



Report

Conference on 23 april 2024:

**“Healthy cities, healthy people – Pathways for clean air
in the EU’s urban environments”**

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On the 23rd of April 2024, experts from 33 countries gathered in Brussels to discuss air quality in EU urban environments at the conference “**Healthy cities, healthy people**”. The conference, bringing together EU and urban decision-makers, health stakeholders, scientists and civil society, aimed to present recent evidence on the health and economic benefits of sustainable mobility, and share good practice on measures initiated by city decision-makers, and showcase stakeholders engagement for cleaning up the air in the city of Brussels. On the eve of the 2024 EU elections, and next EU policy cycle 2024-2029, the purpose was to identify pathways to reach good air quality for everyone, everywhere in cities.

In his opening address, **Xavier Brenez**, CEO of the Independent Health Insurance Funds, emphasized that we need to better protect our physical and mental health against air pollution, and that air quality must remain high on the political agenda in Belgium and Europe after the elections. **Anne Stauffer**, Deputy Director of HEAL, pointed out the importance of the vote in the European Parliament on the trilogue agreement on the revision of the Ambient Air Quality Directive (AAQD). Its implementation in the coming years will be crucial, especially for the protection of vulnerable groups. **Annya Schneider** of Bloomberg Philanthropies indicated that there is resistance in many cities towards certain initiatives such as LEZ, and that it is important to continue to cre-

ate awareness and inform the general public using scientific insights.

In his keynote speech, **Patrick Child**, Deputy Director General of the European Commission’s DG Environment, said air quality is a “fundamental dimension” of the European Green Deal, which has an indispensable link to climate change. In the future, the implementation of the air quality standards will be the focus point. **Alain Maron**, Minister of the Brussels-Capital Region, responsible for Climate Transition, Environment, Health and Social Action, called for cooperation between citizens, NGOs, governments, media and private actors to work together on air quality. Taking a break on measures would be irresponsible, according to the Minister.



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Several researchers then presented results from recent studies and projects. **Alberto Gonzalez** of the European Environment Agency (EEA) presented the latest figures on air pollution in European cities. Today, almost all European city dwellers breathe air that does not meet the recommended standards of the World Health Organization. He pointed out that Europe is the fastest warming continent in the world. **Mark Nieuwenhuijsen** from ISGlobal delved deeper into the sources of air pollution in cities and the benefits of improving air quality. For example, transport is the main source of nitrogen dioxide (48.5%) in cities, while for PM2.5 it is households through their energy consumption (22.7%). He also emphasized that a holistic approach must be taken. Not only air quality needs to be improved, but more focus should also be placed on green zones in cities. Several inspiring examples were given, such as the "superblocks" in Barcelona. **Zorana Jovanovic Andersen** from the European Respiratory Society detailed the health effects of air pollution and heat waves. 20% of diabetes and 26% of heart attacks are caused by air pollution. Increasing temperatures due to climate change are exacerbating the health impact of air pollution, as shown in the EU Exhaustion project. More people die from respiratory problems on a hot day. **Rachel Aldred** from the University of Westminster explained how low-traffic neighborhoods can reduce motor-

ized traffic and air pollution. London has made significant investments to promote active mobility (walking and cycling) and implement low-traffic neighbourhoods. This has led to people walking and cycling more, which has had an impact on car traffic, car ownership and air pollution. **Luk Bruyneel** presented first results of a new study by the Independent Health Insurance Funds on the impact of low-emission zones (LEZ) in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent. There has been an overall more rapid decrease of black carbon (BC), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10) since the introduction of the LEZ in Antwerp (2017) and Brussels (2018), up until 2022, compared to cities without an LEZ. The study confirms that more deprived neighborhoods bear the heaviest burden of air pollution – but also that for some pollutants (BC and NO₂), the LEZ resulted in a faster decrease of air pollution in those neighborhoods.

After the break it was the turn of representatives of 4 organizations to explain how they are committed to better air quality in Brussels: Tim Cassiers for BRAL - Citizen Action Brussels; **Renaud Leemans** for Les Chercheurs d'Air; **Marie-Charlotte Debouche** for ClientEarth and **Dr. Patricia Palacios** for the Société Scientifique de Médecine Générale (SSMG). According to the panel, there is no lack of interest in the problem of air pollution among the





broader public. On the contrary, people expect governments and city councils to take appropriate measures. The commitment and interest of people is also evident from the success of “citizen science projects”, such as CurieuzenAir in which 3,000 people participated. It is true that there is resistance to initiatives by the Brussels- Capital Region to improve air quality, but it should not be forgotten that there is also a lot of support. Governments should also be held responsible for the lack of appropriate policies to improve air quality. Doctors can also contribute by informing their patients about the impact of air pollution on health, especially among vulnerable groups such as people with chronic conditions. But for this it is necessary that doctors are informed about this during their training, something to which SSMG tries to contribute through the development of eLearnings.

Finally, experts discussed measures that city authorities have already been taking and which further policies are needed to clean up the air in cities. **Dorthe Nielsen** from Eurocities provided an overview of initiatives that European cities have taken, or plan to take in the future. For example, Paris wants to achieve the recommended standards for air quality of the World Health Organization by 2035. **Jacek Kisiel**, from the City of Warsaw, talked about the project to gradually phase out the city's many coal stoves. A good regulatory framework and financing are important aspects, but information and creating awareness are essential. Warsaw will be the first city in Poland with a LEZ. **Julia Poliscanova** from Transport & Envi-

ronment presented the Clean Cities Campaign to ban polluting cars from cities by 2030. How can this be achieved? By promoting active mobility, with a good offer of public transport, and by electrifying the vehicle fleet.

Oskar Bonte of the Flemish Youth Council confirmed that air quality is also an important issue for young people, as well as the need for more green spaces, a better offer of public transport and safe roads for cycling. In order to move towards better air quality, the members of the panel see 2 important things: 1) there is no shortage of good ideas, but there is a lack of political commitment to do something about it; 2) a Just transition with a social policy towards vulnerable groups is crucial. A holistic approach is necessary to tackle air pollution.

Christian Horemans of the Independent Health Insurance Funds closed the conference with the following 3 key takeaways: change - to make our cities healthier, we must approach things differently. There's no time to hit the pause button; opportunity - the EU is about to have a new legal framework for air quality, which will create opportunities to further reduce air pollution; solidarity - solidarity with vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, children or people with chronic diseases; solidarity with people who live in more deprived and often unhealthy neighborhoods; solidarity between generations.



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