

The imperative integration of public health protection, pollution reduction and climate mitigation in the Clean Industrial Deal

Summary

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) welcomes the European Commission's Communication on a Clean Industrial Deal, recognising its potential to drive industrial decarbonisation and accelerate Europe's path towards meeting its climate objective. However, EPHA stresses the need for stronger integration of public health and environmental considerations within industrial policy to ensure a truly sustainable and clean industrial base for Europe. While the CID rightly aims to align industrial policy with climate goals, concerns persist over Europe's continued reliance on fossil fuels, especially natural gas, which undermines long-term health and climate objectives. To ensure success, the CID must align closely with renewable energy targets and actions to reduce air pollution. Strengthening these synergies will be vital to achieving a clean, resilient, and health-conscious industrial transformation.

To ensure the success of the Clean Industrial Deal in advancing public health and climate objectives, EPHA urges policymakers to:

- Drive ambitious pollution reduction efforts through industrial policy, to protect health, prevent disease, and reduce the substantial costs of pollution, particularly air pollution.
- Advance a fast, fair, and clean energy transition with clear fossil fuel phase-out targets and rapid electrification based on non-polluting renewables, ensuring affordable access while protecting society from the health and economic toll of the accelerating climate crisis.
- Guarantee transparent, inclusive governance by involving civil society, including health organisations, in decision-making.

Introduction

The European Public Health Alliance welcomes the European Commission's Clean Industrial Deal (CID) and its emphasis on decarbonising Europe's industry. We commend the Commission for placing climate mitigation as a central element of its strategy. We stress that a thriving economy and society can only be sustained by taking urgent and comprehensive action to address the climate crisis – a crisis with profound implications for public health.

Achieving a net-zero industrial sector is essential to securing a climate-neutral future. To meet the Fit for 55 targets by 2030 and net zero goals by 2050, it is imperative that Europe ends its reliance on fossil fuels. This must be accompanied by a rapid transition to an electrified economy, driven by expanded renewable energy capacity and a widespread adoption of clean technologies.¹ It is essential that this strategy is underpinned by stronger synergies across public health and environmental protection, ensuring that the industrial transformation safeguards both the climate and the health of Europe's population.

Considering public health and environmental implications

Industrial decarbonisation is undoubtedly a critical priority for Europe, but the broader public health and environmental implications of the measures proposed under the Clean Industrial Deal (CID) must not be overlooked. Industry plays a vital role in economic development, but it also remains a significant source of polluting emissions, contributing to serious public health and environmental challenges.

A genuine clean industrial transition that safeguards public health requires creating an industrial ecosystem capable of swiftly and significantly reducing pollutant emissions, particularly those that accelerate the climate crisis and degrade air quality. In addition to carbon dioxide (CO₂), industrial processes and activities often release short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs) such as methane and black carbon, which have a far greater warming potential than CO₂ in the short term. Moreover, industry activities often release air pollutants like nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and particulate matter (PM)² that are directly harmful to human health, especially respiratory health.³ It is essential that the actions proposed under the CID are consistent with the objective of promptly reducing emissions and concentration of these pollutants, ensuring that Europe meets its commitments on climate change mitigation, air quality, and public health protection. Only by doing so can Europe build

a clean industrial base that protects both the people and the planet, while contributing to a thriving economy.

A health-focused, forward thinking industrial strategy

While the plan aims to accelerate the industrial uptake of clean, domestically produced energy, the emphasis on natural gas raises significant concerns from both public health and climate perspectives. Continued reliance on natural gas, a polluting fossil fuel, remains harmful to human health and the environment, and undermines progress toward climate objectives. While natural gas produces less CO₂ than coal, its primary component, methane (CH₄), is a potent greenhouse gas. Even small methane leaks can negate its climate benefits; studies show that a 1.5% leakage rate could increase the climate impact over 20 years by 50%, casting doubt on its role as a “bridge fuel” in the transition.⁴ While fully replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy may not yet be feasible in all industrial sectors, policy must prioritise renewable energy to the greatest extent possible. A forward-thinking, health-focused industrial strategy must set ambitious fossil fuel phase-out targets, prioritise rapid industrial decarbonisation through electrification powered by non-polluting renewables, and promote the adoption of technologies that are free from harmful pollutants and do not contribute to global warming.

The Role of Civil Society in Industrial Policy

In a shrinking civic space where health, social, and environmental concerns seem to be taking a back seat, it is crucial to formalise the oversight and participation of civil society in decision-making processes related to industrial policy. These policies have significant impacts on both people and the planet, and civil society, including health organisations, should be actively involved in shaping the strategies that greatly impact Europe’s ability to meet public health, environmental and climate objectives. Without meaningful civil society participation, we risk prioritising short-term commercial interests over the needs of the most vulnerable and the long-term well-being of our society. Ensuring that civil society has a seat at the table is crucial for fostering transparency, accountability, and decisions that safeguard both the health of people and the future of our planet.

Recommendations for a health-centred industrial strategy: the need for policy coherence and inclusive decision-making

Our main recommendations focus on ensuring that Europe's industrial transition is underpinned by strong policy coherence, ensuring that initiatives under the CID protect public health by advancing environmental and climate protection. This includes aligning initiatives that will be propelled as part of the CID with commitments under the European Climate Law, the Renewable Energy Directive, the Zero Pollution Action Plan, and air quality legislation in particular. Specifically, we emphasise the need for the CID to actively support the achievement of air quality targets, ensuring alignment with key legislative commitments, including the revised Industrial Emissions Directive, the revised Ambient Air Quality Directive, and targets set by the National Emission Reduction Commitment Directive.

To achieve this, EPHA urges policymakers to:

- Drive ambitious pollution reduction efforts through industrial policy to protect health, prevent disease, and reduce the substantial costs of pollution, particularly air pollution.
- Advance a fast, fair, and clean energy transition with clear fossil fuel phase-out targets and rapid electrification based on non-polluting renewables, ensuring affordable access while protecting society from the health and economic toll of the accelerating climate crisis.
- Guarantee transparent, inclusive governance by involving civil society, including health organisations, in decision-making.

Conclusion: a clean and healthy industrial future

Europe has a unique opportunity to lead globally on sustainable industrial transformation. The Clean Industrial Deal presents a vital moment to align industrial decarbonisation with urgent public health, air quality, and climate goals. By adopting an integrated approach that brings these issues together, Europe can position itself as a global industrial leader while safeguarding public health within and beyond its borders.