

## Strengthening disease prevention through clean air: A unified call to action from health groups

The evidence is clear – air pollution remains the top environmental risk to health in Europe, resulting in hundreds of thousands of premature deaths, avoidable ill-health, and hundreds of billions of euros in costs annually. The EU Healthy Air Coalition (EUHAC) stands united to advocate for strong and decisive policies that prioritise clean air action in the EU.

As part of our efforts, we recently organised a high-level policy outlook event at the European Parliament, hosted by MEP **Javi López**, a Vice-President of the European Parliament, to emphasise the critical role of strengthening disease prevention through clean air action. With speakers from various EUHAC founding members as well as key clean air action leaders like **Veronica Manfredi** (Director for Zero Pollution and Green Cities at the European Commission, Directorate General for Environment) and WHO air quality representatives **Dr Maria Neira** (Director of Environment, Climate Change and Health) and **Miriam Weber** (city of Utrecht, WHO Healthy cities network), the event brought to the fore the urgent need for coherent action to reduce air pollution's devastating health and economic impacts.

In his introductory remarks in a fully packed room, MEP Javi Lopez – the lead negotiator of the revision of the Ambient Air Quality Directive (AAQD) - recognised the critical and unique contribution of EU civil society in the shaping of EU policies that answer the vital needs of people. In her intervention, Veronica Manfredi highlighted the Commission's commitment to the Zero Pollution Ambition and the range of EU funding opportunities available to support clean air initiatives at national and local levels.

### Diverse health voices, united in purpose

During the event chaired by Anne Stauffer from HEAL as host of the EUHAC Secretariat, Coalition members shared powerful insights from their unique perspectives, painting a comprehensive picture of the health and economic burden resulting from air pollution.

First and foremost, **patient's voices** were brought to the fore, highlighting the very real effects of air pollution on people's lives. The European Lung Foundation (ELF) showed a video featuring Mary, a young patient with severe asthma from Greece, and her mother Mata. Their story is a reminder that behind the statistics are real people whose



lives and wellbeing depend on bold and immediate action to realise the right to clean air. Christine Strous from the European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA) clearly conveyed:

*“Breathing without fear is a right, not a privilege – clean air is like providing health care for patients with respiratory conditions and allergies.”*

Elaborating on the **economic dimension** of the problem, Ludo Vandenthoren from the Independent Health Insurance Funds (MLOZ) stated:

*“Reducing air pollution means protecting the financial sustainability of the social security system.”*

The aspect of **health equity** was brought to the discussion by Raymond Gemen from the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA):

*“For a stronger Europe, we need to work together to reduce air pollution and tackle the health inequities it fuels.”*

These perspectives reinforced the broader call for inclusive and equitable clean air policies that protect the most vulnerable and address the systemic disparities exacerbated by air pollution.

## Urgent health imperative

Interventions at the event effectively underscored the urgent health imperative presented by air pollution. Presenting the **scientific perspective**, Dr. Ulrike Gehring from the European Respiratory Society (ERS) explained that:

*“With every breath we inhale millions of particles that can penetrate deeply into our lungs, there is no safe threshold below which no health effects occur.”*

Cancer is one of the most severe outcomes of air pollution, but it is a reality our policy must contend with. Nico Latteur of the Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL) remains hopeful:

*“Every nine seconds, a new case of cancer is diagnosed in the European Union. The good news? 4 in 10 of these cases are preventable. Strengthening EU's clean air standards is a unique opportunity to intensify the fight against cancer by preventing premature deaths and protecting those most vulnerable.”*



Miriam Weber (city of Utrecht, WHO Healthy cities network) emphasised the importance of meeting the WHO guidelines of 2021, acknowledging that while change is not going to be easy, it is vital for the wellbeing of communities. The urgency to act for the health and well-being of the population was also brought to the front by Dr. Ian Marnane from the European Environment Agency (EEA), who reminded participants of the major combined impacts of heat and air pollution, drawing from the landmark first European Climate Risk Assessment (EUCRA).

Dr Maria Neira from the World Health Organization underscored the necessity of **policy measures targeting the combustion of fossil fuels**. She argued that this issue is not only a major driver of climate change but also a direct threat to human health, contributing to respiratory diseases, cardiovascular conditions, and premature death. On a similar vein, Dr. Ina Kelly from the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) asserted that **Air pollution and climate change are inseparable issues**.

The revised EU Ambient Air Quality Directive (AAQD), which entered into force in December 2024, marks a critical step forward. Its implementation can reduce air pollution's burden on health; however, Coalition members stressed that the AAQD is just one piece of the puzzle. Achieving clean air requires coherent action across policy fields, adequate financing, and integration with EU climate efforts.

## Call to firm political action

The EUHAC event showcased a collective call to tackle air pollution as a public health emergency. By bringing together diverse voices, high-level policymakers, and global health leaders, the Coalition has laid the groundwork for meaningful progress. Clean air is a **health imperative**, a **social justice issue**, and an **economic sustainability driver**. Hundreds of thousands of premature deaths and billions of euros in health costs **each year** can be saved with decisive action. The EUHAC call to policymakers is unequivocal: they must prioritise swift and effective implementation of the AAQD and ensure that clean air measures are adequately funded and seamlessly integrated into broader climate and health strategies.

As Anne Stauffer from the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) aptly stated,

*“The case for strengthened EU clean air action is clear: from the science, the voices we heard today, and the call of people across the EU for clean air.”*

