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Editorial

Ministers of Health, Environment, Traffic, Economy: You need to have lunch together!

World wide, the media outcry was astonishing when The Lancet published that air pollution in Austria, France, and Switzerland accounts for about 6% of total mortality, 48000 hospital admissions, 47000 new cases of chronic bronchitis, more than 500000 cases of bronchitis among children and more than one million asthma attacks per year[1]. More than half of these health effects were attributed to traffic related air pollution. The commentary in the same issue of Lancet was right on target: air pollution is both a public health, and therefore an economic, issue – and the story of air pollution is tightly linked to traffic[2,3]. Many mass media correctly extrapolated the public health message from the tri-national study to the global scale: in many regions of the world, the health toll of total and traffic related air pollution is even larger than in the three European countries.

A couple of days after the "hot story" about cars, air pollution, death and diseases, the mass media focused their attention on another "hot story": we heard about the different approaches of governments throughout the western world to deal with the outcry of, among others, the transport industry. They complained of the costs for gasoline which has increased to about the same level as ten years ago. We read that some governments had taken politically expedient action to compensate part of these costs.

Is there a link between these media events? Unfortunately, the stories seem to be entirely unrelated in the minds of governmental decision makers. Thus, let me emphasize the link. Under the lead of Swiss agencies, the study published in The Lancet was initiated and funded by the governments of the three countries, mainly the ministries of Environment and Traffic. The study was in fact prepared for, and presented at, the WHO ministerial conference on Environment and Health, held in London in June 1999[4]. A key purpose of the tri-national study was to provide an estimate of the external costs of traffic. It is well known that traffic (and other air polluters) don't fully pay the costs of the damage they cause to society. Thus, a logical step in policy making is the internalization of these costs. In other words, polluting the air, for example by burning gasoline, must have a price that includes the public health damage. As these costs are not yet covered, gasoline and other fossil fuels need to be more expensive. Otherwise, in a free market economy, the 20th century history will perpetuate itself. Fossil fuel burning – the key reason for current everyday air pollution and long-term climate changes – will continue to dominate the energy market. Intelligent, efficient, but currently expensive, energy systems and renewable energy will remain unavailable for the masses. And taxpayers will continue to pay the environmental, economic, and public health damage not covered by the polluters. The adoption of the polluter-pays-principle is one step to break this destructive cycle. The tri-national study is an example of how governmental agencies may get an estimate of what polluters ought to pay[3].

Thus, was the study a success? Not by default. The project funders must read the results of their own studies, communicate the issues, and apply the knowledge to decision making. But communicate to whom? Could

it be, first of all, across different ministries and agencies? Do we have a communication problem between governmental agencies? I must admit that the largest methodological uncertainties in the tri-national study also originate from the inherent lack of communication between different scientific disciplines. The traditional lack of sufficient interdisciplinary research, academic institutions, and funding resources results in gaps of knowledge at the interface of the related fields of economics, air hygiene, and environmental epidemiology. Governments and their agencies are disjointed in similar ways as academia.

Ministries of Economy, Environment, Traffic, and Health must more closely interact to understand that cleaner air makes sense for all: the economy, the environment, and the health of the people throughout the world. There is no human right to have cheap gasoline.

There is, however, a human right to a healthy life. Air pollution violates this human right, everywhere and everyday. Sharing knowledge across ministries may help to provide conditions which support a healthy life for today's population. Polluting the air also leads to an increase in greenhouse gases, thus, causing long-term climate changes[5]. Therefore, air pollution also violates the human rights of future generations.

How many business lunches, how many articles, and how many Rio, Kyoto or The Hague conferences are needed until governments take action and abstain from short-term, election-oriented opportunistic decisions which threaten sustainable development? Decision makers, we need to move into a century of sustainable development!

Nino Künzli

References

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