



BRUSSELS, 11 APRIL 2024

To: Members of the European Council

## **Subject: Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: Include and prioritise both climate and environmental action for healthier people and a healthier planet**

Dear Member of the European Council,

As you are considering the EU's Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), an alliance of over 80 member organisations working for better health through a healthier environment, urges you to ensure that the priorities to guide the EU political agenda to 2030 include action to prevent disease and protect health on the triple crisis - climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. We understand that the proposals being circulated ahead of the Special European Council 17 and 18 April don't include any mention of action on health, pollution and biodiversity loss, and a mere lip service when it comes to climate change.

This triple crisis impacts the lives of people in the EU in unprecedented and accelerating ways, threatening the health and well-being, and increasingly the survival, of current and future generations. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), this triple crisis is responsible for almost 20% of all deaths in the European region.

Everyone's health in the EU is at risk from this triple crisis, but some are more vulnerable than others, including children, pregnant women, the elderly, those already sick or those facing social and health inequalities. Socio-economic inequalities in countries, and between countries, exacerbate the triple crisis' impacts and contribute to insecurity and polarisation.

The sustained security of current and future generations of Europeans deeply relies on your commitment and leadership to reduce and prevent the health and economic burden from climate change, environmental pollution and biodiversity loss, in the EU and beyond, through swifter, coherent and more ambitious action.

### **EUROPE NEEDS TO TAKE URGENT ACTION TO RESPOND TO CLIMATE RISKS FOR HEALTH**

The European Climate Risk Assessment (EUCRA) confirms the urgency to act, as Europe is the fastest warming continent in the world. Europe is also the region most vulnerable to health impacts from heat, with more than 61,000 heat deaths in the summer of 2022 alone. EUCRA issues the dire warning that some of the health impacts – heat stress and wildfires - could become catastrophic if we don't act now.

**HEAL urges you to include action on climate mitigation and adaptation as a priority in the EU strategic**

**agenda 2024-29 to strengthen health resilience. It would be woefully irresponsible to merely consider preparing for the new climate realities, and not making climate action a priority.**

#### **THE UNACCEPTABLY HIGH HEALTH BURDEN AND COST FROM POLLUTION IS PREVENTABLE**

The 2023 WHO Budapest Declaration, signed by ministers and representatives responsible for health and the environment, of member states in the European Region of the World Health Organization (WHO) which includes all EU member states, underlines the detrimental and costly effects of pollution throughout people's life course.

Pollution, from a cocktail of substances in the air, food, water, and soil, impacts adults and children's health even at low levels and at all ages and contributes significantly to the burden of disease with which the EU is faced. The ubiquitous exposure to harmful chemicals and pesticides is linked to numerous health impacts, including cancer, infertility, a weakened immune, hormonal system and reproductive system. This exposure is also linked to birth defects and negative impacts on the cognitive and physical development of children. The 2016-2022 European Human Biomonitoring programme (HBM4EU) concluded that the population is exposed to "alarmingly high" levels of hazardous chemicals, in particular children, after testing 18 of the most harmful chemical groups in people across 28 European countries.

In addition, air pollution leads to hundreds of thousands of premature deaths, hundreds of thousands of cases of heart and lung disease, and work days lost. New studies underline that air pollution worsens health impacts during heatwaves, increasing the number of deaths from people with respiratory and cardiovascular disease.

**HEAL urges you to include ambitious action for zero pollution by 2030 as a priority in the EU strategic agenda 2024-29 to strengthen health resilience.**

#### **TACKLE BIODIVERSITY LOSS AND ECOSYSTEMS DEGRADATION FOR HEALTHY PEOPLE ON A HEALTHY PLANET**

The physical and mental health of Europeans depends upon healthy ecosystems, and these are under increasing strain. The EUCRA report identifies EU ecosystems as the area with the highest number of risks where urgent action is needed, with climate change one of the main drivers of ecosystems degradation and biodiversity loss in Europe. Various studies underline the importance of a healthy planet for healthy people, which includes the need to have adequate green and blue spaces in cities, where the majority of the EU's people live. Up to 43,000 deaths could be prevented in EU cities, if WHO recommendations on access to green spaces were achieved.

**HEAL urges you to include action for biodiversity and ecosystems protection as a priority in the EU strategic agenda 2024-29 to strengthen health resilience.**

#### **ACT NOW TO PREVENT HEALTH ECONOMIC COSTS ARISING FROM INACTION**

The impacts from the triple crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss not only lead to immense suffering and health impacts for individuals and their communities, but also to significant economic and societal costs. This includes hundreds of billions EUR of health costs in the EU each year from air pollution, 52-84 billion EUR annually for exposure to PFAS, the forever chemicals, as well as over 163 billion EUR per year in health costs from endocrine disrupting chemicals which impact the body's hormone system.

This health economic burden hampers any efforts to strengthen competitiveness and security.

People across Europe count on you to prioritise EU climate and environmental action for their health and their future.

Yours sincerely,



Genon K. Jensen  
Executive Director  
Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)

**The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)** is the leading not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects human health in the European Union (EU) and beyond. HEAL works to shape laws and policies that promote planetary and human health and protect those most affected by pollution, and raise awareness on the benefits of environmental action for health.

HEAL's over 80 member organisations include international, European, national and local groups of health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, patients, citizens, women, youth, and environmental experts representing over 200 million people across the 53 countries of the WHO European Region.

As an alliance, HEAL brings independent and expert evidence from the health community to EU and global decision-making processes to inspire disease prevention and to promote a toxic-free, low-carbon, fair and healthy future.

HEAL's EU Transparency Register Number: 00723343929-96