



## **Response of the Health and Environment Alliance HEAL to the Rio+20 consultation**

As the leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union, HEAL welcomes the organisation of the UN conference on sustainable development and has very high hopes for the Rio+20 process.

Twenty years after the Rio conference, the world is still very much on an unsustainable path, with dire consequences for our health.

Citizens all around the world are looking onto the political decision-makers to show leadership at Rio+20 in order to tackle the urgent environment and health challenges that we face. It is very important that the conference results in concrete and legally binding outcomes to bring real benefits to people's health and the planet. The transition to a green economy must be fair and equitable, lift people out of poverty, respect planetary boundaries, commit to decent jobs agenda and improve and promote people's health.

Health is recognised as a key goal of sustainable development in the first principle of the Rio declaration, which states that "*Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.*"

However, twenty years later, we believe there is an urgent need to make "health" central to the Rio+20 process and outcomes, potentially by creating a fourth pillar at the center of economic, social and environmental pillars in order to concretely link this agenda more explicitly to what people care most about – their own health and that of their community.

The consequences of environmental degradation on our health are well known and the science continues to grow on the myriad impacts (for example the burden of disease from noise or chemical pollution, also the problem of health impacts of chemicals mixtures and endocrine disruptors). In parallel, well known environmental health hazards continue to harm people across the planet such as asbestos, persistent organic pollutants (POPs), mercury and electronic waste to name just a few. It is therefore important to reverse the toxic legacy for health today and tomorrow and to ensure equity and the protection of those most vulnerable (those living in poverty, children, women).

Four concrete ways to make the foreseen Rio+20 Declaration reflect this health dimension are provided below.

### **The cost of inaction: health impacts of environmental degradation and the rise of chronic diseases**

Chronic diseases – cancer, cardio-vascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes - account for over 63% of deaths globally. The number of chronic disease cases has risen in the last years and is expected to increase further. In Europe, chronic diseases are responsible for 86% of deaths. Environmental pollution is one of the key factors in the occurrence of chronic diseases.

In September, UN Heads of State and governments adopted the political declaration of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable diseases. The resolution highlights that "the global burden of non-communicable diseases constitutes one of the major challenges for development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which undermines social and economic development through the world".

Since Rio+20 puts a strong focus on greening the economy and linking sustainable development and poverty eradication, the challenge from chronic diseases and ways to tackle them cannot be



left out of the agenda. This means first of all to highlight the health impacts of environmental degradation and how they intersect with poverty.

In Europe, half a million people still die prematurely each year because of air pollution, despite many regulatory measures in place to lower pollution levels. Globally, WHO estimates that more than 2 million premature deaths each year can be attributed to the effects of urban outdoor air pollution and indoor air pollution. More than half of this disease burden is borne by the populations of developing countries ([http://www.who.int/topics/environmental\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/environmental_health/en/)).

There is an urgent need to integrate the activities on tackling and preventing chronic diseases into the Rio+20 process.

### **Adding co-benefits: Huge health benefits of sustainable development and greening the economy**

Making health central to Rio+20 would also serve as a major driver for a renewed and stronger commitment for sustainable development measures, through highlighting the huge health benefits that could be gained from taking ambitious action now. Primary prevention through strong environmental policies and enforcement has shown to be not only cost effective but also provide significant gains in providing a healthier environment for all. Reducing our consumption and moving to a low-carbon economy will also create health gains in many cases.

Regarding climate change, the work of WHO and many others have shown the health co-benefits of stronger climate change mitigation action and the move to a low-carbon economy.

For Europe, HEAL and HCWH Europe recently published figures that showed that the EU would gain up to 30.5 billion EUR by moving to a more ambitious GHG reduction goal of 30% (<http://www.env-health.org/spip.php?rubrique97>). This would be as a result of cleaner air, but additional health benefits would be gained from encouraging more walking and cycling and also less meat consumption.

As the leading medical journal Lancet has shown, huge health benefits would also be reaped at a global level. For example, through a programme to introduce 150 million low-emission cookstoves in India the national burden of disease of respiratory and other diseases would be lowered by about a sixth (<http://download.thelancet.com/flatcontentassets/series/health-and-climate-change.pdf>).

### **Renewed international commitment to reducing the public's exposure to harmful chemicals**

From an environmental health perspective, another central issue is to increase international efforts to reduce people's exposure to harmful chemicals. We very much welcome the proposal to strengthen the international framework for chemicals management and make it legally binding. Such a framework should also clearly establish concrete actions to meet the 2020 deadline for producing and using chemicals in such a way that they do not lead to harmful effects on health and the environment.

### **Support for specialised UN agency for the environment**

HEAL supports discussions to strengthen environmental governance through the creation of a specialized UN agency for the environment on equal footing with other specialized UN agencies. This is necessary to fundamentally improve governance, accountability and liability.



HEAL believes that a key criteria for the success of the UN conference will be to make the health dimension central to the process, and consequently involve all actors – UN member states, different intergovernmental organisations and UN bodies, and stakeholders in the process. Given the increasing toll on people's health of unsustainable development, special efforts should be given to increasing the participation of the health sector in this new RIO+20 agenda, as well as increasing the public health framing around discussions.

We hope to continue to contribute to these discussions in the coming months, bringing together various expertise and perspectives from our broad based environment and health alliance.

Best regards,

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*The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is the leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union. We demonstrate how policy changes can help protect health and enhance people's quality of life. HEAL has over 70 member organisations, representing health professionals, patients, citizens, women, youth and environmental experts, help to bring independent expertise and evidence from the health community to different decision-making processes. Members include international and Europe-wide organisations, as well as national and local groups. [www.env-health.org](http://www.env-health.org)*