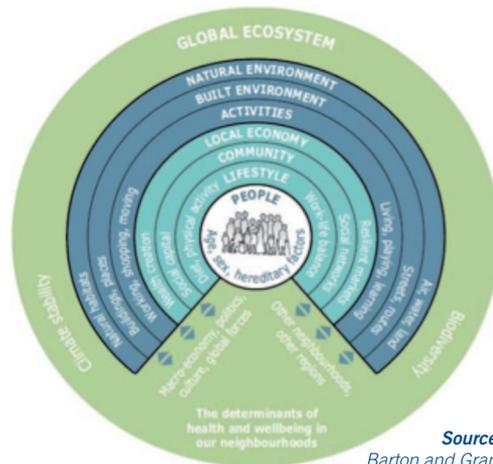


Making the link: **Sustainable Lifestyles** and health equity

The World Health Organisation's **Commission on the Social Determinants of Health** has identified principles and recommendations to tackle health inequities: the factors responsible for avoidable health inequalities, which persist globally and in the European Union. This series of summaries, updated and expanded online at www.equitychannel.net, introduces how those and other recommendations, as part of evidence based health promoting approaches, could be applied to a range of European Union legislation, policies and programmes. The aim is to improve international, national and local policies and practices within and beyond health systems, in order to promote better health and wellbeing for all.

Why making the link matters

Leading a sustainable lifestyle refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising social, economic and environmental resources for the future. These resources are intrinsically linked to health and social equity. Unfortunately, today's reality continues to be shaped by unsustainable practices within society, and its negative consequences can already be seen and felt in the present. Phenomena like natural disasters, lack of access to healthy nutrition, economic instability and increasing chronic diseases are only few examples of current threats, which represent a particularly dramatic burden to socially disadvantaged groups.



Source: Barton and Grant

Changing behaviours is not only a matter of individual choice and action, as available options depend on the cultural, physical, socio-economic and political environment. At political level, the principle of equally targeting the interdependent pillars of economic development, social equity and environmental protection remains elusive. The challenge is to avoid confining sustainability as an environmental issue and to bring together different sectors including transport, health promotion, environment, urban planning, education, transport, business and local administration.



The situation

CLIMATE CHANGE

It is widely agreed that climate change is one of the major threats of our times. It affects access to food and water, air quality, adequate shelter, fuel and energy prices, which are all part of the social and environmental determinants of health. Low income and socially disadvantaged groups are those most severely affected by climate change due to their living conditions and lack of resources. Consequences to health may include malnutrition, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, infectious diseases and health risks due to heat waves. Furthermore, the scarcity of food would lead to a rise in food and fuel prices with dramatic consequences on eating habits and diets, with unhealthy, highly processed products being the most affordable.

NUTRITION

Evidence has shown that our current food consumption patterns are unsustainable, producing low cost food at a high cost for the environment and both human and animal health. For example, increased meat production has negative environmental impacts due to the high use of non-renewable energy and water. A diet based on meat also increases levels of blood cholesterol and, if combined with low levels of physical activity, leads to overweight and obesity, and therefore to a higher risk of cardio-vascular diseases and cancer. Meanwhile, the increased availability and low prices of highly processed, unhealthy food explain why in Western Europe, the poorest people are those most affected by obesity, with 20-25% of men and 40-50% of women being obese¹.

LIVING CONDITIONS

People with low income are also most likely to live in poor housing conditions, which is associated with respiratory and heart diseases. They may live in areas particularly exposed to floods or other natural disasters, and are more likely to be affected by displacement, migration and homelessness. Aggravating factors include having a low income, social isolation, old age, very young age and chronic illness². Population growth, changes in the demographic structure (e.g. ageing populations), and an increase in the number of households are also significant factors. These trends result in higher demand for products and social services, putting pressure on public finances. Dense population in cities may also, if not properly addressed, increase health threats and risks due to vector borne diseases, inadequate access to water, lack of sanitation and poverty.

TRANSPORT

Our current way of living is over-dependent on motorised transport which is contributing to lower levels of physical activity. On top of harming the environment, this leads to obesity and an increased risk for cardio-vascular diseases, stroke, diabetes, cancer and poorer mental wellbeing. Moreover, the quality of life of those living close to busy roads is greatly affected by air pollution, noise and road injuries. There are several factors preventing people from making healthy and sustainable travel choices like walking or cycling: lack of information, levels of traffic, noise, crime, litter, poor street lighting and low quality public transport. Unsurprisingly, these factors are more prevalent in disadvantaged communities³.

CONSUMPTION

In the past decades, the policy orientation has been that of sustaining economic growth rather than the global ecosystem. Economic growth is driven by the increasing consumption of goods and services, requiring the use of natural resources and causing increased emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. However, it is becoming clear that well-being is not only shaped by material goods but also by social and human capital including social networks and family ties, which are often stronger in less affluent economies⁴. People in economically rich countries are often stressed and work long hours, with strained social ties as a result. Media, marketing and advertising play a significant role in shaping consumer choices. Once again, the socio-economic background is a strong determinant of how consumers respond to such pressures.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

The rapid development of technology in recent years has had remarkable consequences on our consumption patterns, social behaviour and everyday lives. Examples include the growth of e-business and advanced medical technology aiming to reduce health care dependency for the elderly and people with disabilities. There is still little knowledge about the impacts of these developments on health. What does remain a certainty is the gap between socio-economic groups in terms of access, awareness and affordability. Today's challenge is to identify opportunities and threats arising from information technology and social media, and to assess their impact from a health and social perspective.

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Setting an example

Bouger 30 minutes par jour, c'est facile! - "Moving 30 min every day, it's easy!" INPES, the French National Institute for Prevention and Health Education, launched a national and local programme in order to promote physical activity. The objective was to get people to integrate walking or cycling in their daily practices. They introduced a signalling system in the cities providing information on specific destinations and their distance in time, such as: "centre of the city, 15 min". It is a way of showing that physical activity is accessible for everybody. Everybody can walk or cycle for three daily trips of 10 min, which is made easier by knowing where to go and how long it takes to get there.

There is a social gradient in population's health linked to housing conditions. With sections of the EU population lacking adequate washing and toilet facilities as well as affordable energy and heating, it is of utmost importance to ensure better housing conditions for all socio-economic groups.

Quality Housing – the Sustainable Development Scheme of the Welsh Assembly Government is a strategy that was developed in 2009 to provide a coherent direction for housing policy in Wales. It guides housing policies of the government, local government and NGOs, ensuring that social housing continues to provide high quality, affordable homes that meet needs of people with low incomes. Housing is considered a key lever for stimulating private investment which will contribute to the sustainable regeneration of communities.

Pathways to progress

There needs to be a deeper understanding at all levels of the complex interactions between the economy, social development and the environment. There is more to behaviour change than merely empowering individuals, communities and populations with the necessary information. While increased awareness, knowledge and changed attitudes are important, they are seldom sufficient. For instance, initiatives by governments and social institutions using regulatory frameworks have proven to be more successful in triggering the transition from unhealthy to healthy behaviours. Different aspects need to be addressed to insure that all people's health and well-being is put at the centre of future developments while prioritising environmental and societal issues.

EU INITIATIVES

Europe 2020

The Europe 2020 strategy and its objectives for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, set out the proposed economic, social and environmental development for the EU until 2020. In order to achieve this, the European Commission has proposed key targets that include, among others, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 20% compared to 1990 levels; an increase of the share of renewables in final energy consumption to 20%; and a move to a 20% increase in energy efficiency.

Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related Health Issues

The Strategy emphasizes the importance of integrating policies from food and consumer to sport, education and transport. It recognizes that obesity has a higher prevalence among people in lower socio-economic groups indicating the need to pay attention to the social dimension. Issues for action include: consumer information, availability of healthy food, encouragement of physical activity, priority groups and settings, development of the evidence base to support policy making, and development of monitoring systems.

Sustainable Development Strategy

The main challenge of the current EU Sustainable Development Strategy is to gradually change the current unsustainable consumption and production patterns and the non-integrated approach to policy-making. The overall aim is to identify and develop actions to enable the EU to achieve continuous improvement of quality of life for both current and future generations. This is to be achieved through the creation of sustainable communities that are able to manage and use resources efficiently and to tap the ecological and social innovation potential of the economy ensuring prosperity, environmental protection and social cohesion.

Strategic Transport Technology Plan

The European Commission has presented a framework for transport research, innovation and deployment, based on the vision for an integrated, efficient, safe, secure and environmentally friendly European transport system by 2050. In a context of growing transport demand, differences in the evolution of transport modes and demographic change, its objectives include reducing Europe's dependence on imported oil, improving the environment, reducing accidents and sharply cutting greenhouse-gas emissions.

Additional Information

- **The SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 2050 project**
<http://www.sustainable-lifestyles.eu/>
- **Sustainable Lifestyles: Today's Facts & Tomorrow's Trends**
http://www.sustainable-lifestyles.eu/fileadmin/images/content/D1.1_Baseline_Report.pdf
- **Europe 2020: a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth**
http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm
- **EU Sustainable Development Strategy**
<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/>
- **Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health**
http://www.who.int/social_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/en/index.html
- **Fair Society, Healthy Lives – Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010**
<http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review>
- **Sustainable Development Commission - Sustainable development: The key to tackling health inequalities**
<http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=1053>
- **WHO Regional Office for Europe - Climate change, extreme weather events and public health – Meeting report**
http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/144389/e95103.pdf

Contact

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Sources

- (1) Robertson, A., Lobstein, T. & Knai, C. (2007). Obesity and socio-economic groups in Europe: Evidence review and implications for action. Report for DG SANCO. Brussels: European Commission
- (2) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007). Climate change 2007: Synthesis Report of 4th Assessment. Geneva, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change p.48
- (3) IPH - The Institute of Public Health in Ireland (2011). Active travel- healthy lives
- (4) SPREAD (2012). Sustainable Lifestyles: Today's Facts & Tomorrow's Trends, D1.1 Sustainable lifestyles baseline report.



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