

Dunkirk Urban Community expects healthy urban planning to form an integral part of development projects

Interview with Anne-Cécile Gautier,
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La Santé en action: When did Dunkirk Urban Community start taking an interest in the concept of healthy urban planning?

Anne-Cécile Gautier and Delphine Capet: The city of Grande-Synthe, one of the towns in the community, was among the first to participate in the WHO Healthy Cities Network, in 1991. Dunkirk joined in 2004, then the Dunkirk Urban Community (CUD) in 2009, and gradually other local towns followed. The industrial activity of our area has left deep marks on the environment and on the health of residents. Their general condition remains worrying, even though we are now seeing a decline in cancer-related mortality. This is why we have longstanding partnerships with organizations such as the regional air-quality observatory Atmo Hauts-de-France, the association for air-quality monitoring (AASQA), the permanent secretariat for the prevention of pollution and industrial risks (S3P), and other associative structures. This approach gained new impetus from 2013, when work started on the new inter-municipal plan for local development, housing and travel (PLUi-HD), in which we decided to integrate the notion of healthy urban planning. We are convinced that the health of populations does not depend solely on individual factors: other determinants, such as the socio-economic situation, transport, natural spaces in the city, air quality and access to care, all play a crucial role and public action has the power to transform them.

S. A.: How does the local development plan integrate a global approach to health?

A.-C. G. and D.C.: Three major challenges formed the basis of this territorial project. Firstly is the promotion of healthy lifestyles. The idea is to encourage developments that favour physical activity (cycle paths, foot-

paths), but which also improve food quality. To achieve this, the community dedicates communal land to organic or sustainable crops via a call for farming projects aimed at supplying school canteens with locally sourced food. The second challenge is to improve the environmental factors of health; in other words, to work on air quality, noise pollution and the living environment. For example, planners working on the redevelopment of a district in Grande-Synthe used a tool to model the concentration of pollutants, which will help steer decision-making on the project. On the mobility aspect, the idea is to reverse the paradigm: rather than adding new modes of transport to districts, we want to develop districts according to the existing transport network. Therefore, new developments are planned in areas that are well connected by public transport, which is free within the CUD¹ – and not in dead zones. Finally, the third challenge in the local development plan consists of facilitating access to care. This involves making the region more attractive for health professionals. An example is the project to build a modern residence in the heart of the city for 60 medical interns who, each year, spend six months at the Dunkirk hospital. By offering them good living conditions, we hope to encourage some to stay on or return to practice in the area. Healthcare facilities must also be accessible. The network of bus routes (reformed in 2018) now includes a regular service² stopping at the hospital, with connections to districts in which many inhabitants do not own cars.

S. A.: Can you present one of the most emblematic actions of this plan?

A.-C. G. and D.C.: In Dunkirk, as part of the urban regeneration of the Banc Vert district, new facilities will unite a nursery school and primary school that were previously located in two separate buildings, together with a canteen – pupils had to take the bus to the old one – and a community welfare centre. It's about creating shared spaces geared towards public education. The canteen has the capacity

KEY POINTS

■ **Through its local development plan (PLU), the Dunkirk Urban Community insists that health is an element to consider in any urban planning project. The local authorities have set three priorities: promoting healthy lifestyles, improving environmental factors of health, and facilitating access to care.**

to cook more meals than there are students so it will be able to supply other schools and nearby retirement homes. This school of the future was designed with a “zero endocrine disruptor” objective, which implies a precise choice of construction materials, but also of furniture. The building is more compact to reduce soil artificialization; every last square metre has a use. In addition, a 1-hectare park is set to take the place of one of the two schools demolished. It's a transversal project that has involved almost all municipal services: buildings; public spaces; transport, to plan the bus stop; waste recovery, for the canteen and the schools; local democracy, because there is a community centre where residents can come to express interests and talk with other inhabitants; sanitation and water, etc. This project receives funding from the National Agency for Urban Renewal (ANRU) and the Hauts-de-France region. The family welfare fund (CAF) and the regional authorities of the Département du Nord are also involved. The building permit has been issued and the call for tenders was recently launched.

S. A.: How was the population involved in forming the local development plan?

A.-C. G. and D.C.: There was a broad consultation, starting in 2018 and lasting 18 months, called “PLUi hd'idées sur les Dunkerquois”. It took many forms in order to give all inhabitants, especially young people, an opportunity to have their say. During the first phase, a mobile exhibition illustrated the current situation

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Urban planning dedicated to health



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in the area using figures, photos and graphs. Nine public meetings were organized, bringing together a total of 350 people. Roughly ten other meetings took place in markets or shopping centres, to get as close as possible to the population in the places where they live. The consultation also involved digital channels via a dedicated website. Internet users could post freely on a specific subject or a more general theme; we received around 50 contributions in this way. A questionnaire was circulated, allowing inhabitants to share their opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the territory, their personal priorities and those for the area as a whole. A participative geolocation tool also allowed people to submit ideas via a map concerning issues such as mobility, housing, landscape, health and training. Other users could then vote and comment. This page received 30,000 views and collected 555 ideas, which gathered more than 2,000 votes. Finally, elected officials from the urban community responded to questions from the population during four live chat sessions held online. While consultation obviously generates positive effects, it also has limits in terms of representativeness, which we pointed out in the evaluation report. Even by diversifying the methods of reaching out to the public, the elderly remained more highly represented among those who came forward. It should also be noted that this phase took place during a period of major works, meaning topics related to mobility were preponderant in the discussions. In terms of timing, the

PLUi-HD will be definitively adopted by the community council in autumn 2022, after a public survey on the population's observations during summer 2022.

S. A.: *What obstacles do you see to the implementation of healthy urban planning as embodied in the PLUi-HD?*

A.-C. G. and D.C.: The challenge now is to implement this approach, in concrete terms and in everyday life. This requires acculturation among the services and divisions of the CUD, and the creation of tools to bring planners, promoters and partners onto the field. The concept of land recovery and the preservation of resources forming the pillars of a sustainable and inclusive city does not necessarily correspond to the operating model of contractors, nor that of residents who still aspire to a detached house with a garden. Another obstacle is that there may be doubts, including among some decision-makers or even elected officials, about the economic balance of all these development operations, which also strongly integrate health and quality of the living environment. We will have to convince them that it is not necessarily more expensive or more complex to implement.

S. A.: *Do you plan to assess future development projects?*

A.-C. G. and D.C.: The CUD was fortunate to be nominated as a "Territory of Innovation"³ in the state's finance plan for a 21st-Century carbon-free industry⁴ [1]. In this context,

a section on air-quality was integrated into the PLUi-HD. This will allow us to increase the capacity of the local health observatory, created in 2018 in Dunkirk, and to structure a dedicated team within the Espace Santé du Littoral, a local organization working on health promotion and prevention. This multidisciplinary team, piloted by a scientific council, will include epidemiologists and air-quality experts, etc. Its mission will be to assess the actions implemented according to four main themes: the health status of the population, professional health networks, production of new data on links between quality of air and health, and the accessibility of this information to all. This evaluation, which will be coordinated by the Flanders-Dunkirk urban planning and development agency, will provide us with indicators for long-term monitoring. ■

Interview by Nathalie Quéruel, journalist.

1. Since 1st September 2018, the urban transport network is free to use 7 days a week. Dunkirk has thus become the largest city in Europe to offer free transport for all, without conditions. Passengers board the bus without presenting a ticket or proof of residence in the CUD.

2. In Dunkirk, Chronos runs five lines with buses every 10 min. Dedicated bus lanes in certain parts of the city have also made journeys more fluid.

3. Action from the Grand Plan d'Investissement, backed by the third wave of investment from the Programme d'Investissements d'Avenir (PIA). The programme financially supports innovation projects involving decision-makers and citizens, and which embody an ambitious 10-year strategy for territorial transformation. The Dunkirk project is rooted in the establishment of a territorial symbiosis that embodies the industry and the city of the future. Its ambition is to improve living conditions for its inhabitants by combining environmental preservation, economic development and social cohesion. On-line: <https://www.banquedesterritoires.fr/territoires-dinnovation>

4. See article by Patrice Vergriete, president of the CUD and Mayor of Dunkirk. On-line: <https://www.eco121.fr/patrice-vergriete-a-dunkerque-la-relance-sous-le-signe-de-lindustrie-decarbonee-du-xxie-siecle/>

REFERENCE

[1] Secrétariat général pour l'investissement. *Le Programme d'investissements d'avenir (PIA)*. French government, 6 September 2018, updated on 24 December, 2021.