

EU researchers contribute to better air quality policy

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An EU project has undertaken detailed research to support the review and implementation of the EU's comprehensive air quality legislation.

Air quality has become one of the primary environmental concerns for EU citizens in the last decade. Although air quality has substantially improved in the last 20 years, there has been a growing realisation that technical measures will not be sufficient alone to achieve the high standards for air quality contained within EU environmental legislation. Policymakers are now also focussing on the socio-economic dimension of air quality policies in order to improve their effective and overall acceptance amongst EU citizens.

The FP7-funded SEFIRA project has thus spent the past three years

coordinating some of the best scientific and socio-economic resources to achieve a deeper understanding of these complex issues. Due to finish at the end of May 2016, the project team hosted a final workshop in Brussels on 20 April 2016 to highlight their results and formally present them to European stakeholders.

Understanding perceptions and awareness of air quality issues

The project team utilised a transdisciplinary approach that encompassed fields as diverse as economics, political science, geology and atmospheric sciences. They undertook a detailed analysis of documents to ascertain how relevant EU Directives have been translated into national and local measures to combat air pollution.

They then interviewed 38 experts from four European countries to find out which are the most important obstacles to full policy implementation. Finally, they undertook detailed focus groups in four European cities (Antwerp, Milan, Warsaw and Malmo) to understand citizens' real concerns and vision for the future with regards to air quality. They discovered a stark difference in attitudes and awareness – for example, residents of Antwerp were seen as highly active and organised over the issue, with their efforts even being featured in local Flemish media. Such high levels of activism were not recorded in the other three cities.

Using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) method, the project also conducted over 16 000 individual interviews across seven EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK). Participants were screened with regards to demography as well as their mobility and eating habits. Specifically, participants had to be over 18 years old, used pollution-causing vehicles and ate meat and

dairy products for more than four days per week. They were then asked detailed questions on their opinions and attitudes towards various environmental issues.

The researchers discovered that attitudes and perceptions differed markedly across countries, age groups, levels of education and genders. For example, when asked whether they agreed with the statement that it is not up to the individual to adopt environmentally friendly behaviour, only 19 % of Austrian participants and 18 % of British participants agreed to this, in contrast to 30 % of Belgians. One quarter of Polish participants agreed with the statement that environmental protection is not an important issue, substantially higher than in Western European countries. In Austria, men were less willing to change their mobility habits than women, and were willing to pay 40 % more than they currently do (in taxes, charges etc.) in order not to change their habits. With regards to eating habits, men in Austria and Belgium were willing to pay 65 % more than women in order not to change their diets. One surprising result from the project was that better educated participants were willing to pay 70 % more than less educated participants to not change their mobility habits.

Policy implications and next steps

SEFIRA's work is the first time that such research methods have been applied to the issue of [air quality](#). With their results showing such a plethora of views from European citizens, they argue that policymakers need to find a way to balance and integrate such individual perceptions with the technical requirements and priorities for ongoing policy action. In particular, individual acceptability of environmental policy should be considered during the policy implementation process.

The project's results were well-received by the policymakers present. MEP Eleanora Evi, a speaker during the workshop and an active

member of the European Parliament's Environment Committee, stated that the project results were highly topical, particularly in the wake of recent events such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal. 'This project comes at the right moment in order to speed-up the debate on these issues, especially as some files such as the Air Quality Directive, seem to be at stake,' she commented.

Although the project will soon finish, the project team have stated that they will continue to conduct further analysis of their results and undertake more research on the topic. Overall, the [project](#) aimed to show how taking such a multidisciplinary approach and the methodology utilised for the SEFIRA research can be applied to better policymaking and policy implementation at EU, national and local levels.

More information: For more information please see SEFIRA project website: www.sefira-project.eu/

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