

# Planetary health: A holistic vision for people and the planet

**Danielle Brady**

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# Executive summary

The nexus between health and the environment has been underscored by crises such as COVID-19 and the climate crisis. With increased awareness of the interlinkages between policy areas comes a heightened recognition of the need for more coordinated policymaking at the EU and national level.

Calls for a more holistic approach have long been recognised, but the pandemic has further emphasised the importance of dismantling existing barriers in policymaking at all levels to improve the health status of people, animals, and the planet. Despite this recognition, questions remain in relation to the execution of a more holistic approach with the aim of yielding benefits for human, animal, and environmental health.

This Discussion Paper advocates for implementing a planetary health approach across all levels of governance to encourage transdisciplinary action. To achieve such an approach, the paper argues for the need to break down silos at the EU and national level, adopt a multi-level governance approach, establish common indicators to measure the planetary health approach, create a best practices platform, adopt planetary health for health systems, invest in education, communication, and research, and work with international partners.

# Introduction

The current era of permacrisis has exposed the interdependence of several sectors on each other and highlighted the intersection between a plethora of policy areas. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the acceptance that human, animal, and planetary health cannot be separated but are instead intertwined with each other. The climate crisis and associated health implications further exhibit the connection between people and the planet. With increased awareness of the interlinkages between policy areas comes a heightened recognition of the need for more coordinated policymaking at the EU and national level to improve the health status of people, animals, and the planet.

Improving the health status of people and the planet is a key aim of planetary health, a concept first proposed in 2015 by The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission to coincide with the launch of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. They define planetary health as “the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends.” The concept was further redefined in 2021 by the Planetary Health Alliance as “a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field and social movement focused on analysing and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to Earth’s natural systems on human health and all life on Earth”.<sup>1</sup>

Planetary health challenges the current barriers between disciplines and instead focuses on their connections to derive co-benefits for health and the environment.

Incorporating a planetary health approach offers an opportunity to shift beyond health security towards a greater emphasis on health prevention and promotion. It also offers a natural foundation for making decisions involving multiple disciplines, addressing social, economic, and environmental problems affecting both human health and the environment. It acknowledges the necessity of merging various fields of study and emphasises the pressing need to do so promptly.<sup>2</sup>

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## Improving the health status of people and the planet is a key aim of planetary health.

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However, with that said, there exist several challenges that impede the implementation of a more holistic approach. Such challenges include persistent siloed approaches to policymaking, acquiring buy-in from all sectors, mobilising resources, difficulties in demonstrating the impact of a planetary approach due to the novelty of the concept, and lack of education, skills, research, and funding. This paper explores the benefits and challenges, setting out recommendations to overcome these challenges and implement a planetary health approach.

# Making the case for planetary health

## IMPROVING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Planetary health aims to improve and promote the health and well-being of all beings and the planet they inhabit. It emphasises the importance of environmental stewardship and sustainable practices to ensure the long-term viability of the planet. It promotes clean air, water, and stable climates. Incorporating such an approach can help mitigate and minimise the adverse impacts of challenges such as climate change. Additional benefits include biodiversity conservation, as planetary health focuses on maintaining the resilience and functioning of ecosystems and processes to mitigate biodiversity loss.<sup>3</sup>

Exposure to high-quality natural environments is linked to various health benefits, including lower rates of cardiovascular diseases, decreased prevalence of type 2 diabetes, improved pregnancy outcomes, and reduced mortality rates.<sup>4</sup> Increasing evidence suggests that being in natural surroundings can have positive effects on mental health. Being close to green spaces has been linked to decreased stress levels and reduced symptoms of

depression and anxiety. Additionally, engaging with nature can enhance cognitive abilities in children with attention deficits and individuals suffering from depression. Research has shown that individuals who relocate to greener urban areas experience ongoing improvements in their mental well-being.<sup>5</sup> The link between green spaces in local neighbourhoods and people’s health and well-being is especially significant for low income, disadvantaged urban and suburban communities.

However, environmental factors have a negative impact on health. For example, one in ten premature deaths in Europe are linked to pollution, while environmental and occupational risks account for approximately 10% of all cancer cases.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, extreme weather caused by climate change can have severe effects on the health of populations. For example, the rise in temperature correlates with a rise in rates of infectious, allergic, water- and food-borne diseases. While human and animal health are greatly impacted by environmental stressors, human activity has an impact on the health of the planet.

More broadly, the production and consumption of commodities have significant environmental consequences. The extraction of natural resources, such as mining and logging, can lead to habitat destruction, deforestation, and soil degradation. The extraction and burning of fossil fuels contribute to air and water pollution, as well as greenhouse gas emissions, leading to climate change. Unsustainable practices and overexploitation of resources can deplete ecosystems, disrupt biodiversity, and harm the environment, resulting in harmful implications for health.

Adopting policies which consider the implications for health and the environment will render positive results for the health and well-being of society in the broadest sense. For example, reducing emissions from industry will not only improve environmental standards and air quality but should work to reduce diseases caused by air pollution, such as cancer and heart disease and improve the mental health of populations.

### MITIGATING HEALTH IMPACTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental stressors significantly contribute to a range of illnesses and diseases with implications for health systems. Nevertheless, the systems designed to address health issues are paradoxically contributing to the problems they seek to resolve, with healthcare accounting for approximately 4-5% of global carbon emissions.<sup>7</sup> Hospitals emit greenhouse gases at a rate 2.5 times higher than commercial buildings. Planetary

health offers benefits for health systems, but they must, in turn, adopt a planetary health approach to reduce their environmental harm with benefits for all.

### REDUCING INEQUALITIES

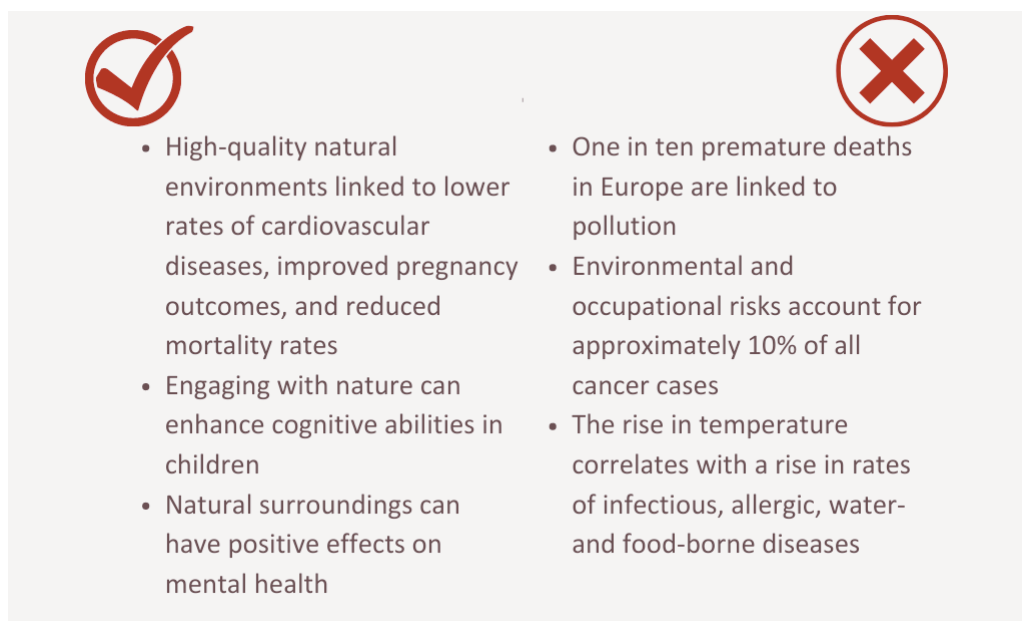
Environmental variables have a disproportionate impact on the health and well-being of our society's most vulnerable. In addition, pollution has a greater impact on socially disadvantaged groups, notably in economically depressed regions of Europe where high levels of air pollution, noise, and extreme temperatures are prevalent. The elevated exposure to environmental stressors and the resulting health impacts further amplify existing health inequalities.<sup>8</sup> The planetary health approach not only advocates for measures to reduce the impact of environmental stressors, which would work to address health inequalities but also considers the social implications that these policies can have. It goes beyond health and the environment to integrate social and economic factors with the objective of securing long-term well-being, highlighting the importance of addressing disparities and promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities for all communities.

### TOWARDS GLOBAL TARGETS

Taking the concept of planetary health and translating it into tangible actions contributes to attaining international objectives like the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Fig. 1

#### IMPACT OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON HUMAN HEALTH



These global frameworks acknowledge the significance of regional and global collaboration in addressing intricate issues at the heart of planetary health. It recognises the long-term effect of climate change and changes in land use on global health, which includes food and water security. It further aligns with the field of sustainability, in which future generations' needs are debated with long-term impact as a significant factor.

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## **Adopting a planetary health approach can build resilience and better prepare systems and societies for health and environmental threats such as future pandemics and natural disasters.**

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This feeds into the ongoing discourse on the need to redirect policymaking towards a broader range of economic, social, and environmental objectives rather than considering growth as the sole objective. Alternative frameworks such as the economy of well-being<sup>9</sup> and the doughnut economy<sup>10</sup> acknowledge the importance of indicators beyond GDP and prioritise the health and well-being of people and the planet.

### **RESILIENT AND BETTER-PREPARED SOCIETIES**

Additionally, adopting a planetary health approach can build resilience and better prepare systems and societies for health and environmental threats such as future pandemics and natural disasters. A healthy planet with robust ecosystems will be in a better position to withstand and recover from these challenges, not

just in Europe but at the global level. Improving air quality, water and sanitation, waste management, and biodiversity conservation can enhance environmental health, leading to decreased vulnerability of communities to pandemics and overall improvement in societal resilience. Access to clean water and the protection of biodiversity is crucial in combating the spread of pandemics. Additionally, effective waste management plays a vital role in minimising potential secondary impacts on both health and the environment.<sup>11</sup>

### **A SOLUTION TO A GLOBAL PROBLEM**

Planetary health is not just required at the European level but at the global scale to counteract the threat that changing environments are having on the health of populations across the world. Integrating planetary health into global initiatives offers the opportunity to reduce the global burden of diseases and improve the health of the planet in the broadest sense. Without such an approach, the benefits of planetary health will be reduced as health threats are not confined within borders. Adopting a planetary approach at the global level enhances health security and mitigates health threats, which also should play a role in reducing health disparities by improving environments on the global scale.

However, improving environments at the global scale requires action at all levels of governance. Working across scales acknowledges that environmental and health issues are interconnected and transcend political, administrative, and geographical boundaries. Actions taken at one scale can have ripple effects and implications at other scales. Therefore, it is essential to understand and address these interconnections to effectively tackle planetary health challenges. Involving actors at all levels of governance is essential to address planetary health challenges, which require aligning actions and coordinating policies.

## **State of Play: EU action to date**

### **HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES AND THE ONE HEALTH APPROACH**

Challenging barriers between disciplines is not a novel concept, particularly within the health domain. There has long been discussion at the EU level about the need to embed health in other policy domains. There have been efforts to move towards a more integrated approach since the Finnish Presidency in 2006 when the principle of "Health in all Policies" (HiaP) was adopted. HiaP "considers the impacts of other policies on health through health determinants when policies of all sectors are being planned, decisions between various policy options are being made, and when implementation strategies are being designed".<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact the

principle was adopted and institutionalised, it has not resulted in transformative policymaking.

In fact, there has been a growing movement to shift or broaden the perspective towards 'Health for all Policies.' Studies have found that merely acknowledging the crucial role of non-health policy areas in influencing the broader determinants of health is insufficient. The argument put forth is that it is necessary to emphasise the reciprocal advantages that arise from collaboration between the health sector and other sectors. By doing so, the aim is to enhance the attractiveness of intersectoral action and encourage the active participation of stakeholders from diverse sectors.<sup>15</sup>



In recent years, the European Commission, namely DG SANTE, has tried to incorporate a more holistic approach using the One Health approach. This “integrated, unifying approach aims to sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals, and ecosystems. It recognises the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants, and the wider environment are closely linked and interdependent.”<sup>14</sup>

In 2017, the Commission adopted the EU Action Plan against Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR), and more recently in April 2023, proposed a Council Recommendation on stepping up EU actions to combat antimicrobial resistance in a One Health approach. Under the auspices of DG SANTE, a “One-Health” Directorate has been established, signalling a recognition at the EU institutional level of the interconnectedness of people, animals, and their environment. This demonstrates that, at least at the EU level, there is a strong recognition of the need to combat AMR through a coordinated approach. Action on AMR is paramount, particularly given its status as the “silent pandemic”.<sup>15</sup> However, with that said, this recognition appears to be predominately focused on AMR, with the wider nexus between health and the environment somewhat missing.

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**While there have been efforts to move towards a more holistic approach to health, the impact of such efforts has been limited.**

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The Commission has also attempted to integrate a more holistic approach to its global health mandate via the EU Global Health strategy, adopting a One Health approach to prevent and combat health threats, including pandemics.<sup>16</sup> While the need for a Health in all Policies approach is called for, it does not go further in linking the strategy more explicitly to the European Green Deal. There are also concerns about the strategy’s implementation, which lays out goals but needs to be more specific about how to attain them.

## Challenges to implementing a planetary health approach

Despite the increased recognition of the interlinkages between policy areas, there exist several challenges that impede the implementation of a more holistic approach.

So, while there have been efforts to move towards a more holistic approach to health, the impact of such efforts has been limited. Perhaps this is due to an absence of strong political leadership and a failure to truly implement a more coordinated approach to overcome the ever-persistent silos which continue to be a characteristic of policymaking at the EU level.

Outside the Commission, there are signals of collaboration between environmental and health actors, at least informally. EU agencies have in the past been accustomed to dealing exclusively with the sector falling within their remit, but there now appears to be much more communication between the agencies such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA), the European Environment Agency (EEA), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) on human health, animal health and planet health. This is set to be formalised by the establishment of a new cross-agency task force on One Health.<sup>17</sup>

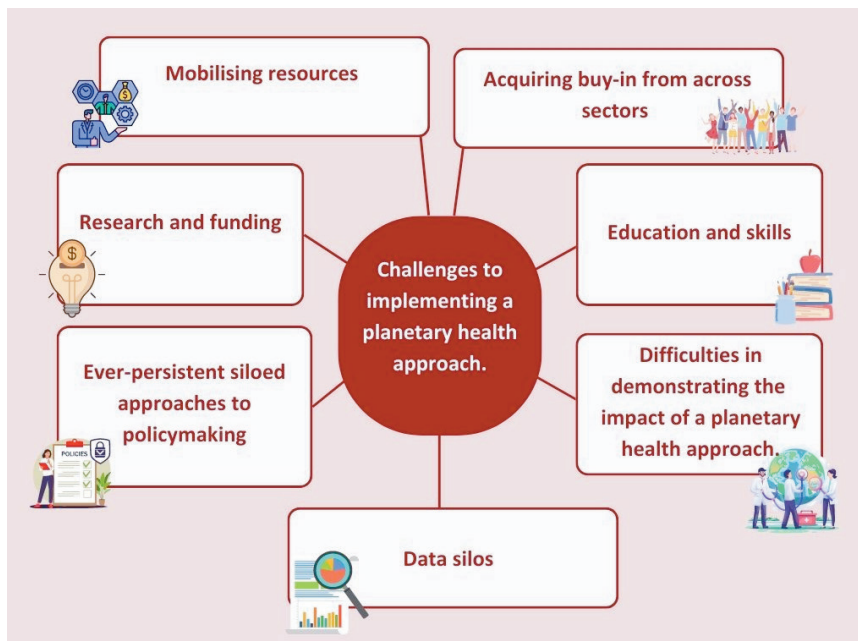
### BUILDING ON THE POLITICAL MOMENTUM

The pandemic spurred greater collaboration between human, animal, and environmental health. As we enter a post-pandemic era, we must ensure this momentum is not lost. There is a tendency to neglect health at the EU level once the worst of a crisis has passed, as evidenced by the N1H1 pandemic. We cannot afford to miss this current window of opportunity to push for a more integrated approach to policymaking to implement planetary health.

Compared to the One Health approach, planetary health offers a broader scope to include the social determinants of health. This promotes a more holistic vision with evident benefits for health and the environment. However, they are both intertwined and indisputably complementary to each other, with creating and implementing policies in a more coordinated manner, the objective common for both concepts.

Overcoming these challenges will be vital to ensure a planetary health approach with positive outcomes for both health and the environment.

## CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING A PLANETARY HEALTH APPROACH



Source: EPC

## EVER-PERSISTENT SILOED APPROACHES TO POLICYMAKING

Firstly, organisation structures allow for silos and siloed approaches to policymaking. Existing institutional structures, and administrative processes can hinder collaboration and resource mobilisation. Siloed decision-making, rigid organisational structures and bureaucratic hurdles may impede effective coordination and hinder the integration of planetary health considerations into sectoral policies. Siloed policymaking can be seen at the EU level. Despite progress during the current mandate, increased collaboration is required between different Directorate-Generals (DGs) within the European Commission. A lack of integration or communication between DGs can result in policy fragmentation. Without proper coordination, policies can be developed in isolation, resulting in missed opportunities for synergies, in this case, to the determinants of health and the planet.

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**Planetary health challenges are interconnected, and actions taken in one sector can have ripple effects on others.**

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Siloed approaches are not exclusive to the Commission but can also be seen within the European Parliament. The recently established Subcommittee on Public Health (SANT) is viewed as a cause for celebration in terms of the status it affords health policy within the Parliament. Undoubtedly, this elevates the status of health and is important to ensure continued momentum around health as we move beyond the pandemic. However, with that said, it is essential that debates on health do not occur in isolation but are part of the wider debate within the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and beyond.

There have been efforts to include a more cross-policy approach to health in all policies and One Health Directorate. More broadly, efforts have been made to extend the European Semester from a narrow economic focus to a wider one that considers the perspective of sustainable development goals.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, efforts were made under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RFF) to promote the green transition by prioritising investments in projects that contribute to environmental sustainability, such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, circular economy, and climate adaptation. However, despite this, silos continue to be a feature of policymaking at the EU level. This acts as a barrier to implementing a planetary health approach, which requires collaboration and coordination between policymakers across the various sectors. This siloed approach must also be overcome at the member-state level to ensure planetary health becomes embedded in policymaking across Europe, with ministries working together to achieve better health and well-being outcomes while protecting the health and well-being of the planet.



## ACQUIRING BUY-IN FROM ACROSS SECTORS

Planetary health challenges are interconnected, and actions taken in one sector can have ripple effects on others. For instance, agricultural practices have implications for both food production and water quality and vice versa, while energy production influences greenhouse gas emissions. Coordination across various policy domains and sectors will ensure the successful implementation of a planetary health approach at all levels of governance. To guarantee coordination, buy-in is required from various stakeholders, including policymakers, industry, environmental actors, healthcare professionals, and agricultural actors.

Major challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and unsustainable resource use, are complex and require interdisciplinary approaches. They transcend traditional sectoral boundaries and impact multiple aspects of society. Addressing these challenges effectively necessitates not only collaboration but also mobilisation of resources from all sectors. Acquiring this buy-in can be problematic, often due to a lack of understanding and awareness of the benefits of a more coordinated approach, longstanding institutional structure, and diverging priorities between sectors.

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**Buy-in is required from various stakeholders, including policymakers, industry, environmental actors, healthcare professionals, and agricultural actors.**

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Diverging priorities creates challenges that could threaten implementing a planetary health approach. Thus, trade-offs will be required to derive the best outcomes for both health and the environment. In a 2019 report on healthy environments and healthy lives, the European Environment Agency highlighted examples of such conflicts. For one, reducing greenhouse gas emissions using renewable biomass or energy-efficient buildings with decreased ventilation can increase exposure to ambient and indoor air pollution. Additionally, while pharmaceuticals are essential for care and treatment to support good health, their release into the environment can affect ecosystems. They also point to the fact that economic growth is the principal means of poverty reduction, but it is achieved by unsustainable consumption and production, contributing to environmental degradation.<sup>19</sup> While these conflicts may create barriers, they also make the argument for planetary health and the need for a more holistic approach to policymaking.

## MOBILISING RESOURCES

Issues can also arise when it comes to funding, whereby resource mobilisation for planetary health initiatives are presented with budgetary challenges due to limited funding availability and competing priorities. Governments and organisations allocate resources based on various considerations, and planetary health may not always be perceived as a top priority compared to other pressing issues or political agendas.

This challenge is exacerbated by a lack of indicators related to planetary health, which makes it difficult to measure and monitor and harder to make a case for its adoption and implementation. Reliable data is necessary for developing indicators. However, data on planetary health indicators are scarce or incomplete. Planetary health indicators need to consider long-term trends and changes. Environmental and social processes occur over extended periods, and indicators should capture these dynamics accurately.<sup>20</sup> This requires establishing baselines, setting targets, and tracking progress over time, which can be challenging due to limited historical data and the need for ongoing data collection. The fact that planetary health encompasses a vast range of interconnected environmental, social, and economic factors means that developing indicators that display this complexity and integrating the various dimensions is difficult. It requires a systems approach that considers the indirect and cumulative impacts of environmental changes on various sectors and human well-being.

## DIFFICULTIES IN DEMONSTRATING THE IMPACT OF A PLANETARY HEALTH APPROACH.

The lack of indicators presents further challenges in demonstrating the impact of a planetary health approach and creates difficulties in measuring the return on investing in planetary health initiatives. Since such initiatives address complex, interconnected issues that have long-term impacts, it can be difficult to isolate the direct effects of specific interventions on outcomes such as public health, biodiversity, or climate change. These issues are influenced by a wide range of factors, making it challenging to attribute specific outcomes solely to planetary health interventions.

Additionally, planetary health interventions tend to take time to render tangible results. For example, the impact of improving air quality for health may take time to transpire, with results only visible and thus measurable after an extended time. This can create difficulties in assessing the returns on investments and providing a strong basis or argument for planetary health. Of course, this is intertwined in the economic model based on growth as actors tend to favour policy interventions that demonstrate strong monetary value or indicate “growth” in the short-term. Under a framework based on traditional economic metrics, the intrinsic value of planetary health policy or initiatives are difficult

to demonstrate. However, their value should not be underestimated. If measured using more holistic metrics under a framework such as one based on the well-being economy, then the value of such measures greatly increases with positive outcomes for both health and the environment. The economic aspects of sustainable development need to be intertwined with the social and environmental aspects. This approach challenges conventional economic perspectives by regarding economic development not as an ultimate objective, but rather as a means to enhance the health and well-being of both humanity and the planet.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, it will be imperative to capture the impact of planetary health on prevention and improvement in public health. Preventing illness and promoting health are cost-effective measures and thus appeal to economic arguments for adhering to a planetary health approach. One useful example here is the outcome of Lahti's planetary health plan. The Finnish city invited a group of locals to participate in a trial of a planetary health plan, exploring the potential benefits of adopting environmentally friendly practices for personal well-being. The plans created by Finland's first Planetary Health Physician Dr. Hanna Haveri, with carbon emissions and the overall health of the participants measured before and after the experiment. On average, the five participants saw a 17% decrease in their carbon footprint, a 16% increase in their overall well-being and a 36% drop in their exhaustion scores.<sup>22</sup> Projects such as this should be scaled up and piloted at regional, national, and European levels, demonstrating the benefits for the environment, health, productivity, and climate action.

## DATA SILOS

Good quality data is essential for planetary health, serving as a valuable tool for identifying key risk factors, generating forecasts and models, and monitoring trends. However, harnessing the potential of data is often impeded by data silos, which prevent the sharing and pooling of data. The European Commission's proposal for European Health Data (EHDS) space offers much potential to enhance data harnessing and interoperability across and between the 27 member states. The proposal aims to advance research, innovation, and policymaking to generate better health outcomes. The EHDS is likely to pave the way for other data spaces, such as the Green Deal data space, which would connect data from various ecosystems, both for/from the private and public sectors, to support the objectives of the European Green Deal.<sup>23</sup> Some examples of other data spaces are agriculture, business, and mobility. However, there is a risk that these platforms could operate in isolation, impeding true advancements in research and innovation for planetary health. To mitigate this, an integrated approach promoting FAIR data<sup>24</sup> and interoperability of technical infrastructures is required.

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## Healthcare professionals can play an important role in communicating planetary health to the wider population acting as “health literacy agents”.

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Another issue with data spaces more generally, which impact the advancement of planetary health in the EU, is that member states are starting at different points of departure in terms of data collection and reporting. Improving human health and that of the planet requires robust and timely data collection and reporting across member states.

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Education and skills, or rather the lack thereof, act as a further barrier to the implementation of a planetary health approach. This includes the need for communication and information across all areas of the policy-making ecosystem to ensure that all actors are aware of the benefits of adopting a planetary health approach and the rationale for doing so. Without such awareness, the ability to fully implement such an approach becomes somewhat impossible, as buy-in will be even more difficult to secure.

The challenge presented by the lack of citizen understanding and education more broadly also needs to be addressed in pursuing planetary health. To advance the concept and promote its implementation, communication with citizens will be crucial. There is a need to integrate diverse disciplines such as environmental science, public health, economics, policy, and social sciences into educational programmes. To ensure its success, citizens must be aware of why there is a need to push towards a planetary health approach and how doing so will benefit them and their health. The absence of understanding and strong communication of the benefits of planetary health would create difficulties when it comes to the implementation of planetary health initiatives.

Healthcare professionals can play an important role in communicating planetary health to the wider population, acting as “health literacy agents”.<sup>25</sup> However, healthcare professionals must be provided with adequate knowledge and skills to provide education and medical consultation incorporating planetary health information. This is not without difficulties, especially given the current shortages of healthcare workers across the EU combined with high workloads and the burden already placed on healthcare professionals across health systems.

This must also be complemented with coordination between national ministries of education, labour, finance, health and environment, and relevant organisations to establish communication campaigns. An example of this can be observed in the Irish context with a project

entitled the Fair accessible air quality information resource (FAIR) project run by Irish Doctors for the Environment, Children’s Health Ireland and the Environmental Protection Agency. The project is a pilot project at Children’s Health Ireland at Temple Street Dublin, which displays local air quality on information screens at the hospital accompanied by a health messaging video. The short, animated video contains information on the importance of clean air for good health to increase awareness amongst patients, parents and staff to improve their local air quality and reduce their exposure to air pollution. It is hoped that this will lead to a nationwide roll-out throughout hospitals in Ireland in the short to medium term. In the long-term, it could be expanded to all healthcare centres and beyond.<sup>26</sup> In June 2022, the Council of the European Union passed a recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development. It seeks to foster and bolster policies and programs pertaining to learning for the green transition and sustainable development by enabling learners of all ages to acquire the knowledge to live more sustainably, obtain the skills needed in a changing labour market and take action for a sustainable future.<sup>27</sup> Member states are advised to offer learning opportunities across formal, non-formal and informal settings. They are also encouraged to strengthen teaching and learning for the green transition and sustainable development by providing necessary infrastructure, digital tools, and resources, and leveraging the new European Competence Framework on Sustainability (GreenComp). The recommendation also suggests that member states disseminate fact-based and easily accessible information on the climate, environmental, and biodiversity crisis, along with its underlying causes and support educators in participating in professional development programs related to sustainability. While such action is welcome

and has the potential to harness positive results, it does not incorporate the broader vision to include health.

## RESEARCH AND FUNDING

The current organisation of research and funding also creates barriers to the realisation of planetary health. There is a need to transform the existing limitations caused by predominantly channelised research funding streams and reconsider the often narrow discipline-based/grounded structures of universities and research institutes. This entails promoting interdisciplinary research and policy programs to address these intricate issues effectively. Simultaneously, it is crucial to cultivate integrated approaches that nurture the development of both future scientists and researchers who can tackle these challenges.<sup>28</sup>

The 2023 Horizon opportunity included a call on “planetary health: understanding the links between environmental degradation and health impacts”. This is very welcome, partially filling to some extent the wide gap in funding opportunities, with proposals welcome on projects which aim to provide actionable evidence for policymakers to take preventive actions to protect human health and well-being by exploring the links between human health and environmental degradation in an integrated and comprehensive manner, with a wider scope of links between climate change and health and, between biodiversity and health also welcome. While this call signals the importance of planetary health, it will be insufficient by itself. Thus, greater funding for transdisciplinary research is required to fully pursue a planetary health approach and tackle the major challenges of our time.

# Recommendations: Towards a planetary health approach

## **RECOMMENDATION 1 Pursue coordinated policymaking by breaking down silos.**

To realise the ambitions of planetary health and foster a more holistic approach, breaking down silos at all levels of government is crucial. To harness its potential, planetary health should be embedded into local, regional, national, and EU policies. Effective governance of planetary health necessitates clear mandates and roles for relevant institutions and stakeholders at all levels. This must be complemented with coordination between all levels of governance along with civil society organisations, communities, academia, businesses, and individuals in decision-making, planning, and implementation. This will be essential to ensure buy-in from all actors.

At the EU level, a shift is needed from the traditional siloed approach to a more collaborative one involving cross-directorate cooperation. Building on the Green Deal, the concept of planetary health could serve as an overarching strategy for the next Commission. This cross-cutting strategy should incorporate policies and legislation from across directorates such as AGRI, SANTE, ENVI, CLIMA, TRADE, and EMPL to integrate planetary health into policymaking across sectors to improve outcomes for health and the environment. This strategy could fit wider ambitions to move beyond growth towards a well-being framework.

The European Parliament must also ensure that establishing the SANT committee will not transpire as an adverse development creating more silos. While the space for discussion on public health is welcome and

indeed needed, legislative work must remain linked to the wider work of the ENVI committee to ensure that health considerations are also integrated into environmental legislation. Environmental policies and legislation can serve as effective means to advance ambitious measures aimed at enhancing health. By incorporating health considerations into environmental frameworks, it becomes possible to pursue comprehensive approaches that prioritise protecting the environment and human and animal health. Through such integrated efforts, environmental policies and legislation can effectively contribute to improving health outcomes.

**RECOMMENDATION 2 Appoint an Executive Vice President for the Well-being Economy.**

Political leadership will be required to ensure policy coherence and the integration of a planetary health approach across sectors. The shift towards planetary health will be complex and will be faced with trade-offs and political challenges. Governance and institutional structure will be important in overcoming these barriers, requiring a more holistic organisational structure accompanied by strong leadership and political vision.

Therefore, the next Commission should appoint an Executive Vice President for the Well-being Economy to push for a more holistic agenda. This person would be


responsible for driving the transformative policy agenda, including overseeing the integration of the planetary health approach, both within the outlined directorates (AGRI, SANTE, ENVI, CLIMA, TRADE, and EMPL) as well as beyond the Commission while providing the necessary coordination and strategic political leadership required for its successful implementation.<sup>29</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION 3 Plan and implement national roadmaps and establish common indicators.**

At the national level, ministries responsible for the environment, health, transport, agriculture, and energy should collaborate and plan roadmaps for integrating the planetary health approach into all relevant policies and establish action plans with specific goals and priorities for each sector. Member states should utilise resources such as DG REFORM to implement planetary health and collaborate to find common solutions to integrate planetary health into their national systems. Member states should also utilise the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) to facilitate implementation. The temporary EU financial mechanism, established to support the sustainability and resilience of member states in the COVID-19 pandemic recovery, should be used to integrate planetary health measures into national policies pertaining to green and digital transitions.

Fig. 3

**Towards a planetary health approach**



- Pursue coordinated policymaking by breaking down silos.
- Appoint an Executive Vice President for the Wellbeing Economy
- Plan and implement national roadmaps and establish common indicators.
- Create best practices platforms.
- Adopt planetary health for health systems.
- Promote education on planetary health.
- Adopt a European-wide Communication campaign.
- Invest in research and innovation.
- Foster the integration of the European Health Data Space with future data spaces.
- Work with international partners to adopt a global planetary health approach.

Source: EPC



To effectively measure the progress and impact of the planetary health approach, it is important to establish appropriate indicators. More defined indicators are required which go beyond the Sustainable Development Goals. Metrics used by the Rockefeller-Lancet Commission could be used as the basis for common indicators.<sup>30</sup> These key indicators encompass a range of factors that play a significant role in shaping the planet's health and its inhabitants. They include population growth, poverty levels, life expectancy, energy and water consumption, land use, fertiliser use, marine fish capture, tropical forest loss, water scarcity, ocean acidification, carbon dioxide emissions, temperature changes, and biodiversity loss. They should be complemented with indicators, that reflect health status, such as morbidity and mental health. These would serve as valuable tools for decision-making, enabling the identification of areas that require immediate attention and the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and initiatives aimed at improving human and environmental well-being.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4** Create best practices platforms.

By leveraging the collective experiences and expertise of member states, sharing best practices can enhance the overall capacity and effectiveness of efforts towards planetary health. It enables a broader understanding of the interconnectedness between environmental sustainability and human health, leading to informed decision-making and the development of comprehensive and contextually relevant strategies. Furthermore, sharing best practices encourages a collaborative learning environment where member states can engage in dialogue, share lessons learned, and adapt successful practices to suit their specific contexts. This approach promotes more efficient and effective use of resources by avoiding unnecessary duplication of efforts and promoting the adoption of evidence-based approaches.

A platform for planetary health should be established at the European level to facilitate the sharing of best practice between cities, regions, and member states across the EU. This would offer the opportunity for dialogue and knowledge exchange and for authorities to learn from each other's successes and challenges, thereby identifying effective means and actions for promoting planetary health. It is also recommended that member states assign a national level coordination agency/ authority to compile initiatives and best practices at the national level that are adapted to local and national level needs, as planetary health needs to be implemented across scales. Projects such as Lahti's planetary health plan should be scaled up and piloted at regional, national, and European levels, demonstrating the benefits for the environment, health, productivity, and climate action.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5** Adopt planetary health for health systems.

Health systems must be at the fore of planetary health promotion. Preventive healthcare should be prioritised to decrease the burden of diseases on individuals and

the environment as well as reduce healthcare system costs. Member states should promote nature-based interventions such as green prescriptions to improve the populations' overall health and well-being.

Member states should also take measures to ensure that public hospitals prioritise using renewable energy. Furthermore, it is essential to establish criteria mandating the adoption of energy-efficient medical equipment across all public health settings, thereby complementing the shift towards renewable energy sources. Green procurement and infrastructure should be adopted across health systems to mitigate their negative impact on the environment and contribution to carbon emissions.

Governments should be encouraged to adopt green procurement measures for health systems to reduce the environmental footprint of healthcare facilities. This entails choosing products and services with minimal environmental impacts, such as low energy consumption, reduced waste generation, and non-toxic materials. Healthcare facilities can mitigate their environmental impact by minimising their carbon emissions, water usage, and waste production by choosing eco-friendly options. By prioritising sustainable healthcare products and infrastructure, such as energy-efficient medical equipment or environmentally friendly cleaning supplies, health facilities can create healthier environments for patients, staff, and communities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6** Promote education on planetary health.

Education will be key to the realisation of a planetary health approach and getting everyone on board. Member states should mandate the incorporation of planetary health principles into relevant disciplines and courses at all levels of education. This includes healthcare professional training, public health programs, veterinary sciences, animal welfare, and environmental sciences. By ensuring that these disciplines encompass planetary health concepts, future professionals will be equipped to understand and address the complex interconnections between human, animal, and environmental health. An EU-level program should be established to promote cross-border collaboration and facilitate the upskilling and reskilling of professionals in planetary health. This program can provide training, workshops, and knowledge-sharing platforms that foster collaboration and exchange of best practices. This should be incorporated across sectors with a focus on healthcare professionals and educators who can act as drivers of planetary health. The interface between healthcare professionals and patients is a vital forum for communication on the nexus between human health and the environment. Thus, healthcare professionals must be equipped with the relevant skills and knowledge to promote this narrative.

Given the transgenerational nature of planetary health, education across all ages will be paramount. Thus, planetary health must be incorporated into school curriculums across member states. This will require

training for teachers and those involved in educating younger generations. In a similar manner to healthcare professionals, teachers must be granted the skills and knowledge on planetary health. Programmes such as Erasmus+ should be utilised to exchange knowledge and best practices between educational institutions across Europe.

**RECOMMENDATION 7 Adopt a European-wide Communication campaign.**

It is recommended that the European Commission implement an EU-wide communication campaign regarding the interconnection between health and the environment. This necessitates input from all relevant directorates general, including ENVI, SANTE, CLIMA and AGRI, to display the interconnectivity of all areas and the impact they have on the health of the population and individual health.

This must be complemented with coordination between national ministries of education, labour, finance, health, and environment, and relevant organisations to establish further national and local communication campaigns to ensure that communications across Europe are aware of the interconnectedness of health and the environment. This will work to build an understanding of why a planetary health approach is required and the benefits it offers to communities across the EU. Local and regional projects such as the FAIR project have the potential to be upscaled at national and even European levels to enhance understanding of the importance of planetary health.

**RECOMMENDATION 8 Invest in research and innovation.**

The recent inclusion of a call for planetary health projects under Horizon Europe is more than welcome. However, additional financing and better continuity are required to support projects that focus on translating planetary health into actionable policies, guidelines, and interventions that integrate planetary health considerations into decision-making processes. The EU4Health programme should incorporate planetary health within crisis preparedness, health promotion, disease prevention, health systems, and the healthcare workforce. As well as funding for initiatives that focus on implementing a planetary health approach. Research and innovation calls should focus on developing social and technological innovations and solutions and establishing concrete pilots and initiatives that demonstrate how planetary health can be integrated into various fields and

sectors to concretely display the added value of such an approach. Implementation and evaluation research needs to be included to assess the impact of planetary health approaches and determine what is effective and needed to scale the findings of projects across the EU.

Funding should not only be focused on research and innovation merely concentrated on planetary health in Europe but should also include opportunities to investigate how planetary health can be adopted more globally.

**RECOMMENDATION 9 Foster the integration of the European Health Data Space with future data spaces.**

To advance planetary health, good quality and accessible data is required. Data platforms and spaces pertaining to planetary health, including health, green deal, agriculture, industry, and energy, should be integrated to enable and enhance research and innovation. Doing so would give researchers across disciplines access to multi-sectoral data, encouraging greater transdisciplinary research and innovation. This should also help better inform policymaking and enhance evidence-based policy, which advocates for a planetary health approach and aims to improve public health and the state of the environment, which are closely inter-connected. To utilise such an approach, good-quality data is required. Therefore, member states, the Commission, the research and innovation community and other relevant actors must take measures to promote data quality and interoperability of infrastructures. A community-based approach through aligned visions and co-creation of data spaces that considers both domain-specific contexts and also relevant cross-sectorial contexts is necessary in terms of environmental and planetary health.

**RECOMMENDATION 10 Work with international partners to adopt a global planetary health approach.**

In order to fully capitalise on a global approach, it is imperative to adopt a planetary health approach. The EU institutions should leverage their leadership position in global health to advocate for this on the international stage. For one, the Commission should advocate for a planetary approach to the International Pandemic Preparedness Treaty currently under negotiation in the World Health Assembly. Achieving planetary health requires international political will; thus, EU leaders should push the agenda also at the G7 and G20 levels, advocating for the benefits of a planetary health approach.



# Conclusion

Planetary health offers many benefits for health and the environment. However, without concentrated efforts to move beyond the traditional siloed approach to policymaking, the benefits may never be realised. Action must, therefore, be taken to shift towards more transdisciplinary policymaking. This must be combined with the establishment of concrete roadmaps for implementation and common indicators to measure the impact of planetary health, along with a platform for sharing best practices. A Planetary health approach

must be adopted by health systems, and investment is required to promote education and communication on the benefits for health and the environment as well as society at large. Relationships with international partners will also be crucial, given the global nature of health threats. Failure to adopt a more holistic approach comes at a greater cost for health and the environment, which translates to costs for the economy and society as a whole, impacting future generations.

- <sup>1</sup> De Castañeda, Rafael Ruiz *et al.* (2023) "One Health and planetary health research: leveraging differences to grow together" *The Lancet Planetary Health*, Volume 7, Issue 2, e109 - e111.
- <sup>2</sup> Grant Liz, Hornidge Anna-Katharina *et al.* (2021) "[Global Transformation Towards Planetary Health](#)" T7 Taskforce for Global Health.
- <sup>3</sup> Myers, S. and Frumkin, H. (2020) *Planetary health: Protecting nature to protect ourselves*. Washington; Covelo: Island Press.
- <sup>4</sup> European Environment Agency (2019) "Healthy environment, healthy lives: how the environment influences health and well-being in Europe" Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- <sup>5</sup> UN Environment Programme "[Healthy Environment, Healthy People](#)" (accessed 3 June 2023).
- <sup>6</sup> European Environment Agency "[Exposure to pollution causes 10% of all cancer cases in Europe](#)" (accessed April 24).
- <sup>7</sup> World Economic Forum "Here's how healthcare can reduce its carbon footprint" (accessed 21 April 2023).
- <sup>8</sup> European Environment Agency (2019) "[Healthy environment, healthy lives: how the environment influences health and well-being in Europe](#)" Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- <sup>9</sup> A well-being economy policy approach aims to transform economies around the world to deliver shared well-being for people and the planet. That means moving beyond GDP indicators as the best measure of societal progress, and instead reframing economic policy to deliver quality of life and flourishing for all people in harmony with the environment. The well-being economy policy agenda is fundamental to addressing people's needs and fears. With its preventative approach, long-term horizon and intergenerational perspective, implementing this agenda will help to shift short-termism in policymaking.
- <sup>10</sup> Doughnut economics is an alternative economic framework that considers social and planetary boundaries. The concept of the doughnut represents sustainable development goals and environmental limits, with the inner boundary symbolising the minimum social foundation necessary for well-being, and the outer boundary representing the ecological ceiling to avoid irreversible harm to the planet.
- <sup>11</sup> OECD (2020) "[Environmental health and strengthening resilience to pandemics](#)" Paris.
- <sup>12</sup> European Commission "[Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Brussels, 30 November-1 December 2006](#)" (accessed 23 May 2023).
- <sup>13</sup> Greer Scott L. *et al.* (2023), "[Making Health for All Policies Harnessing the co-benefits of health](#)" Copenhagen: World Health Organisation.
- <sup>14</sup> De Castañeda, Rafael Ruiz *et al.* (2023) "[One Health and planetary health research: leveraging differences to grow together](#)" *The Lancet Planetary Health*, Volume 7, Issue 2, e109 - e111.
- <sup>15</sup> European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2022) "[Antimicrobial resistance - the silent pandemic](#)" (Accessed 15 June 2023).
- <sup>16</sup> European Commission (2022) "[EU Global Health Strategy: Better Health for All in a Changing World](#)" Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- <sup>17</sup> European Food Safety Authority (2023) "[ONE Conference 2022: one year on](#)" (accessed 22 June 2023).
- <sup>18</sup> McLeod Aileen, Rayner Laura, Kuiper Elizabeth, Brady Danielle (2023) "[Wanted: An Executive Vice President for the Well-being Economy](#) [Wanted: An Executive Vice President for the Well-being Economy](#)" European Policy Centre Brussels.
- <sup>19</sup> European Environment Agency (2019) "[Healthy environment, healthy lives: how the environment influences health and well-being in Europe](#)" Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- <sup>20</sup> Haines, A., Hanson, C. and Ranganathan, J. (2018) "[Planetary health watch: Integrated monitoring in the Anthropocene Epoch](#)", *The Lancet Planetary Health*.
- <sup>21</sup> De León, Emilia Aragón *et al.* (2021) "[Beyond building back better: imagining a future for human and planetary health](#)" *The Lancet Planetary Health*.
- <sup>22</sup> Green Lahti (2022) "[Planetary Prescription](#)" (Accessed: 09 June 2023).
- <sup>23</sup> European Commission (2021) "[Information session on a preparatory action for the common European Green Deal Data Space under the Digital Europe Programme \(DIGITAL\)](#)" (accessed 6 July 2023).
- <sup>24</sup> FAIR data is data which is findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reusability.
- <sup>25</sup> Jochem, C. *et al.* (2023) "[Planetary health literacy: A conceptual model](#)", *Frontiers in Public Health*.
- <sup>26</sup> The FAIR Project "[The Fun Accessible Air Quality Information Resource](#)" (accessed 3 June 2023).
- <sup>27</sup> European Commission (2022) "[Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on learning for environmental sustainability](#)".
- <sup>28</sup> Almada, A.A. *et al.* (2017) "[A case for Planetary Health/GeoHealth](#)", *GeoHealth, GEOhealth*.
- <sup>29</sup> McLeod Aileen, Rayner Laura, Kuiper Elizabeth, Brady Danielle (2023) "[Wanted: An Executive Vice President for the Well-being Economy](#) [Wanted: An Executive Vice President for the Well-being Economy](#)" European Policy Centre Brussels.
- <sup>30</sup> Whitmee, S. *et al.* (2015) "Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene Epoch: Report of the Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health", *The Lancet*, 386(10007), pp. 1973–2028. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(15)60901-1.

**NOTES**

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The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

The **Social Europe and Well-being** (SEWB) programme is structured around the following priorities:

- (1) strengthening the social dimension of EU policies and governance for upward social convergence;
- (2) moving towards a modern and inclusive labour market;
- (3) making European welfare states and social protection systems 'future-fit' in the light of ongoing labour market transformation; and
- (4) investing in human capital for greater well-being and less inequality, with a particular focus on health.

The activities under this programme are closely integrated with other EPC focus areas, especially those related to migration and the economy, with a view to providing more 'joined-up' policy solutions.