

“The jurisdictions of urban planners and public health experts are complementary”

Interview with Damien Saulnier,
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La Santé en action: How did you become interested in healthy urban planning?

Damien Saulnier: This interest in healthy urban planning is part of a context where environmental concerns carry more weight in local government policy and there is increased awareness about the impact of the environment on the health of populations, in the broader sense, i.e. living standards. We began by holding initial technical discussions with the regional health observatory of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. Then, in 2016, the urban planning agency initiated a prospective approach to understanding the interactions between urban planning and health. This involved mapping the parties involved, identifying the tools and methodologies available, and looking at how to capitalize on past experiences. A benchmark analysis and a review of health impact assessments (HIA) in France were carried out and presented in a special issue of the local magazine *Point de repère*¹, which was brought to the attention of partners at the urban planning agency. These agencies felt justified in supporting the incorporation of environmental health issues into urban planning policies. Closer ties were then formed between the four urban planning agencies in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes regional network (Urba4) and the regional health agency, then a three-year partnership agreement was formalized in 2018, aiming to contribute to the definition and implementation of the third regional environmental health plan.

S. A.: How does your professional practice change with contributions from public health?

D.S.: The Urban Planning Code does not explicitly mention health and does not identify it as one of the general objectives of the regulations. Instead, health is addressed through the prism of public health and sanitation. Public health does not change our methods or professional practices, especially since there

is a strict regulatory framework. However, it changes how we perceive and understand the challenges of specific areas by placing the human, the individual, at the heart of public policy. Urban planning, whether regulatory or operational, is becoming less a technical system and more a tool serving the general interest. The public health approach gives – or restores – a political meaning to the project, because it foregrounds the well-being of everyone and integrates the aspirations and needs of residents. From a technical point of view, healthy urban planning is an approach that ensures consistent public action across an area because, when viewed through the prism of health determinants, there is crossover between the sectors of local government and therefore of public policies. The health determinants approach means that the standard departments of work – environment, housing, economy, mobility, etc. – can be opened up, highlighting potential synergies from a win-win perspective. Finally, this approach reveals the considerable health disparities among different areas, along with the dominant influence of citizens' socio-economic living conditions, and it includes vulnerable and/or fragile populations who, with the exception of people with reduced mobility, have previously been overlooked by urban planning documents.

S. A.: What drivers do you use for healthy urban planning?

D.S.: The first and most powerful driver is education: it is a question of making elected officials understand the stakes of environmental health and the interactions with health determinants, so that they are fully aware of the fundamental role they can play in public health, through the jurisdictions of local government. Urban planning agencies are in a strong position to deliver this education due to the close partnerships, the proximity and the trust that they foster with local government and public stakeholders, and they can promote experimental approaches in healthy urban planning, as demonstrated in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region by the eight projects carried out under Action 17 of the third regional environmental health plan –

KEY POINTS

Public health is a theme that unifies local government policies. It should not be considered as a new issue but as a common thread for any land management or urban planning project, an opportunity to break down the silos that stand between different local authorities: urban planning, health, etc.

PRSE3 (*editor's note:* see the article “Deprived neighbourhoods: how urban regeneration can help combat inequalities in health”). Through their multidisciplinary teams, urban planning agencies can consider the full spectrum of health determinants in order to analyse and understand an area. However, at present they still lack true public health expertise. The experimental partnership with the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes regional health observatory for various projects (support for two regional cohesion schemes (SCoT), two local development plans (PLUi), a local housing plan (PLH), an urban project, a land revitalization operation and a climate-air-energy plan covering local housing and mobility) demonstrated how their jurisdictions could complement each other. Public health is a theme that unifies local government policy. It should not be considered as a new issue but as a common thread for any land management or urban planning project, an opportunity to break down the silos that stand between different local authorities: urban planning, health, etc. In this way, public health can offer a fresh perspective on an area and how to tackle its challenges, and therefore direct public action towards living standards that promote health. Ultimately, the jurisdictions of urban planners and public health experts are complementary. ■

Interview by Yves Géry, editor-in-chief

1. <https://www.urbalyon.org/fr/point-de-reperendeg4-vers-un-urbanisme-favorable-la-sante?from=31>