

EuroHealthNet Feedback on Empowering the consumer for the green transition

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EuroHealthNet is a not-for-profit partnership of organisations, agencies and statutory bodies working on public health, disease prevention, promoting health, and reducing inequalities. Between 2016-2019, it coordinated the Horizon 2020 INHERIT project, which looked at initiatives and policies that simultaneously improve health, the environment, and health equity – a “triple-win”. **The green transition is an area in which we need to strive for and can deliver a triple-win**, promoting not just environmental sustainability but also health and health equity. It is also crucial that all stakeholders are involved in the transition, including policymakers and the private sector, but also citizens.

Individual (un)sustainable behaviours impact not only the health of our planet, but also our own health. Changes in how we live and consume are key aspects of the green transition. **Policymakers can facilitate these changes by making them easy**, given that initiatives that require a high level of personal agency are less likely to be adopted at scale. A crucial element here concerns guidelines and labelling.

Although in many cases healthy food is also sustainable food, trade-offs do exist, and there is little consensus internationally on what constitutes sustainable and healthy foods. There is a need for **clear scientifically sound guidelines at EU level and for mandatory standardised EU-wide labelling on food products, which highlights health, social and environmental sustainability aspects**, to support people’s capability to make positive changes. Criteria established by the “Question Mark” tool, which scores products on the basis of health, environment, human rights and animal welfare considerations, can provide guidance.

Information must be easy to understand and apply by all; the more complex the information the harder it is for the general population to act on. Given that information and misinformation is increasingly transmitted digitally, this also calls for investments in improving digital literacy. Policymakers must also ensure responsible (digital) marketing to all consumers, including vulnerable consumers such as children. Finally, sustainable and healthy food, as well as other products and services, needs to be affordable, as cost is a key factor driving consumer behaviour, and this can increase health inequalities.

The “triple-win” transition cannot happen without the private sector. **Policymakers have a duty to facilitate the efforts of front-runners, and to hold accountable those that harm the environment and public health**. In this respect, legislation should help to foster a level-playing field amongst companies and make sure that externalities are included in the ultimate pricing. Tax incentives could also be provided to encourage companies to produce sustainable products and services, particularly those that have yet to prove economically sustainable. Enshrining the “right to repair” in legislation and banning the practice of obsolescence would help to further embed sustainable practices within companies. **“Business as usual” is not an option**, and EuroHealthNet highlights the urgent need to enforce existing and amended legislations, rather than relying on self-regulation.

Foresight activities carried out within INHERIT help to further this reflection. Based on research about demographics, health, social inequalities and the environment, INHERIT set out four positive scenarios of what Europe could look like in 2040. In focus groups carried out in five European countries, the “circular economy” scenario was well received, mainly due to its inclusion of citizens insights into the planning of societal processes and the promotion of resource efficient and circular models of production and consumption, highlighting that these are elements which are highly valued amongst European citizens.