

Polluting vehicles will not drive Italy out of the crisis

Brussels 24 June 2020: Health and environmental NGOs, including *Active Citizenship Network/Cittadinanzattiva, Associazione Medici per l'Ambiente - ISDE Italia, Cittadini per l'aria, European Public Health Alliance, Greenpeace Italia, Kyoto Club, Legambiente, Transport & Environment and WWF Italia*, demand that the Italian Parliament and the Italian Government no longer invest in fossil-fuel cars. It would be preferable to promote shared and sustainable mobility, with zero-emission public transport and plans to reallocate public spaces to cyclists and pedestrians.

Encouraging the purchase of internal combustion engine models favours obsolete and polluting technologies that are harmful to our health and climate. The amendments to the "Relaunch Decree" to encourage car scrapping programmes will only worsen pollution and public health in Italy.

Italy was particularly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and chronic disease patients suffered the most. Latest evidence suggests that the elevated air pollution, especially in the Po Valley, should be considered as an additional co-factor of the high level of mortality recorded in that area. Nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) pollution alone is responsible for over 14,000 deaths in Italy every year.

"Air pollution makes us sick and worsened the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research demonstrated that people living in Northern-Italy with high levels of pollutants are more prone to develop chronic respiratory conditions and are suitable for any infectious agent. But prolonged exposure to air pollution damages even young and healthy people. Reducing lethal pollution and putting the economy on a sustainable recovery curve is more important than ever!", said Dario Caro, researcher at the Department of Environmental Science at Aarhus University.

To reduce transport-related air pollution, the number of combustion engine vehicles, the main source of emissions in Italian cities, has to decrease. This means encouraging electric vehicles, which are not only better for public health, but are also sustainable. No public funds must be allocated to diesel, petrol or gas vehicles, even in the form of tax credits. Taxpayers' money must not be used to put more polluting vehicles onto our roads.

Healthy, green investments are good for the Italian economy and businesses, too! It would be much more effective to direct recovery funds for industry to the production of electric vehicles and batteries (including the recovery, re-use and recycling chain) and the development of charging infrastructure, which are fast ways to create numerous sustainable jobs.

However, the best solution for both health and environment is to promote shared and sustainable mobility with zero or low emission public transport. The use of bicycles, including electric bicycles, must be encouraged by public incentives to reduce pollution from car use and increase physical activity. The same must be done for pedestrians, with pedestrian areas, wider pavements, and removal of mobility barriers for people with disabilities. Indeed, physical inactivity causes disease and increases mortality.



Most Europeans, and Italians in particular, do not want a return to pre-pandemic levels of air pollution. Citizens are ready to support profound changes in urban mobility to keep the improved levels of air quality experienced during quarantine, when air pollution was drastically reduced. They are in favour of banning cars from entering their cities and introducing zero-emission areas to reduce smog.

Innovative examples in Europe already exist. In Germany, for example, the government has limited incentives to electric vehicles only in its national recovery plan. Neither the Italian Parliament nor the Italian Government should support obsolete mobility systems that harm our health and our planet but should take the opportunity to decarbonise its transport sector. Now is the time to take a step forward in sustainable mobility for everyone's benefit.

NOTES TO EDITOR

To tackle the crisis and support the demand that collapsed with the COVID-19 public health emergency, some amendments to the "Relaunch Decree" tabled by both the majority and the opposition are currently under discussion in the Italian Parliament. Incentivising the automotive and motorcycle sector to promote the purchase of traditional vehicles (petrol, diesel, gas) is not acceptable.

Euro 6 standards are not homogeneous and not clean enough either!

Euro 6 standards for vehicles are very heterogeneous, Euro 6d being the most stringent. Progress has been made between the first Euro 6b models and the latest Euro 6d vehicles, but it is not enough. For example, the latest generation of diesel engines, sold as "clean" by the automotive industry, still emits large quantities of dangerous particulates, which represent a serious health hazard. Particulates are largely emitted by internal combustion engines, whether diesel, petrol or gas.

The World Health Organization (WHO) considers the particulates as the most harmful pollutant for humans. Despite many studies on the harmfulness of chronic exposure to particulates, for instance the increased incidence of cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, 77% of European city dwellers are exposed to higher levels than those indicated by the WHO.

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