

# Environment and health in policy-making

## How environment and health stretch across policy domains

A healthy environment is crucial for human health and well-being. Major national legislation started in the mid-20th century to improve air quality. This was triggered by serious problems with smog caused by industry, private heating and traffic. Environment policy at the EU level started with the adoption of the first Environment Action Programme in 1972, based on the ideas that prevention is better than cure and the 'polluter pays' principle.

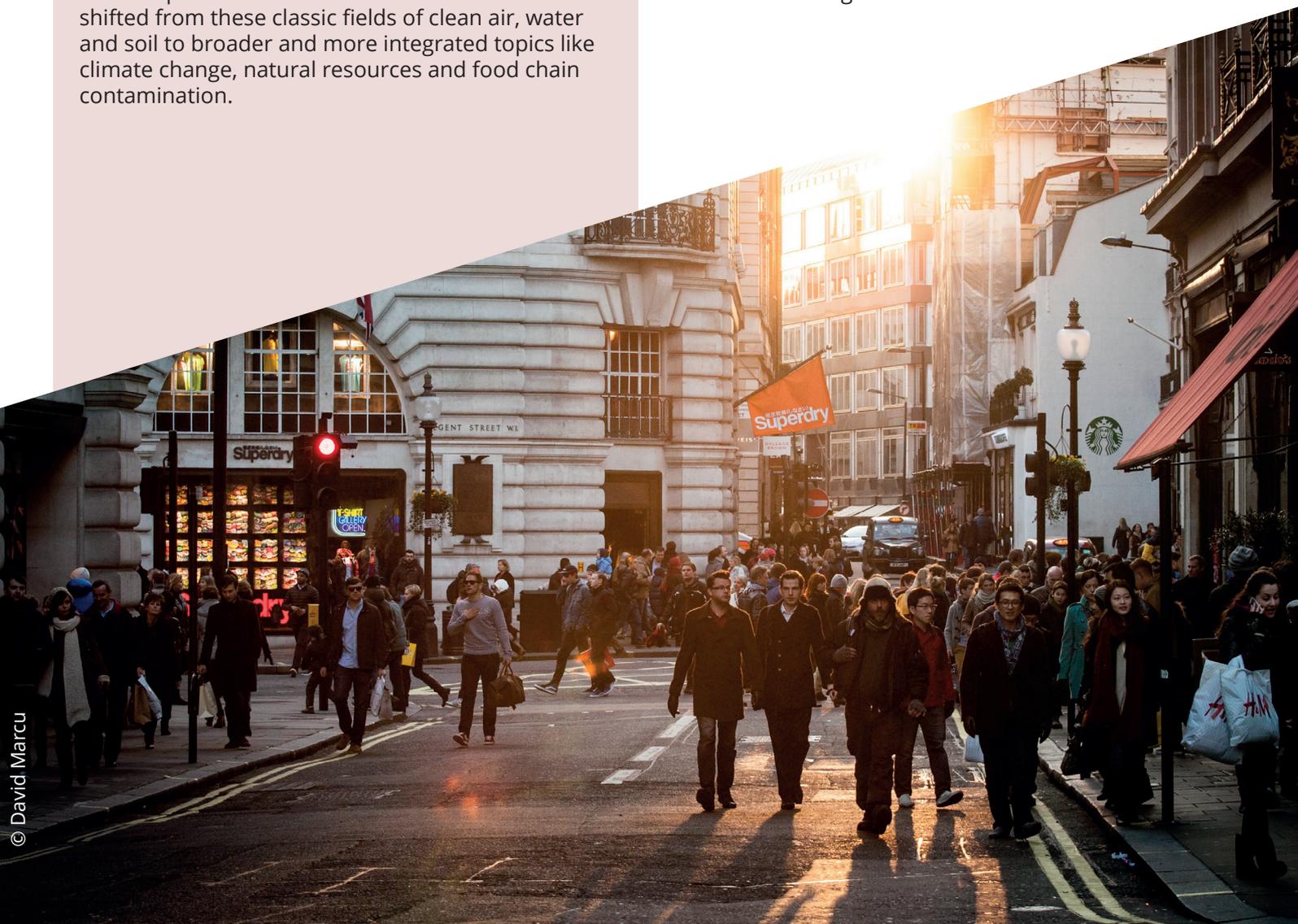
Environment policy in the last decades of the 20th century was driven by regulation of specific sources (vehicles, plants) and setting both emission and environmental quality standards for single chemicals in air, water, soil and waste. Today, the focus of policies on environment and health has shifted from these classic fields of clean air, water and soil to broader and more integrated topics like climate change, natural resources and food chain contamination.

## What are the impacts of key EU policies on environmental health and well-being?

In November 2013, the 7th Environmental Action Programme (7th EAP) was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council. Entitled "Living well, within the limits of our planet", the programme recognises the intimate link between human health and well-being and environmental quality.

The 7th EAP's three thematic priority objectives are:

1. To protect, conserve and enhance the Union's natural capital;
2. To turn the Union into a resource-efficient, green and competitive low-carbon economy; and
3. To safeguard the Union's citizens from environment-related pressures and risks to health and well-being.



These three priority objectives show the main thematic challenges of recent and future environment and health policies. If they are addressed in an integrated way, taking into account the numerous interlinkages of environment and health, the implementation of the 7th EAP represents a tremendous opportunity to improve synergies between environment and health policies.

At the same time, the EU policy challenge for the near future is driven by the Commission Communication

on Europe 2020 - A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (COM (2010) 2010 final). These policy objectives aim to promote sustainable growth and progress towards a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy.

One of the five headline targets addresses climate change and energy sustainability and includes ambitious objectives on greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy supply and energy efficiency.



The EU 2020 strategy: a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (based on Rappolder, 2012)

The three key objectives for 2020 include:

- A 20 % reduction in EU greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels;
- Raising the share of EU energy consumption produced from renewable resources to 20 %; and
- A 20 % increase in the EU's energy efficiency.

A key challenge facing policy makers today is how to design and implement policies that promote energy and resource efficiency and at the same time deliver improvements in environment and health.

## How can we resolve conflicting policy objectives?

Some of the actions to reach these objectives may have effects on the environment and on human health. Moreover, they may conflict with policies to improve air and water quality, with subsequent impacts on health. Some examples of possible adverse effects on human health related to measures that are taken to combat climate change are:

- reductions in indoor air quality resulting from insulation materials intended to reduce energy loss from residential buildings;
- environmental and health impacts associated with the production and use of biofuels;
- environmental and health impacts associated with the production, processing, combustion and disposal of biogas; and
- land use for energy crop production in competition with food production and biodiversity.

Such conflicting priorities between policies on resource efficiency and energy, on the one hand, and environment and health policy on the other should be

identified at the early stages of planning. This would enable policy makers to choose the most appropriate measures in order to avoid negative health impacts.

Research is necessary to identify the possible negative health impacts associated with different policy options and innovative measures are then required to minimise trade-offs and maximise synergistic effects.

As resource efficiency and energy policies, as well as those on environment and health, fall under the responsibility of different sectors and administrations at Member State and EU levels, it requires strong cooperation across these sectors to ensure that environment and health is fully taken into account.

The integration of environment and health considerations into policy making from the outset can reduce negative health impacts of European and national energy and resource efficiency policy. This can improve health outcomes and reduce the associated burden of health-related costs.

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