerable groups and future generations at early stages of key decision-making processes as well as evaluation concepts to consider equity aspects.
4. Strengthen public health services and health promotion efforts as well as Population Health Information Research Infrastructures, for a climate-resilient future.

III. Background

In tackling the intertwined challenges of climate, health, and equity, it's essential to recognize the linkages of policy domains within the governance system. This policy brief acknowledges their unique attributes while understanding their interdependencies, which are key for achieving desired outcomes.

Climate Change as new Determinant of Health

Higher **greenhouse gas emissions (GHG)** contribute to rising global temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, more extreme weather events, and rising sea levels. These changes lead to **heat-related morbidity and mortality, effects on food security, impacts on mental health, and more vector-borne diseases**, etc.³. Impacts of climate change could not only be seen in decreased population health, but also on impacts within several economic sectors and policy fields (for example heat stress for health work force influencing health systems). Moreover, mitigating climate change can also reduce co-pollutants and related health issues, like premature deaths from air pollution. To tackle recent and future challenges as well as overview developments, there is a lack in Population Health Information Research Infrastructure to prepare for climate change related health crises and to promote action beneficial for climate, health, and equity.

The health sector as a thread for climate change

The national **health sectors** emit between **4% and 8%** of GHG⁷ and are, therefore, also responsible for climate change. Within health sectors most of the emissions occur from the energy and heating supply, transportation system, medical products and services, medication and to some part from the food system and related activities.

Not addressing climate-related co-benefits of health promotion sufficiently

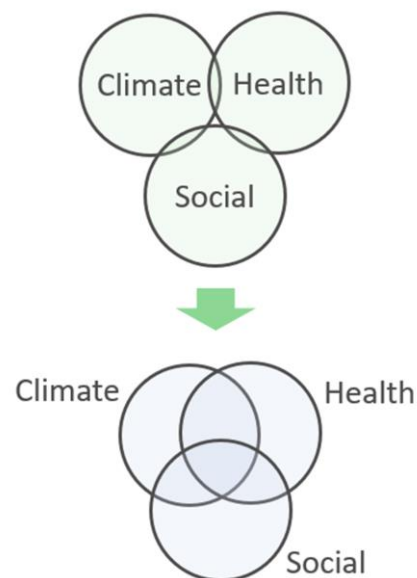
In 2019, air pollution continued to drive a significant burden of premature death and disease in the 27 EU member States: 307.000 premature deaths were attributed to chronic exposure to fine particulate matter. Examples of health impact assessments have shown that nearly 20% of mortality could be prevented if international recommendations for physical activity, exposure to air pollution, noise and access to green space had been followed, with even a greater benefit for vulnerable groups⁴.

Health systems need to focus more on health promotion, due to climate-related co-beneficial outcomes of this approach. Co-benefits are defined

Objective

This policy brief outlines **challenges and opportunities when harnessing the intersections of climate, equity, and public health**. An integration of these three sectors offers large potential for successful policy-making, political strength, and public acceptance.

From policy silos to integration



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as the positive effects that a policy or measure aimed at one objective might have on other objectives, thereby increasing the total benefits for society and the environment⁵. Three prominent fields of action are **active mobility**,⁴ **sustainable food systems**⁶ and **spatial planning**,⁷ each of them presenting opportunities for health, climate, and equity gains. In terms of mobility, motorized individual traffic powered by internal combustion engines emits GHG emissions and co-pollutants.

Lack of integration in the governance system

Policy-inhibiting forces and actors may spread narratives that⁸ lead others to oppose stringent climate action. In the governance system, these **discourses potentially reinforce silos and scepticism** between the varying actors of policy making. In practice, **climate and health policies often remain largely locked into their own policy silos**.

IV. Results

Mitigating climate change is key to achieving good health for all.

Success in climate change mitigation has direct and indirect positive effects on public health outcomes. In terms of the health sector there is need to green hospitals and to adjust our current health system to a more health-promoting approach, avoiding misallocation or unneeded polypharmacy, for instance.

Breaking down silos takes time, effort, and accountability.

It is necessary to put health at the centre of action for eco-social health transformation. This requires efforts to intersect and align climate, health, and equity goals. Taking steps in this direction includes openly recognising challenges and underlying conflicts following transparency principles.⁹ **The concepts of Climate Policy Integration and Health for All Policies** highlight the need for policy integration. It is essential to acknowledge the interdependencies of climate and health policies with other sectors as well as potential co-benefits accruing from policy links between these domains.

Health, social cohesion, and equity as core levers in climate change mitigation and health promotion.

When insufficient and siloed climate change mitigation measures are challenged effectively in public discourse, this may create new opportunities to strengthen social cohesion and equal access to health services. This is urgently needed as the impacts of the climate crisis are becoming increasingly severe.

Possible opportunities are as follows:

1) Prioritise and strengthen public health systems.

Empirical evidence shows that **private-based health systems go hand in hand with higher GHG emissions** relative to service quality.^{10,11} **Shifting health provisioning** to democratically controlled public or non-profit actors entails a more equal distribution of health services and protection of health for all as well as social and climate co-benefits.

2) Large potential for co-beneficial outcomes in climate, health and equity.

Co-beneficial measures for climate mitigation and health promotion can offer opportunities for the necessary transformative change, in terms of active mobility, sustainable food system and spatial planning. A promising new field for co-benefit related policies lies in changing the relationship between paid and unpaid work. When having a look at today's food systems, it contributes up to **one third of the EU's GHG emissions**,¹² with the **production and consumption of meat and dairy products** having the largest **environmental impact and food waste worsening** the current state. A shift towards a more **nutritious plant-based diet** in line with WHO dietary recommendations could reduce global emissions significantly, ensuring a more **resilient food system**, avoiding about 11.1 million deaths per year in 2030, and reducing premature mortality by 19%.^{6,13}

3) An integrated and participatory approach to equity.

Success in **public health is interdependent with better health equity outcomes (e.g., more healthy life years for all population groups regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds)**. Outcomes are related to the

What policymakers should consider to do:

- ✓ Evaluate policies on health-climate-equity outcomes.
- ✓ Define clear intersecting and aligned goals for climate, health, and equity to aid transformation.
- ✓ Establish high-level commissions within the EU which include different Directorate-Generals mixed with academics from different disciplines for steering.
- ✓ Identify rhetorical escape routes in political discourse (e.g., a technology discourse focused on e-fuels vs. e-vehicles).

What policymakers should consider not to do:

- ✗ Don't focus on low-hanging fruit without consulting and considering the interests and goals of other parties or dimensions.
- ✗ Don't prioritize interests and economic growth by vested interests over well-being for all.
- ✗ Don't miss windows of opportunity due to a lack of preparedness and within-silo responses that fail to integrate climate-equity-health co-benefits.
- ✗ Don't focus on financially measurable outcomes.

vulnerabilities of the populations concerned, including their coping capacities in terms of climate change, and living conditions. Participatory and socially informed policy making processes can address the needs of vulnerable groups and enable climate-friendly¹⁴ and healthy lives for all¹⁵, as well as making climate change adaptation accessible for all population groups.

4) From policy inertia to transformational governance.

To achieve transformational change, policy making needs to be guided by governance principles that foster the integration of policy fields and outcomes in relation to climate, health and equity.¹⁶ Accompanied by a Population Health Information Research Infrastructure preparedness could be increased and transformation towards a more climate-resilient, equitable and healthy future supported.

From	Towards
Egoistic acts	Ecological action for public welfare
Health repair	Prevention and health promotion
Sole focus on technological efficiency	Integrated sufficiency
Silo thinking	Systems thinking
Individualistic lifestyles	Healthy and sustainable living environments
Fragmented budgets	Joint budgeting and programming
GDP growth led economy	Economy of wellbeing

V. References

Want to learn more?

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