

Environmental health policy: A priority for a global health renaissance

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On 21 May, the Italian Presidency of the G20 together with the European Commission will co-host the World Health Summit in Rome. A few days later, the World Health Organisation will hold its annual meeting in Geneva. Both events will obviously focus on the Covid tragedy and on reforms that could prevent similar disasters in the future. “The world needs a new beginning in health policy. And our health renaissance starts in Rome,” said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on 6 May. We share this hope and want to see it succeed.

As members of civil society, we have been called upon to contribute to the collective discussion that will lead to the drafting of the “Rome Declaration”. Based on a [report we are releasing today as part of the Well-being Economy Alliance](#) (WeALL), we believe that the notion of an environmental health policy should be at the heart of the Rome Declaration and,

beyond that, it should inspire the overhaul of health policy at all levels of government. In essence, we are calling on the delegates at these two crucial summits to recognise the fruitful interdependencies between the environment, health and the economy.

The key principle is to make the link between health and the environment the core of global health and move from a cost-benefit logic to co-benefit policies. Our inability to respond effectively to the twin crises hitting health and the environment stems in large part from our perception of the costs that resolute action would have for the "economy". But we are the economy, and the economy forms only part of the true source of our prosperity, which is social cooperation. The health-environment transition does of course have an economic cost, but it is clearly lower than the cost of *not* making the transition. The limits of the monetarisation of life are becoming more and more apparent, and every day it is becoming clearer that the supposed trade-offs between health, the environment and the economy are wrong-headed and counter-productive. Conversely, the gains in terms of health, jobs, social cohesion and justice from co-benefit policies are considerable. Health systems are the strategic institutions in this reform, so long as much greater emphasis is placed on prevention, but other areas of the transition are also involved: food

production and consumption, energy systems, social policy (particularly the fight against inequality and social isolation) and educational policy.

To take simply the example of energy, it is abundantly clear that today's global energy system, based 80% on fossil fuels, makes no sense from the point of view of humanity's well-being, as it is simultaneously destroying current and future health. Air pollution resulting from the use of fossil fuels is playing a grave role in the health vulnerability of Europeans facing Covid-19 (responsible for 17% of deaths according to [some estimates](#)); yet reducing air pollution in Europe's cities would bring a key health co-benefit: it would reduce the risk both of co-morbidity in the face of future environmental shocks such as respiratory diseases but also of heatwaves, which are becoming increasingly frequent and intense on the continent. When all the co-benefits are taken into account, first and foremost the reduction of morbidity and mortality linked to air pollution (which, according to recent studies, are much higher than previous estimates, with [100,000 premature deaths in France](#) each year), the switch to renewable energies would lead to savings of around fifteen times the cost of their implementation.

Beyond these areas we have identified, there are many others where health, the environment and the economy are mutually reinforcing. Together they form a foundation on which to erect

policies that
aim for the full health of a living planet. As the Rome Summit
and the WHO
Assembly approach, we therefore want to challenge the
participants with two
simple questions: What if the best economic policy were a
genuine health
policy? What if the best health policy were
a genuine environmental policy? As the countries of Europe
know very well,
crises are the cradle of new worldviews, the catalysts of new
approaches that
can gain traction. Rome was not built in a day, but the co-
benefit approach can
light the way to a renaissance in health.