



# POLICY BRIEF: THE NEED FOR A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE ON Biodiversity and Public Health in Belgium



## **BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH ARE CLOSELY RELATED**

Biodiversity impacts Public Health in various ways<sup>1-7</sup>. First of all, biodiversity is safeguarding the quality of food, air, water, and providing resources for medicine (traditional or modern) as well as aiding stress reduction and management of cognitive resources, stimulating social ties and physical activity, and supporting development over the lifespan for those experiencing nature. Moreover the contribution of biodiversity to disaster mitigation (e.g. flooding or drought) and the control of the increasing threat of infectious diseases (in Belgium e.g. Hantavirus, Lyme and other tick-borne diseases; in Europe e.g. West Nile virus, Chikungunya, Leishmaniasis) is of utmost interest in terms of public health and cost to society. The large media coverage of a breakthrough in linking micro-organism diversity and human health<sup>8,9</sup>, involving Belgian researchers, illustrates the societal relevance and interest in the topic. In addition, according to McMichael<sup>10</sup>, "Human population health should be the central criterion, and is the best long-term indicator, of how we are managing the natural environment." The 2001 - 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in collaboration with the World Health Organization, dedicated a full report<sup>6</sup> to the relation between ecosystems/biodiversity and human health. Public Health is also one of the priority societal challenges identified in the European "Horizon 2020" strategy<sup>11</sup> for research and innovation.

## **BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN BELGIUM: AN EMERGING FIELD OF INTEREST**

Research on the linkages between biodiversity and public health is an emerging issue that nevertheless has not received much concerted attention in Belgium to date. Considering that the issue attracts the interest of various scientific disciplines, including biodiversity, public health and social sciences, an interdisciplinary approach is called for. Promoting new linkages and collaboration amongst these disciplines, to propose appropriate new research ideas and topics is of priority interest. The expertise arising from such interdisciplinary research potentially has substantial added value for policy making. This will e.g. allow Belgium to live up to the Belgium Biodiversity Strategic<sup>12</sup> aim of maximising the advantages for human health arising from biodiversity and expand the collaboration between the interested organisations / public services. To promote the integration of such expertise into relevant policy at different levels, a transdisciplinary approach is called for to ascertain the involvement of relevant stakeholders from different sectors of society in the development of a research agenda and projects.

On November 30th 2011, the Belgian Biodiversity Platform organized the first Belgian Biodiversity and Public Health<sup>13</sup> conference. The meeting attracted 81 Belgian experts, 68% of whom were scientists (universities and governmental scientific institutes; health-, ecological- and social science), 16% represented policy interests (Federal, regions, provinces, cities; health-, environmental-, nature- and land planning policy), and the remainder comprised of consultants (policy advice, eco-therapy, education) and persons involved in NGOs (nature protection, landscape development, ecological life and gardening), or from media.

Discussions during the conference focused on priority scientific and policy challenges and resulted in the identification of several topical issues of priority interest. A general need for further capacity and network building was highlighted. This will require structural follow up of activities for science to adequately address societal challenges related to the Biodiversity and Public Health domain.

\* A Community of Practice (CoP) is a network made up of individuals and organizations that share an interest and practice, who come together to address a specific challenge, and further each others' goals and objectives in a specific topic area<sup>14,15,16</sup>. An interesting international example is the Canadian Community of Practice in Ecosystem Approaches to Health (COPEH)<sup>14</sup>. This CoP has vast experience in establishing collaborative relationships and capacity building.

**A BELGIAN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE ON BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH**

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS CALL FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A BELGIAN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE\* ON BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN BELGIUM WHICH WILL:

- BUILD A STRONG NETWORK AND STIMULATE CAPACITY BUILDING
- PRODUCE AN OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STATE OF BELGIAN KNOWLEDGE CAPACITY REGARDING BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH
- RESPOND TO THE DEMANDS OF POLICYMAKERS AND STAKEHOLDERS REGARDING BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERTISE AT THE LEVEL OF BELGIUM AS WELL AS AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL PLATFORM ON BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES



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