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WHO & UfM Joint Webinar on Environment and Health in Seaport Cities – a report

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Seaports are vital nodes connecting the hinterlands of countries and continents with the rest of the world, attracting industries and people. This nodal function, however, is incompatible or even in conflict with other uses: port activities affect the entire region of a port city and not just the area administrated by the port. Despite several legal interventions, the side-effects from the port's activities - such as pollution and risk of accidents – still affect the natural environment of the port and the [health of the citizens in the “port-cityscape”](#). In a webinar, which was organized jointly by the European office of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) on June 17, 2021 and attracted over 100 participants, a group of researchers and practitioners discussed how health can be negotiated in expansion plans of seaport cities.

The event featured a first discussion of a report on the *Environment and Health in Seaport Cities* that was sponsored by the WHO, and other ongoing research from other European and

Mediterranean cities. This initiative followed a *Memorandum of Understanding* signed in 2020 between the WHO and the UfM to support the development and implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Prepared by Cesar Ducruet, Mariantonia Lo Prete, Viola Graef, Elyakim Ben-Hakoun and Katharina Wabnitz, the report on Environment and Health in Seaport Cities starts with a scoping review, the identification of good practices, and presents the case studies of Hamburg, Haifa, and Southampton. Said Madani and Amira Ghennai complemented the findings with their research on Algiers, focusing on the use of the tool Boussole 21, while Stephan Hauser discussed the long-term health impact of petroleum on various types of soils in Dunkirk. Carola Hein concluded by highlighting the need for adaptive strategies by including diverse stakeholders to design sustainable, just, and healthy port cities.

Several key elements emerged during this event regarding the environmental and health situation of port cities. One key element that participants highlighted was the substantial imbalance in the literature. Ducruet explained that environmental studies are numerous, provide estimation, quantification, and localisation of pollutions, but they merely discuss health as being at risk and rarely the impact of this pollution on health itself. Moreover, health studies in port cities are lacking, with less than a dozen scientific papers on the impacts of ports and shipping activities on health. These articles mostly deal with industrial complexes, or develop a technical and medical perspective ignoring the importance of actors and governance. The effects of noise, air, soil, and water pollution on the health of inhabitants therefore remain under-investigated. Yet, the few articles available do point at the detrimental effects of port activities on the quality of life and health of port cities' inhabitants, for example the effects of noise pollution on sleep and stress, and the impact of dust clouds from the port on air quality.

Port cities are places where flows connect, at sea and on land. As such, port cities become increasingly congested; with cars and trucks, but also at sea with the growth of the oil and shipping industries (Couling 2014, 2021). Urban areas grew together with the expansion of industrial and port activities, increasing the pressure on the infrastructure and the environment. This congestion affects in turn the quality of the environment and of the life of citizens. As a result, ports often have a detrimental impact on the health of nearby cities and regions, more so than other cities of the same country.

The petrochemical industry was discussed as one of the main threats to the health of citizens in port cities. In both Skikda (Algeria) and Dunkirk (France), the oil industry, and the industrial processes related to it, are negatively affecting the life of inhabitants by polluting soil and water. Disasters linked to storage, transformation, and transportation of oil have increased the pollution of the entire region around these port cities. Historical developments of the oil industry, being disasters or facilities, are lost in the memory of people and in records, and remain invisible in the soil, polluting it, as well as the water. The transformation and cleaning of industrial sites, linked or not to the oil industry, must not stop at the visible infrastructure, but also consider the impact that past activities still have on the health of port cities' inhabitants.

The sources of pollution can also have lesser-known sources and therefore gain less attention. Dry bulk activities, while less polluting in appearance, can also damage inhabitants' health. Mariantonia Lo Prete explained that the transshipment of cereals, for example, can have negative health impacts due to the clouds of dust they generate. The particles within these clouds can

drastically deteriorate the air quality way beyond the limited area of the port, triggering an episode of air pollution in nearby urban areas.

The presentations and discussions during the Webinar demonstrated the positive influence that efficient and constraining rules can have. The mechanisms introduced on air pollutants from the shipping industry by the MARPOL Convention and European Union's regulations efficiently tackled the emission of toxic gases such as NO_x (nitrogen oxides) and SO_x (sulphur oxides) by ships around port cities. The amount of health troubles and deaths associated with air pollution highlights the importance of regulating the emissions of this economic sector.

In conclusion, participants in this webinar pointed to the need for collaboration among ports and city actors in tackling pollution. First, by researching its current impact on port city citizens. Second, through innovations on technological, social and cultural levels. International, national, and local initiatives, such as the SECA (Sulphur Emission Control Areas) regulation introduced by MARPOL, the use of liquefied natural gas, better ship turnaround time (TAT), or platforms of expression for local inhabitants are effectively collaborating with the aim to reduce the pollution produced by port-related activities. Dialogues between cities and their port, as well as between authorities and inhabitants, demonstrate the positive effects that inclusive governance systems can create. If technological innovations can help us reach sustainability objectives, they go along with investments, political and popular will, as well as new and adaptive regulatory frameworks.

Acknowledgement

This blog has been written in the context of discussions in the LDE PortCityFutures team. It reflects the evolving thoughts among group members on the socio-spatial and cultural questions surrounding port city relationships. Special thanks for comments and reviews to Carola Hein and Hilde Sennema.

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Webinar website: <https://ufmsecretariat.org/ufm-who-webinar-environment-health-seaport/>

The Webinar recording is available [here](#)