

Resolution 2286 (2019)¹

Air pollution: a challenge for public health in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Across Europe, despite improvements over the last decade, air pollution remains the largest environmental risk to our health, causing disease and shortening lives. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that outdoor air pollution kills 4.2 million people worldwide every year. In Europe, air pollution is responsible for at least 753 000 deaths annually. However, the latest research evidence shows that the actual death toll is considerably higher, and that air pollution kills more people than tobacco smoking. According to WHO, the global economic burden from premature deaths due to outdoor air pollution amounts to US \$5.7 trillion in welfare losses, or up to 4.4% of the global gross domestic product (GDP).
2. Air pollution also cripples health by causing disorders that include respiratory diseases (particularly asthma), heart attacks, strokes and lung cancer. There is also a strong link with diabetes, obesity and dementia. At the beginning of life, air pollution leads to lower birth weight, alterations in immunity, impaired lung capacity, delayed neurocognitive development and reduced intelligence. Recent studies also link air pollution to mental health disorders in childhood. Of the numerous air pollutants, fine particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and ozone are the most damaging to human health.
3. As three in four Europeans live in cities, they are highly exposed to toxic air due to urban traffic, energy production, industry and residential heating systems – largely as a result of fossil fuel combustion, notably diesel – and also from waste incineration. In rural areas, the agricultural sector contributes significantly to air pollution through the intensive use of phytosanitary spraying. No one can escape air pollution, and because it crosses borders so easily, concerted policies and action across Europe are needed.
4. The Parliamentary Assembly considers that clean air is a basic human right: wherever we live, we need air that is breathable and that does not shorten or impair our lives. Public authorities bear direct responsibility for putting in place effective regulatory policies to reduce air pollution. The Assembly notes that while the current mandatory norms of the European Union on exposure to air pollutants are a helpful benchmark for its member States, they should be fully aligned with the more stringent WHO Air quality guidelines and must be better enforced. Non-European Union countries should follow the WHO guidelines and incorporate them into national legislation so as to better protect public health.
5. The Assembly believes that multilateral action on cutting outdoor air pollution would not only save lives, prevent disease and improve public health budgets, but would also enable member States to contribute to reaching various targets under the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 3 (good health and well-being for all), Goal 7 (clean energy), Target 11.6 (air quality and waste management in cities), Target 11.2 (access to sustainable transport) and Goal 13 (climate action). Both present and future generations have the right to enjoy a healthy living environment.
6. The Assembly welcomes and supports the WHO action plan adopted in 2018 – the Geneva Action Agenda to Combat Air Pollution – aiming to mobilise global, national and local players to reduce the number of deaths from air pollution by two thirds by 2030. The Assembly also commends WHO's efforts to integrate new evidence on the toxicity of air pollution through policy advice to member States, based on its Air quality guidelines, which are currently undergoing re-evaluation, with particular attention to fine particulate matter, ozone, NO₂, SO₂, carbon monoxide and benzene, as well as certain heavy metals.

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 24 May 2019 (see [Doc. 14888](#), report of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Mr Serhii Kiral).*



7. The Assembly deplores the fact that the consequences of chronic excessive exposure to air pollution are the worst for the most vulnerable population groups (children, pregnant women, people in poor health and certain categories of workers). It is moreover concerned that across Europe, social inequalities – within and between countries – tend to penalise the poorest populations in terms of disease and mortality from air pollution. Exposure levels are highest in eastern and south-eastern Europe, which is plagued by high poverty and unemployment rates, and within countries in the most socially deprived urban areas.

8. The Assembly urges member States to make action against air pollution a political priority on the grounds of the imperative to protect public health. It recommends that they:

8.1. enhance their co-operation with the European Environment Agency by participating fully – either as members or co-operating countries – in collecting data for the European Environment Information and Observation Network (Eionet), particularly as regards real-time air pollution levels;

8.2. ensure sufficient national capacity for air quality monitoring and inform the public about the current levels of air pollution in comparison with WHO air quality norms;

8.3. put in place new mechanisms for measuring ultra-fine particulate matter (less than 0.1 micron in size, or the so-called PM_{0.1} or less) in the air;

8.4. ensure that national legal provisions are in place to allow local authorities to levy green taxes and enact other relevant measures (such as traffic restrictions, pedestrian zones, sustainable urban planning, bans on burning biomass, air pollution alert units with monitoring and law-enforcement capacities) aimed at improving air quality locally;

8.5. establish clean air zones around schools and other institutions ensuring full-time care of children, and ensure an adequate safety perimeter around agricultural areas that make intensive use of phytosanitary products;

8.6. consider special measures to limit the circulation of diesel-powered vehicles and make it mandatory for their owners to retrofit them with exhaust filters, as appropriate;

8.7. in the light of new evidence, reverse their policies favouring or tolerating diesel which have proven to be a failure from a climate change perspective and a disaster from a public health perspective, especially in terms of air pollution;

8.8. set up alert mechanisms for systematically triggering air pollution control and reduction measures at local level whenever pollutant levels exceed the WHO's guideline values;

8.9. where national clean air strategies promote greater use of electric vehicles:

8.9.1. boost recourse to sustainable and renewable energy sources for generating "clean" electricity;

8.9.2. ensure the traceability of the materials and processes used for making batteries, so that third countries involved do not use child labour in any part of the production chain;

8.10. enhance investment in clean technologies and fuels for industry (in particular transport and energy sectors), agriculture and households (notably for heating systems), and promote clean public transport systems and cycling.

9. The Assembly specifically calls on national parliaments to hold governments to account on domestic clean air policies, the enforcement of existing requirements on air quality and adherence to the relevant international legal instruments, in particular:

9.1. the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and its protocols, notably the Gothenburg Protocol (as amended in 2012);

9.2. the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which obliges parties to eliminate dioxins;

9.3. the Minamata Convention on Mercury of the United Nations.

10. Finally, the Assembly urges the European Commission to upgrade the European Union norms on air quality through the current review of its air quality directives in order to align the European Union reference limits with WHO norms as soon as WHO's re-evaluation process is completed. By the same token, the

Assembly calls on the European Parliament to monitor closely the review process regarding the European Union's air quality directives and norms. Where relevant, it also invites the European Commission to use the pre-accession instruments to support efforts to improve air quality in the neighbourhood countries.