



TERRITORIES FACING THE CHALLENGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

From history to action

This working paper is open to
commentaries online

March 2015

Revealed by some great scandals at the end of the 20th century, the link between environmental quality and health is now difficult to deny. The scope of such causal relationships fuels the scientific debate regarding epidemiology and toxicology, but also the legal discussion about the precautionary principle.

This working paper begins by giving a synthetic overview of the awareness of the health impact of environment, going from the history of urban hygiene at the end of the 19th century to the promotion of environmental health at the edge of the 20th century, between the economic requirements and/or the management objectives on the one hand, and sanitary issues on the other.

The importance of environmental health remains nowadays discussed. Despite State's eagerness to elaborate national health and environment oriented plans, and the intensification of the European policy framework, the precautionary principle does not seem consistently implemented or implementable in the current economic, political and scientific context. Citizens often feel remote from a topic that is frequently limited to its scientific/expert dimension and its anxiety-inducing issues of health risks.

To overcome these obstacles, three strong lines of action are presented:

1/ A democratic set-up of health risks management, which would give the citizens/electors the opportunity to take decisions, including, if need be, through a local referendum, instead of using a "scandal-answer" mode, as it has been the case for 20 years;

2/ The promotion of environmental health on a local scale, by consistently implementing the methods used by "health cities" and by associations of social and health education. For instance, institutions of environmental health gathering these partners, could become widespread in order to raise citizens' awareness about everyday prevention practices and strengthening self-esteem of the underprivileged populations;

3/ The consistent integration of public health requirements into urban principles and space management practices, which is not ensured by other "sustainability" issues (densification and greenhouse gas reduction, for instance).

SYNTHESIS OF THE WORKINGPAPER

The rise of challenges for environmental health requires, if we wish to move away from a crisis approach, that cities and territories take into account systematically these questions.

"Environment today, health tomorrow": this slogan carried out by the World Health Organization is not the first topic that comes to mind when one thinks about environmental challenges. Climate change, biodiversity or energy savings take more space in the media and political agenda.

