

Widening the scope of walking policies through impact assessment
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**This is a (very) preliminary paper that does not include references yet
It does not represent the view of the Walloon Government**

The introduction. The paper at a glance

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how impact assessment can contribute to widening walking policies to include urban health issues and to creating healthier, equitable and sustainable urban environment. Using the example of Walloon walking policies, it demonstrates how looking at climate, employment and poverty issues helped considering urban health issues.

The paper is divided in three sections (the context, the case and the trick) and a conclusion with reflections for future action.

The context. Wallonia and the creation of the High Strategic Council

Wallonia is one of the three regions of Belgium, with Flanders and Brussels-capital Regions. There are around 3,5 million people living in the 262 Walloon municipalities.

In Belgium, as a federal country, regions are responsible for a wide array of competencies, in policy areas such as employment, territorial and urban planning, primary care, and public transportation. The federal level can also intervene in some of these policy areas, but on specific matters as public transport by train, and licensing general practitioners. The Walloon Region is thus a fully-fledged politico-administrative entity, with its own competencies, its elected Parliament (75 MPs) and its government (8 ministers, one central administration and multiple public agencies).

At the start of the 2019-2024 legislature, the Walloon Government set long-term objectives in terms of climate, employment and poverty:

- Cutting greenhouse gases emissions by 55% by 2030 compared with 1990 levels.
- Increasing the employment rate by 5% by 2025: the current employment rate is around 65%.
- Reducing poverty by half by 2030: one fourth of the Walloon population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

In this context, in October 2021, the Walloon Government has instituted a High Strategic Council, aimed at supporting it with its climate, employment and poverty objectives.

The High Strategic Council is an interdisciplinary body composed of independent scientific experts. It has both an advisory and a support role. In its advisory role, the main activity of the Council is to undertake impact assessments on strategic policies, identified in an annual or biennial programme. In 2023, one of the policies that have been examined is the Walloon walking policy.

The case. The “Walking Wallonia” action plan

In October 2023, the Walloon Government (BE) has adopted a new walking policy, aiming at increasing the modal share of walking in the Region to 5% through four specific behaviour changes among stakeholders:

- Federal, regional and local public bodies, businesses and schools adapt their approach to mobility by integrating pedestrian issues as a priority.
- Regional and local players implement pedestrian-friendly infrastructures.
- Stakeholders are empowered to reclaim public space.
- Stakeholders are more aware of pedestrian issues and the benefits of walking.

This policy has been supported by an impact assessment examining its implications for climate, employment, and poverty. The paper presents how such an IA has been effective to highlight specific issues that were not initially covered by the policy, especially in terms of climate justice.

The impact assessment on the “Walking Wallonia” action plan aims at answering to five questions:

- What are the direct and indirect effects of implementing the action plan?
- Are these effects consistent with the governmental climate, employment and poverty objectives?
- Are there more relevant instruments to reach the action plan objectives?
- What are the implementation factors to be considered to maximize effects?
- How can we establish a M&E framework for the action plan?

It combines a desk analysis of grey and academic literature (contextual analysis, stakeholders mapping, literature review, benchmarking), multiple interactions with the policymakers in charge of the action plan and a scenario workshop with policymakers in charge of infrastructures.

This paper is based on answers on the first two questions.

The trick. Widening the scope of potential effects by using an interdisciplinary framework

To identify possible effects and co-benefits of the action plan in terms of climate, employment and poverty, the High Strategic Council has used an interdisciplinary framework it has developed in-house, based on based on academic literature. This framework makes it possible to analyze a project through a set of dimensions linked to these three issues. It rests on three scientific notes that have been reviewed by experts from academia and from the public sector. It can be illustrated as follows (in French).



The tool is available online here (in French only): <https://hcs.wallonie.be/home/nos-outils/notre-outil-danalyse-des-enjeux-climatiques-demploi-et-de-pauvrete.html>

Focusing on health-related effects, the framework allows to identify multiple issues related to the climate, employment and poverty issues.

Objectives	Dimensions	Issues
Climate	Adaptation	Reducing people's vulnerabilities to climate-related risk and extreme events
Employment	Working conditions	Improving health through working conditions to ensure work sustainability (e.g.: limiting long-term absence from work)
Employment	Economic activity	Improving workers' health improve presence at work, hence, workers' productivity
Poverty	Deprivation	Improving access to health through higher income
Poverty	Experience	Improving health for people declaring a poor subjective health
Poverty	Interaction	Reducing non-take up to healthcare services

Looking at the “Walking Wallonia” action plan, several health-related effects can be identified based on this framework.

Firstly, in terms of climate adaptation, the literature shows that the expansion of walking (and more broadly of active modes of transport) is seen as an effective, but under-utilized, policy option, insofar as it meets both mitigation challenges (reducing emissions) and the need to adapt people and territories to the risks of climate-related risks. The action plan does not include an explicit adaptation objective, although a number of measures can support adaptation, in at least two ways:

- Improving infrastructures quality and comfort (e.g.: by increasing the shading and greening of infrastructures) could limit the exposure of pedestrians, including children and the elderly, to the consequences of climatic hazards. These populations are indeed the most fragile vis-à-vis extreme climate-related events such as urban heat islands.
- Developing walking policies brings various benefits in terms of health, considering that better health reduces people's vulnerability to climate-related risks as heat waves or floods (e.g.: improving air quality by reducing the modal share of cars, improving physical and mental health through physical activity).

Secondly, in terms of employment, the action plan only addresses directly urban health issues. The academic literature is not fully conclusive but some results point out that increased walking in public spaces, especially in cities, could have positive effects on the health and well-being of workers. Concretely, this would be about improved safety on the way to work, reduced stress, regular physical activity. Indirectly, improving workers' health could therefore play a role in their working conditions and help them stay in work. For example, it could contribute, alongside many other factors, to reducing accidents or burnout, thus limiting the risk of professional inactivity - and *de facto* contributing to keeping the employment rate steady. However, these effects can only really take shape in contexts where there is a reflection on working time and work flexibility, considering that home-work journeys can be lengthened by the use of walking.

Thirdly, in terms of poverty, the action plan also only addresses indirectly urban health issues. The literature however shows that promoting walking can also help to reduce social inequalities in health (e.g.: by a potential increase in physical activity). This is particularly the case if infrastructures are designed for the most disadvantaged populations, and if awareness-raising campaigns are carried out for them¹. It should be noted, however, that other factors are more important (e.g.: income, education, work, and social support).

The analysis also shows that the action plan would also gain from distinguishing between urban and rural areas.

¹ According to existing surveys, the use of walking, particularly for physical activity, is higher among people with higher levels of education. In this context, for example, awareness campaigns would benefit from considering the socio-economic level of their target audience. In particular, the literature review suggests that focusing campaigns on economic rather than environmental benefits was likely to have a greater impact with people at lower socio-economic levels. They may therefore become aware of the financial impact on the household of reducing car use.

The conclusion. Lessons learned and avenues for further development

To conclude this short paper, the key lesson to be highlighted is that the “Walking Wallonia” Action plan partly addresses urban health issues. Looking at it through the framework helped making visible these issues.

In addition, we can also point out how to further develop this work linking walking policies and urban health.

First, as for any impact assessment, additional work can be made in the appropriation and utilization of the results by policy-makers responsible for walking policies (both at civil servant and ministerial aide levels). Using a well-known utilization conceptualization (Alkin & King, 2017), we distinguish between three types:

- Instrumental utilization: providing arguments to support intersectoral cooperation regarding walking policies.
- Conceptual utilization: providing new knowledge on how to understand walking policies.
- Symbolic utilization: involving other stakeholders in the process because the impact assessment points them out.

Second, our approach could largely be improved by making health a fourth component of our interdisciplinary framework that would be reviewed by public health experts.