



Socially just: Health – Environment – Climate

Discussion Paper “Kongress Armut und Gesundheit 2024” (Poverty and Health Congress)

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“Being poor makes you sick, being sick makes you poor!” With this simple but concise summary, Prof. Dr. Gerhard Trabert got to the heart of what has by no means lost its relevance, even in the year 2023: the high influence of social status on health (Kongress Armut und Gesundheit, Eröffnungsveranstaltung Präsenzteil. Video 2023).

Current data on poverty in Germany, among others from the Paritätischer Gesamtverband, show an enormous consolidation and expansion of poverty - “16.9 percent of the population living here is affected by poverty” (Der Paritätische Gesamtverband 2023, 4). Within two years, the poverty rate has risen from 15.9 to 16.9 percent (Der Paritätische Gesamtverband 2023).

The relationship between poverty and health has been comprehensively documented internationally with the help of a broad database. This is true for Germany as well. The findings show with great consistency that people with a low socioeconomic status are significantly more often affected by health impairments and serious chronic diseases than those with a higher socioeconomic status (Lampert, et al. 2017). **Many facts and figures from the international arena further confirm that as inequality rises, social problems also rise significantly** (u.a. Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

At the 2023 Congress, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier emphasized that “these figures are a challenge for our welfare state. **They touch not only our sense of justice but affect the cohesion of society** - the basis and prerequisite of any successful democracy (...). **Only a state that doesn't ignore the voice of the poorest and most vulnerable, only such a state and such politics will be accepted in the long term**” (Kongress Armut und Gesundheit, Eröffnungsveranstaltung Präsenzteil. Video 2023).

The Kongress Armut und Gesundheit 2023 shed light on how societal challenges (COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis, increased refugee migration, inflation, ...) exacerbate this relationship (see i.a. Gottlieb, Ohm und Knörnschild 2021, Hoebel, et al. 2022, Wabnitz 2023). **“In recent years, we have been dealing continuously with crises that are mutually exacerbating and running parallel to each other”** stated Stefan Pospiech, Managing Director of Gesundheit Berlin-Brandenburg e. V. (Kongress Armut und Gesundheit, Eröffnungsveranstaltung digitaler Teil. Video 2023).

The 2024 Congress will continue the discussion on the relationship between poverty and health by taking a closer look at how environment and climate interact with poverty and health; because: “Climate change is the greatest challenge for humankind” (Robert Koch Institute 2023, 3). It not only endangers our natural resource-based livelihood: “Climate change is also a significant threat to our health - and the health of future generations” (Federal Minister for the Environment Steffi Lemke, Umweltbundesamt and BMUV 2022). And “tackling climate change is the greatest opportunity for global health (Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change 2015, 1798).

In Germany, climate change is leading to more frequent high-temperature extremes, such as heatwaves, which can lead to serious health problems. In one single summer (2022), an estimated



4,500 people in Germany died from record-breaking heat. In addition to acute diseases such as heat stroke, high temperatures can also cause or worsen respiratory, cardiovascular, and kidney diseases (German Advisory Council on the Environment 2023).

The negative consequences of human-caused climate change affect everyone everywhere - but not to the same extent. **Vulnerable populations, who are the least contributing to climate change, are disproportionately highly affected.** This is true at both the global (IPCC 2022) and national level (German Advisory Council on the Environment 2023).

In addition to the negative consequences of climate change on health, vulnerable populations are also more exposed to the health risks posed by the pollution crisis. For Germany, the Conference of the Ministers for the Environment noted already in 2016 with concern that "*social status plays a role in determining whether and to what extent children, adolescents, and adults are affected by harmful environmental impacts or are excluded from positive environmental impacts*" (57. Umweltministerkonferenz 2016, 16). Current empirical findings show that socially disadvantaged populations in Germany tend to be more affected by environmental and climatic challenges and feel higher burdened. This is true for both, the national and the regional level (Bunge und Rehling 2020). Often, heat stress, noise, and air pollution are concentrated especially in socially disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. At the same time, these neighborhoods usually lack green infrastructure (i.a. Shrestha, et al. 2016; SenUMVK 2022).

Questions of social and socio-spatial distribution of health-relevant environmental hazards (i.a. noise, air pollution) and health-promoting environmental resources (i.a. green spaces, parks) are discussed in Germany under the heading "environmental justice". The concept further draws attention to the question of who can successfully participate in environmentally relevant planning and decision-making processes (procedural justice) (Bolte, Bunge, et al. 2018).

In this way, environmental justice links to the public health discourse on health inequities and merges the issues of environment, health, and social status (Bolte, Bunge, et al. 2012).

As a normative guiding principle, environmental justice aims to establish **healthy environments for and with all people, regardless of their social situation, to create the best possible environmental health opportunities for all.** On the basis of the principle of the welfare state and the principle of equality, the classic goals of health-related environmental protection in the sense of avoiding or eliminating environmental pollution are thus combined with the goal of socially just access to the healthiest possible living conditions (Böhme, Preuß, et al. 2014, Bolte, Bunge, et al. 2012)

With this in mind, the German Institute of Urban Affairs (Difu) on behalf of the German Environment Agency, has developed concrete recommendations for action on how the federal government, the states, and the municipalities in Germany can support the establishment of environmental justice. These include, among others, the development of a common mission statement 'environmental justice', the creation of organizational structures for cross-departmental cooperation, and the strengthening of this topic in education (Böhme, Franke, et al. 2022).

At the global level, the international community has adopted ambitious goals in the form of the **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Agenda 2030)**. Key components include combating poverty and hunger, health and education, protecting natural resources and livelihoods, justice, and fighting inequality. The signatories have committed themselves, among other things, to end poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1) and to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (Goal 3) (United Nations 2015). The German Strategy for Sustainability (DNS) considers the SDGs as a basis for sustainable development at the national level (The Federal Government 2020). In the DNS and its related documents, it is clearly stated that efforts are needed in all policy areas to achieve

the SDGs. In its current special report, the German Advisory Council on the Environment emphasizes: "For all people to live well and healthy lives, it's necessary to build a healthy public policy" (German Advisory Council on the Environment 2023, 25).

The current global environmental and social crises have several common drivers. There is widespread scientific consensus on the fact that climate change already has significant negative impacts, e.g., on the security of states, societies, and people (Rüttinger 2020). To tackle their root causes, **a profound sustainable transformation of the way we organize society is needed**. "The multiple environmental crises - climate change, biodiversity loss, and inputs of harmful substances - are leading to fundamentally new systemic requirements and call for profound societal changes" (German Advisory Council on the Environment 2023, 26). Particularly central to this is that "social justice and environmental protection issues are not played off against each other (Maja Göpel, Kongress Armut und Gesundheit, Eröffnungsveranstaltung digitaler Teil. Video 2023).

What concepts, sources, strategies, policy, and practical guidelines are already available, especially at the national level, for bringing together health with environmental and climate considerations while not missing out on the issue of social justice?

- The "[One Health](#)-Approach" recognizes that the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants, and the wider environment (including ecosystems) are closely linked and interdependent.
 - How can the social dimension of the One Health approach be properly addressed?
- The Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) has been informing about the effects of climate change on human health via the web portal www.klima-mensch-gesundheit.de since 2021.
- [Status reports](#) on climate change and health from the Robert Koch Institute are published regularly.
- The [Kompetenzzentrum Klimafolgen und Anpassung \(KomPass\)](#) of the German Environment Agency (UBA) identifies sustainable paths and provides impulses for the development of a society and environment adapted to climate change.
- The current special reports of the German Advisory Council on Global Change ([WBGU](#)) and the German Advisory Council on the Environment ([SRU](#)) deal with the issue of environment, climate, and health.
- The Zukunftsforum Public Health published the [Call for and to action: Climate Change und Public Health](#) in 2022.
- The **Nationale Präventionskonferenz** has adopted [a basis for action](#) concerning health and climate.
- The [GKV-Prevention Guideline](#) and thus the catalog of services provided by the statutory health insurances was expanded correspondingly: "Because of the dependence of human health on life-supporting ecosystems, health promotion and prevention services provided by the GKV should, as far as possible, be oriented in such a way that they indirectly serve to protect our natural resource-based livelihood" (GKV 2023, p.9).
- The Federal Government agreed upon a "[Climate Pact for Health](#)" with many of the leading organizations in the health care sector in December 2022.
- The German Environment Agency (UBA) together with the German Institute of Urban Affairs (Difu) published [recommendations for action](#) for embedding and implementing environmental justice at the federal, state, and local levels.



- The [recommendations](#) for drafting heat-health action plans by the federal-state ad hoc working group on "Health adaptation to the consequences of climate change" chaired by the Federal Ministry for the Environment.
- Die [German Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change](#) (DAS) (2008), which is currently undergoing further development as part of a wide-ranging public participation process, explicitly addresses health in a separate topic cluster.

Prof. Dr. Maja Göpel concluded her Keynote 2023 by stating that there is a need for **respectful and valuable social discussion environments in which fundamental issues can be boldly questioned and different positions and perspectives can be heard to achieve common solutions** (Kongress Armut und Gesundheit, Eröffnungsveranstaltung digitaler Teil. Video 2023). The Kongress Armut und Gesundheit would like to create such an environment for the causes and consequences of the climate and environmental crisis on health, as well as the concrete shape of the necessary transformation processes. We cordially invite you to discuss the following questions (and more) at the upcoming congress.

- Which alliances (perhaps also new ones) are needed to successfully bring the issue to public attention and anchor it on the political agenda?
- How is the DNS being implemented so far and what does a successful implementation require (in terms of additional partners, structures, etc.)?
- How can the new institutions (such as the Bundesinstitut für Öffentliche Gesundheit, to be created in 2024) and instruments (such as the Public Health Service Pact) be transformative in the field of public health?
- How can people participate more in these transformative processes?
- With whom could new (perhaps unusual) alliances for equal opportunities and transformation be built to achieve comprehensive well-being?
- How can health-promoting measures be systematically combined with environmental protection, climate protection, and equal opportunities?
- What good practice examples already exist in Germany and internationally in the area of...
 - environmentally friendly, equal opportunity, AND health-promoting development?
 - trans-sectoral and multi-professional cooperation between different stakeholders
 - the participation of people affected by health, social, or environmental inequalities?...

You will find an overview of the criteria used to evaluate the incoming contributions at <https://www.armut-und-gesundheit.de/kongress-2024/auswahlverfahren>. It is important for the organizers that you refer to social and environmental health inequalities and consider the perspective of people experiencing poverty. Furthermore, we welcome contributions that illustrate and discuss innovative approaches to transformation, focusing on co-benefits for health and the environment. Cross-departmental and - wherever possible - participatory approaches, plus the relevance of the contributions, are also important for the evaluation by the program committees.

Even though a large part of the contributions is in German, we also welcome English ones and encourage you to reach out to the organizers of the Congress in case you have any questions regarding the event or the submission process.

Please submit your contributions by 07.09.2023 at: <https://www.conftool.pro/armut-und-gesundheit2024/>

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