
Commentary III

A joint effort in the field of environment and health

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One important observation is that in the past measures related to environmental protection contributed a lot to enhance health at the individual and population level. Can we expect additional health benefits in industrialised countries nowadays? The Swiss National Environment and Health Action Plan (NEHAP) was among the first to be developed in an industrialised country. We fully support the statement that health cannot be ensured by the health sector alone. Health must be integrated into the planning and implementation processes of the different administrative sectors and levels in order to create a supportive environment. To develop such joint efforts, for instance in the field of health and environment, it is a prerequisite to create a situation of mutual benefit. The targets and measures must have an impact both on health and environment, which seems to be part of the Swiss NEHAP. So far so good.

However, the paper of Sonja Kahlmeier et al. also raises questions. We will highlight three topics. The first one relates to the selected areas and their underlying concepts. From 17 areas, the working group members selected the following three: nature and well-being, mobility and well-being, and housing and well-being. How was this selection made? The paper gives seven criteria on which the choice was based, but has not made clear how these criteria of very different sorts were weighed in order to make the final selection. In addition, we miss one important criterion, which is the possibility to influence the area by active intervention. Actually, we need a comprehensive conceptual model, which makes clear how nature, mobility, and housing tie together, how they interact with other determinants of well-being, and what their impact is on well-being. Such a model was e.g., developed for the Dutch Public

Health Status and Forecasts report (Ruwaard & Kramers 1998) and implies the recognition of several groups of determinants of health, including lifestyle, the social and the physical environment. Nature, mobility, and housing could be placed in this scheme. We presume that in the NEHAP context well-being is taken as a widened concept of health.

The second topic concerns targets and indicators. Table 1 formulates several targets and areas of intervention. First, the potential effect of the intervention in terms of well-being as an outcome is not given. Secondly, the most concrete part is the indicators. How are they defined and how are they measured? The text refers to a baseline assessment in 1999, but we as readers would have liked to see more details on this. In this context it is noteworthy that the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health recently developed a comprehensive set of environmental health indicators for use in NEHAPs (World Health Organization 2000).

The third topic is concerned with the phases after the initial plan. Under "weaknesses", the authors indicate the lack of a clear implementation strategy along with adequate financing, and the absence of a clear involvement of the general public and the economic sector, whereas these are crucial success factors. Which is then the status of the "interventions" mentioned in Table 1? And which is the ex-ante cost-benefit estimate of the plan? In this respect we can learn from the USA. Here, the definition of goals and quantitative targets in the field of environmental health promotion are included in the comprehensive Healthy People Initiative of the Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC. In this initiative both the public and the economic

sectors are intensively involved in the planning and implementation strategy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000).

In conclusion, we fully agree that an intersectoral approach is essential in improving our health. We support the initiative of formulating goals and targets, which can be very stimulat-

ing. However, in order to be successful, the approach needs to be well thoughtout taking into account all critical phases of the process from monitoring targets to implementing effective interventions.

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