

Healthier offices and schools for healthier economies

Looking back a few years in time we could say we were just not ready. From Energy Performances certificates to Indoor Environment Quality (IEQ), we saw some ambitious policy on an EU level. Today we know it is not enough. These programs nevertheless paved the way for Innovation and progress that benefited the European citizen and its economy. In this statement, we argue that the time is now to revive the discussion about IEQ, starting with our most crucial aspect, the air we breathe.

Energy performance requirements defined by governments in all EU countries should optimize health, indoor air quality and comfort levels (EPBD, 2018/844).

Looking back at the amendments for EPBD law we miss tangible goals, numbers, incentives, and strategies. How to achieve this kind of “optimized health” was nowhere to be found it was up to member states to find out. A lack of money and investment combined with an exception from the member states to act and implement ambitious rules creates sub-optimal progress, limiting itself to more wealthy and progressive regions. As a result, we only saw a limited rise in legislation. Still, the commission already pointed out in 2016 that EU wide legislation for IEQ was deemed unnecessary due to the:

“Huge gaps between EU countries on the matter, noting “health-based mandatory minimum IEQ requirements can hardly be found in several national or regional building codes” (2016/0381 COD).

Rewinding to 2020 we have learnt one of the most impactful vulnerabilities of our indoor climate: our indoor air quality (IAQ). The impact, cost and foremost the benefits of our IAQ showed themselves critical in society. The time has never been more pressing for the EU to revive the requirements and set out practical goals. TAL believes an IAQ certificate following EPC and EPBD certificates is the first step to be taken. Harmonizing the indoor comfort requirements across member states and enabling EU citizens to make informed decisions about their exposure to harmful environments shows a promising investment for the future.

As several national governments (Germany, Belgium, Netherlands) due to health concerns are open to investing in public and private buildings, and better ventilation practices concerning air quality. And companies are trying to figure out how to get people back inside after a prolonged stay at home. We fully support new policy and regulations on a member state level. As the focus for many will shift on what a healthy IEQ must be. We must not miss the same boat as we did in 2018. As the worst students in the class may not feel the need to implement new regulations, the impact on the daily lives of EU citizen is evident with more than 417.000 premature deaths in 2017 according to the EEA.

Support from the EU towards public and private building owners investing in IEQ could create a robust basis for future policies. Schools and offices make the perfect test case, as we spend an enormous time of our lives inside these buildings, we argue that the return on investment has significant potential here. Recent news marked an improvement in Europe’s air quality over the past decades. We must continue this path and demand the same for our indoor habitats.

With a stagnating renovation rate in the EU, it did not appear a change of mindset was going to happen overnight soon. The case for public and private buildings to invest in such improvements are obvious. A 15% increase on performance, attention and reduced absenteeism for students when improving the air quality. Resulting in more qualitative education and strengthened position on the job market, next to the decimation of lifelong diseases like asthma and eczema we reduce pressure on healthcare and social services. Children are more vulnerable to their environment than adults, so schools must be designed and refurbished to maximize all dimensions of indoor environmental quality.

For private buildings, the investment in IAQ is small in comparison with the costs of people and infrastructure. With 80 million people working in offices in Europe, better indoor environmental quality could stimulate productivity benefits worth up to €500 billion annually, helping to boost the European economy and increase international competitiveness. In an office organization, employees are the means of production and at the same time the biggest cost item. No less than 80% of the costs consist of personnel costs, while the building-related costs only account for 10% of the total. Higher return on personnel costs thus leads to a higher profit margin. Numerous studies have shown a significant correlation between indoor air quality, work productivity and Absenteeism. The cost to our societies of work absenteeism and resulting productivity loss because of poor indoor conditions, either at work or home, is measured in billions.

We strongly support the idea of air quality certificates. The growing consciousness on the European level is mainly to be found in NGO organisations such as patient associations and advocacy groups. As their call for immediate action is heard on the EU level, we still miss a vital part in creating awareness. As the citizens of the EU are still not informed adequately on how indoor air quality affects their health. The importance of good ventilation practices was strongly and repeatedly communicated in the year 2020. But controlling and improving air quality is an immense task when living in extreme environments, urban developments or impoverished and outdated buildings. The results that we could achieve from the implementation of IAQ certificates are limitless. Indicators as VOC's, CO2 emissions, and the fight against viral pathogens go hand in hand with EPC intentions. Energy efficiency and IAQ share the same goals in achieving optimal conditions.

The data extracted from these buildings can be used to further improve our understanding of our indoor environments and helps us determine which technologies show the most promise in tackling the problems in a cost-efficient way. Further away from the beaten path of traditional, energy-consuming and short-sighted measures. As the EED and EPBD created general awareness and interest from private and public actors in energy-efficient technologies such a revolution could be accomplished with IAQ certificates. The European clean energy transition also shows great potential in helping this revolution as the opportunity arises to invest in people alongside improving building performance. Helping the public make their own informed choice on their exposure to harmful environments would not only help patients and interested people. A race to the top in convincing people of a healthy indoor air climate could benefit the whole European population when choosing their next school or office building. EPBD regulations are an opportunity today to promote and give recommendations on healthy and comfortable indoor environments. The full integration of IEQ inspections, compliance and quality control is still missing. A cost-optimal methodology is the only way of creating sustainable and qualitative implementations thorough and decisive action will be essential.

As IAQ certificates would not solve the whole IEQ issue, we believe that creating awareness can become a driving force for the renovation sector in its totality. Not only creating benefits for the EU citizen in terms of job employment, health, economic growth and much-needed stress relieve for social healthcare systems. But also, for corporate Europe in creating offices where economic interests and health go hand in hand.

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