



Policy Brief #2

PUTTING HEALTH EQUITY AT THE HEART OF SUSTAINABLE TRANSITIONS

For greater health, equity and sustainability

WHY 'HEALTH EQUITY'?

Those who are less and least well-off bear **less responsibility** for the causes of climate change and environmental degradation, but **suffer more** from its consequences.¹ At the same time, they benefit less from the measures being taken to address the climate crisis.

For example, in Belgium, the poorest 10% produce four times less carbon dioxide emissions than the richest 10%. In parallel, tax increases on gas, oil and petrol have the biggest proportionate effect on their incomes. They also benefit least from 'green subsidies', for instance on solar roofs and other products that they cannot afford.²

Such factors undermine health equity, which is commonly understood as the absence of **avoidable differences in health outcomes between social groups**. These differences – health inequalities – arise from the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, and exist between groups by socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, race, disability, and area of residence. **Health inequalities are interlinked with environmental inequalities, are socially constructed, can be reduced by reasonable means, and are therefore avoidable and unfair.**³ They also cost up to €980 billion per year in the EU (in terms of productivity losses, higher healthcare and welfare costs), and contribute to less socially cohesive societies.⁴

But while rising levels of inequalities are gaining political attention, not enough is being done.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

**KEEP HEALTH EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT OF
POLICYMAKING ON HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT.**

BUT HOW?

A wide body of research has analysed what can be done to reduce health inequalities; less has been done to relate this to measures that can protect the environment and mitigate climate change. The following recommendations emerged from INHERIT's work. They should not be considered a comprehensive guide, but provide indications of what can be done to keep health equity at the forefront.



INHERIT

INHERIT is a Horizon 2020 research project (2016-2019), based on the premise that **environmental and societal challenges are interlinked and relate to unsustainable 'take, make, consume, dispose' economies. Addressing these challenges through integrated solutions is an opportunity to simultaneously improve the environment, health and health equity (the INHERIT 'triple-win').**

MAKE IT AS EASY AND AFFORDABLE AS POSSIBLE

WHY?

- People need the capacity, opportunity and motivation to make sustainable choices. Cost and access are key factors.

HOW?

- Subsidise fruits and vegetables.
- Invest in urban infrastructures that make it easy for people to engage in active travel.
- Be careful not to stigmatise or stereotype.

INVOLVE COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE SOCIAL GRADIENT

WHY?

- Involving all communities in policies that affect them helps to ensure they address real needs, is empowering and gives them a vested interest in their success.

HOW?

- Make it mandatory for local authorities and developers to engage residents in designing, implementing, maintaining and evaluating housing development or green space initiatives.

ACT ON THE ENVIRONMENTS IN WHICH PEOPLE LIVE

WHY?

- Neighbourhoods, houses, schools are key determinants of health and wellbeing. Positively changing them can help to reach low income groups.

HOW?

- Develop and maintain quality green spaces in deprived neighbourhoods, engaging communities in doing so.
- Ensure good indoor thermal conditions and air quality.

BE AWARE OF TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

WHY?

- Measures promoting environmental sustainability can inadvertently exacerbate health inequalities.

HOW?

- Ensure that energy efficiency measures targeting lower socio-economic groups do not come at the cost of negative health impacts (e.g. sealing houses too tightly).

EMBED THE TRIPLE-WIN FROM AN EARLY AGE

WHY?

- Giving children the best start in life is crucial to reduce health inequalities across the life-course.

HOW?

- Support efforts to integrate outdoor learning (about nature and food) in school curricula.
- Encourage and enable schools to procure sustainable and healthy foods.

EVALUATE IMPACTS OF POLICIES ACROSS DIFFERENT GROUPS

WHY?

- Evaluations help understand whether initiatives work across different groups (socio-economic, age, gender) and how to enhance impact, to ensure funds are well spent.

HOW?

- Build in a differentiated evaluation starting from the planning phase of interventions, to compare and act on outcomes.

FOSTER ECONOMIC INCLUSION THROUGH GREEN OPPORTUNITIES

WHY?

- Too often people feel left behind. Ensuring economically viable green jobs and upskilling workers is good for the environment, equity, and health and wellbeing.

HOW?

- Help sustainable small-scale rural producers earn a fair living.
- Provide training and skills in emerging sectors improving health and environment.
- Facilitate green volunteering opportunities, promoting social cohesion and reintegration in the labour market.

ASSESS POLICY IMPACT ON THE 'THERE AND THEN'

WHY?

- Policies do not always pose a direct and immediate risk to our own environment and health, but may have consequences on the broader ecosystem, health of those living in poorer countries, and future generations.

HOW?

- Use the INHERIT Model as a tool to screen policies for potential unintended health and wellbeing consequences. A [short video](#) and explanation are available on the INHERIT website.⁵

THE EVIDENCE - INHERIT TRIPLE-WIN CASE STUDIES⁶



LIVING: THE MALVIK PATH (NORWAY), AND THINKING FADURA (SPAIN)

The Malvik Path is a three-kilometre path along the coast created from a disused railway. All population groups were included in its planning and implementation. It is free to use and efforts have been made to ensure its accessibility.

Thinking Fadura provides free access to green space in the town of Getxo, which was previously only accessible by paying an annual fee. The space was designed through a participatory consultation process that included residents and different municipal departments.

These two green spaces provide health and wellbeing benefits, offering the possibility for physical outdoor activity and social interaction. Since the opening of the Malvik path, **people facing socioeconomic disadvantages tend to use it more often than people with no socioeconomic difficulties**. Visitors have also increased in Getxo, with **lower-income groups standing to benefit most** since the previous fee presented a greater barrier for them. INHERIT findings demonstrate that both initiatives are not only profitable from a societal but also an economical perspective.

Recommendation: Support the development of accessible, affordable green spaces for all, co-created with local communities. This can foster health, equity, environmental, as well as economic benefits.





MOVING: LIFESTYLE E-COACHING (GREECE AND THE NETHERLANDS)

Technological solutions have the potential for social innovation and behavioural change. An INHERIT study involving socio-economically disadvantaged individuals demonstrates that an app is effective in encouraging more physical activity, at least in the short-term, particularly amongst those with sedentary lifestyles. **This dispels two myths: that only the well-off can engage with lifestyle apps, and that more active people gain most from apps to motivate physical activity.**

Recommendation: Provide incentives to companies and health insurance providers to develop applications that promote physical activity across socio-economic groups and allow for long-term evaluations.



CONSUMING: DE VOEDSELTUIN - THE FOOD GARDEN (THE NETHERLANDS)

The Food Garden **produces organic fruit and vegetables for lower-income families connected to the Dutch Food bank.** By providing volunteering opportunities to long-term unemployed, **it facilitates social integration and reintegration into the job market.** It also makes the city healthier and more sustainable, providing a green space where people across social divisions can meet. The support of the municipality, an equal partner in the garden's hybrid business model (funded by private, collective and public sources), is an important success factor.

Recommendation: Provide support for developing, growing and testing initiatives linking the production and consumption of healthy, sustainably produced food with reducing inequalities.



FIND OUT MORE!

Discover more policy-relevant insights from INHERIT in **two parallel policy briefs:** “[Shifting to integrated governance](#)” and “[Enabling positive behaviour change](#)”.

All INHERIT outcomes, including the three Policy Briefs and a related Policy Toolkit, four Future Scenarios of what Europe could look like in 2040, a Policy Roadmap of how to get there, a database of over 100 good practices, qualitative, quantitative and cost-benefit analyses of INHERIT case studies and a report pulling results together to set out “Elements of good practice”, can be found here: www.inherit.eu.

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