

- EXPERT STATEMENT -

HEALTH VOICE FOR HEALTHIER CHOICE

Health Response toward Zero Air Pollution in the Balkan region

Air pollution is the leading environmental risk factor for disease, causing a huge health burden. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), air pollution from indoor and outdoor sources causes seven million premature deaths worldwide every year (WHO, 2018). WHO data shows that 99% of the total global population breathes air considered harmful to health¹, with low and middle-income countries suffering from the highest exposures.

Air pollution is the second leading cause of death from non-communicable diseases (NCDs)², causing ischaemic heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lower respiratory infections and lung cancer. New studies also link air pollution to a higher risk of diabetes, asthma, and dementia, affecting the developing brain of a fetus and children with potential lifelong effects (psychological and behavioural problems later in life, including symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and depression)³. Air pollution leads to an enormous health burden to the individual and society, reflected in the number of sick days, physician visits, medication use, and hospitalizations, adding up to huge healthcare costs in the Western Balkans. Air pollution impacts everybody, but it has a particularly harmful effect on vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and chronic disease patients, children, pregnant women, and people living in socio-economically challenging environments.

Evidence is also growing regarding the harmful effects of low-level pollution, pointing to the fact that there may not be any safe level of exposure.

Ending health harm from air pollution requires firm and urgent preventive action and political will and commitment at all levels and sectors of policymaking. Protecting every human being from air pollution – especially those most vulnerable – requires developing and implementing disease-preventing policies that build on the latest science, prioritize prevention and precaution, and are enshrined in binding legislation with clear goals and timelines.

Poor air quality is a major concern in the Western Balkans with people exposed to high concentrations of harmful pollutants throughout the year, above the national limits. Pollution sources include traffic, with a large number of outdated vehicles, heavy industry, agriculture,

¹ World Health Organization (2021). WHO global air quality guidelines: particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide.

² World Health Organization (2019). Noncommunicable diseases and air pollution, WHO European High-Level Conference.

³ UNICEF (2017). Danger in the air: How air pollution can affect brain development in young children.

residential burning of coal and wood for heating and cooking, waste incineration, and energy production, heavily dependent on old coal power plants that emit enormous amounts of particulate matter (PM), sulphur dioxide (SO₂), and nitrogen oxides (NO_x). Particulate matter pollution has been considered the most dangerous to human health.

In 2019, the European Environment Agency has estimated that the fine particulate matter PM_{2.5} caused more than 25,000 premature deaths in Western Balkans alone: 4,000 in Albania, 5,900 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2,800 Kosovo*, 900 in Montenegro, 3,400 in North Macedonia, and 11,400 in Serbia. In the same year, more than 2 200 lives were lost due to Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) and Ozone (O₃) pollution⁴.

The regional governments keep financing the burning of fossil fuels industry, especially coal power plants that pollute local air, land and water. The communities near the coal power plants and large industrial facilities are affected the most but due to climate conditions, the pollution is spread across the region affecting human lives, wildlife and nature. It seems that citizens are continuing to fund the recovery of public health, the economy and the living environment.

Air pollution and climate change are major health threats in the region. The region has already been hit by extreme climate events such as heatwaves, massive floods, rain and wind storms, and droughts, all of which impose huge health, environmental and economic losses: these climate events have increased the vulnerability of many communities' health and the ecosystem, and slowed taking the steps towards a more sustainable future. If not tackled, climate change will continue contributing to an increase in temperatures and heatwaves as well as the extreme weather events that will along with air pollution, impact health adversely, reminding us of the necessity to act urgently to end fossil fuel dependency in the region, that drive climate change and are major air pollution sources.

Air pollution and climate change have a common source: the burning of fossil fuels. Efforts to reduce one can improve the other. Improving air quality can help with climate change mitigation, and lowering emissions will help with air quality.

By reaching WHO Air Quality Guideline levels, Western Balkans will preserve public health as well as mitigate climate change.

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Eionet (2021). Health risk assessments of air pollution Estimations of the 2019 HRA, benefit analysis of reaching specific air quality standards and more.

* This designation is without prejudice to position on status and is in line with the UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers in the region need to identify and prioritize measures that will provide for the greatest health, climate and clean air benefit. Air pollution is a public threat and should be addressed through ambitious and consistent actions aimed at a healthier future. The Leaders of the Western Balkans need to increase the participation of science in decision-making processes to ensure that the timely integration of the Zero Air Pollution objectives into environmental policies are in place.

The Western Balkan leaders need to acknowledge the significant role of city authorities in delivering actions at reducing air pollution and mitigating the effect of climate change. Making decentralization work demands the funding, accountability, monitoring and effectiveness of investment and delivery policies by the cities in order to manage the rapid response to cutting air pollution at the source. This also means that more health and environmental experts have to join efforts in setting science-based decision-making aimed at building a healthier, cleaner and sustainable future for all.

We, the undersigned health experts working in the Western Balkans call on the following:

Set a zero-pollution objective and timeline

The Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the Action Plan for its implementation are important policy frameworks to achieve clean air by introducing a Zero Air Pollution policy in the region, and a great opportunity to guide investments under the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. Leaders of the Western Balkans have to set the ambitious goal of achieving a pollution-free environment to be followed by a clear timeline.

The most recent emergencies such as Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the financial and energy crisis, and the War in Ukraine have slowed progress toward a healthier future across the Western Balkans. These life-threatening circumstances have increased the vulnerability of our communities, putting people's health at the forefront. Leaders have to promote investments in introducing more renewable energy capacities instead of fossil fuels, cutting pollution to prevent diseases, mitigating climate change, greening the cities, and increasing smart mobility. The ongoing recovery steps need to be considered as the opportunity in delivering a safe, healthier and sustainable future for all.

TO WESTERN BALKAN LEADERS:

- Commit to fully aligning National Air quality standards with the latest 2021 World Health Organization Air Quality Guidelines, as soon as possible.
- Establish Regional cooperation to accelerate the move to Zero Air Pollution, including collaboration between health and environmental ministries, public health institutes and health experts.
- Increase the participation of health experts, the scientific community and academia in decision-making and policy development processes.
- End direct or indirect public subsidies of polluting processes, especially fossil fuel burning for energy production and residential heating and cooking.
- Set an ambitious coal phase-out date for energy production supported with funding for renewable energy sources.
- Provide support to end residential coal and wood burning for cooking and heating, and switch to cleaner alternatives.
- Support cities in implementing policies phasing out old diesel vehicles (import and use) and introducing electric car infrastructure, as well as reducing motor vehicle traffic, and expanding public transport and active travel infrastructure (cycling, walking).
- Finalize the process of the ratification of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and commit to the ambitious implementation of protocols.
- Support modelling to establish economy-wide emission reduction commitments for the major pollutants covered by the National Emission Reduction Plans (under Energy Community Treaty, Directive 2001/80/EC) and the Gothenburg Protocol under the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution.
- Increase the uptake of Best Available Techniques in accordance with the Industrial Emissions Directive.
- Provide funding to develop and implement Air Quality Strategies at the City level aimed at strengthening Health prevention and Environmental protection.
- Establish an adequate Air quality monitoring system, including through accreditation of Air quality monitoring networks.

Expert Signatories:

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