

Good indoor air quality is a basic human right

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The fight to systematically improve indoor air quality through better ventilation is still its infancy, argues Joan Miró Ramos.



Joan Miró Ramos | *Photo credit: EVIA*

In recent decades, policymakers, activists and scientists worldwide have dedicated great amounts of time and energy to improving outdoor air quality by taking measures such as limiting the amounts of particulate matter and nitrogen oxides from cars that are released into the atmosphere.

Society considers this issue so important that many states have even incorporated a healthy environment in their constitutions as a fundamental right. Many however, forget that clean air does not stop at one's doorstep, but also includes the air we breathe indoors, where most of us spend up to 80 per cent of our days.

Numerous contemporary scientific studies have indicated that the air within homes and other buildings can be even more seriously polluted than the outdoor air in even the largest and most industrialised cities (epa.gov).

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Poor indoor air quality (IAQ) can pose serious health risks: in the short term, it can lead to coughing, sneezing, fatigue and headaches.

In the long run, poor IAQ is connected with a range of undesirable health effects, such as allergic and asthma symptoms, lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, airborne respiratory infections and cardiovascular disease.

Bad IAQ is not only a health problem, but can also weigh heavily on the economy because of its negative impact on the work force and students preparing to enter it.

The EU and its member states have already taken important steps to improve IAQ by for example prohibiting smoking in public spaces and banning the use of some chemicals such as lead-based paints.

This however, is only part of the solution. Improving IAQ requires a multifaceted approach that not only bans the most obvious pollutants such as smoke and certain chemicals, but also requires other important measures. A badly ventilated building is an ill building, and this will inevitably lead to ill occupants.

Therefore, raising ventilation standards is a critical next step, especially since new and renovated buildings are made increasingly air tight. This makes it even more likely that in a badly ventilated building, issues such as mould could arise.

The fight to systematically improve IAQ through better ventilation is only in its infancy. What we need now is to take some of the great energy dedicated to improving outdoor air quality and bring it indoors in the form of well thought through regulation.

With the energy performance of buildings directive, we have a once-in-a-decade opportunity to introduce requirements that will increase indoor air quality, by driving the much needed changes and improvements in the existing building stock and promoting systems and solutions that result in high indoor air quality, low energy consumption and consumers' empowerment.

Concretely, we call for legislation requiring the mandatory inspection of ventilation systems to trigger renovation and to define minimum air quality requirements and related airflow rates in European buildings. Only through these measures can we systematically increase the overall IAQ. This is not a luxury, but a basic human right.

About the author

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