

Maroš Šefčovič would do well to highlight the huge health benefits of climate mitigation and clean energy policies when he visits Serbia 10-11 June, writes Anne Stauffer.

Anne Stauffer is Deputy Director of the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL).

European Commission Vice-President Mr Maroš Šefčovič will be attending the EU-Serbia High-Level Conference on Climate Change in Belgrade on 11 June.

Responsible for the Energy Union, Mr Šefčovič may find his task of encouraging more ambitious targets on greenhouse gas emission reductions rather a tough call.

Serbia is investing heavily in coal, one of the biggest single contributors to global carbon emissions. It is doing little on renewables. A recent Commission report said the country needed to "increase its efforts to meet its renewable energy targets". Under its Energy Community obligations, Serbia has taken on the target of achieving 27% of its gross final energy consumption from renewable sources in 2020.

To create ambition for change, Mr Šefčovič might do well to highlight the huge health benefits of cleaner air that can be gained through certain measures to mitigate climate change and help reach energy targets.

About 10,000 people in Serbia die prematurely each year due to exposure to particulate matter and ozone in polluted air. This is the second highest mortality rate in Europe.

A recent report by the World Health Organisation puts the country's health costs from population exposure to polluted air at \$29 billion per year, equivalent to a third of Serbia's GDP.

Polluted air from coal combustion in thermal power plants in Serbia alone leads to health costs estimated by the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) at up to €4.98 billion a year. Opting for a higher percentage of renewable forms of energy makes sense because it would both produce cleaner air and cut carbon emissions.

Policies aimed at improving air quality bring almost immediate benefits. Within five years of the ban on coal burning in Dublin in 1990, deaths from respiratory disease had fallen by 15% and deaths from cardiovascular disease by 10%.

Serbian doctors would be the first to welcome health arguments from Mr Šefčovič. At a press conference at the Ministry of Health last week, they launched an "expert statement" on reducing chronic disease by reducing dependency on fossil fuels.

Prof Dr Berislav Vekić, Serbia's deputy health minister, attended the meeting to add his conviction that energy and environmental policy should make health central. He said: "reducing the level of pollutants in the air would produce very significant reductions in deaths, suffering from respiratory and heart problems and health care costs in Serbia". He added that "long-term effects on population health in Serbia should be taken into account when developing energy policies."

Recognition by medical leaders and professionals that the so-called "health co-benefits" should become central to climate and energy discussions is growing throughout Europe.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) supports these calls and would like all Europe's leaders to take advantage of the health argument in energy and climate discussions. Put simply, it states that increasing investment in coal-fired plants leads to increasing health costs whereas opting for efficiency and renewable energy reduces asthma and chronic lung and heart conditions.

For Serbia, with air quality a very serious health problem, a decision to reduce future investment in coal would represent a win-win-win option: for health, for climate mitigation and because it would put Serbia ahead of other Balkan countries in the EU accession process.

There would also be benefits for the EU. Mr Šeščovič would demonstrate an ethical health and climate leadership from Europe. There would be better health and less air pollution from coal-powered electricity generation not only in Serbia but in the EU, due to reduced trans-boundary effects. In addition, the EU would be less likely to be implicated in the damage from Serbia's future air pollution problems from coal plants. After all, Serbia's intention is to sell the electricity it creates to EU countries.

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