



The future of the Environment and Health process in Europe

Working paper

Introduction

1. The background for this paper consists of the technical report on the assessment of the Environment and Health process in Europe¹ and the conclusions and recommendations of the International Steering Committee on Environmental Health Policy and Action Plans (ISC), which was established by the European Environment and Health Committee to drive the assessment and to make recommendations on the future. This background served as the basis for discussion by representatives of Member States at the Fourth Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting held in Malta in March 2004.

The Environment and Health process in Europe

2. Since the first conference of ministers of health and ministers of the environment, held in Frankfurt in 1989, there have been two others in the European Region of WHO – one in Helsinki in 1994 and one in London in 1999. The main purpose of these conferences is to build bridges between the health and environment sectors in dealing with the impacts of environmental problems on human health at national and international levels. These ministerial conferences form clear milestones in the Environment and Health process in Europe as we know it today which, as a distinct European initiative, has inspired similar processes in other WHO regions, such as those of the Americas and the Western Pacific.

3. The Frankfurt ministerial conference successfully gathered together European ministers of health and the environment for the first time. The major policy outcomes of that conference were the adoption of the European Charter on Environment and Health, which set out the principles for public policy, the establishment of the WHO European Centre on Environment and Health, and the agreement to monitor progress on environment and health at the second conference. The Environment and Health process in Europe had been initiated.

4. The second conference, in Helsinki in 1994, approved the Environmental Health Action Plan for Europe (EHAPE). That plan set strategic directions for action in the different areas of environment and health, such as management, air quality, drinking-water, soil and waste, food safety and occupational health, as well as in several economic sectors. By endorsing the plan, ministers committed their countries to developing national environmental health action plans (NEHAPs) based on the European Action Plan. They also agreed to establish the European Environment and Health Committee as the mechanism for monitoring progress made in implementation of the Action Plan. This was also a successful initiative – the EHAPE has stimulated the development of national action plans in 43 out of the 52 Member States in WHO's European Region.

5. The third ministerial conference addressed environment and health issues in a strategic way, launching action in partnership as a means of implementation. The major outcomes of this conference were: a legally binding Protocol on Water and Health, and the European Charter on Transport, Environment and Health. The conference also endorsed actions in the areas of NEHAPs, local processes, public information and participation, climate change, children's

¹ *The Environment and Health Process in Europe: Evaluation and Recommendations – Technical Report*. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2003 (document EUR/03/5045637/BD/4, http://www.euro.who.int/document/eehc/3rddigoprepmeet_bd04.pdf, accessed 3 March 2004).

environment and health, economic tools for environmental health decision-making, workplace health and environmental health research.

6. The fourth ministerial conference, due to take place in Budapest in June 2004, is expected to further define the partnerships initiated in London. The major policy outcome of this conference will be the endorsement of a Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE), which will call for regional as well as national action to better address the future of our children by ensuring sustainable development and, in so doing, will also call for the involvement of and collaboration with a new set of stakeholders.

7. The European Environment and Health process and these ministerial conferences have in no small way maintained national governments' interest in environment and health. The increasing importance attached to this process is seen through the high-level participation in the ministerial conferences, as witnessed in London where a large majority (three fourths) of the countries were represented at ministerial level, mostly by both health and environment ministers. The successful work to give effect to the outcomes of each conference, although almost all of them were not legally binding, is also an adequate demonstration of how important European Member States consider the Environment and Health process to be.

8. Each ministerial conference involves two sectors and ministries and a range of priority issues, and it is always preceded by extensive preparatory work, at both technical and political levels, to set the policy agenda and to formulate the policy on environment and health. The conferences themselves provide a political forum for discussion and adoption of the main policies proposed, which should subsequently be implemented at national and international levels. The deliberations of the ministerial conferences are addressed to national governments, WHO and other intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders in the process. The high political profile awarded by such a forum is in itself useful in ensuring more successful implementation.

9. In conclusion, the assessment of the Environment and Health process in Europe confirmed that the ministerial conferences on environment and health have had a positive influence on policies and processes at national level. The process itself has been successful in fostering collaboration between the environment and health sectors, as well as in promoting health as a justification for environmental action, and the study of environmental risk factors as part of health protection programmes. This has resulted in an increased awareness of the health problems caused by environmental risk factors. The ministerial conferences have also been useful in presenting policy guidelines and knowledge on issues, as well as in facilitating networking and the exchange of information. The London Conference, in particular, led to greater collaboration and joint action between the environment, health and transport sectors. However, it was recognized that in general the process was more effective in addressing environmental than health aspects, and that it did not sufficiently involve the other economic sectors in joint action on environment and health.

10. The European Environment and Health Committee (EEHC), an important body in the Environment and Health process, was seen to be a unique coalition of representatives of countries, intergovernmental organizations and international civil society that brought together different actors under one common agenda. It was useful as a steering committee in preparations for the London and Budapest conferences. However, during the preparations for the Budapest Conference, Member States expressed the need for better representation of countries on the

committee if it were to continue after Budapest, and it was acknowledged that EEHC has reached its capacity with regards to the number of members it can accommodate.

Recommendations for the future of the Environment and Health process

11. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's fifth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" (Kiev, 2003), discussed the *relationship between the Environment for Europe and the Environment and Health processes*. In Kiev, ministers of the environment agreed on "the need to make cooperation with other ministerial processes in the region more effective..."² The environment ministers invited the Environment and Health process to keep them updated on progress and encouraged "communication to explore opportunities to strengthen joint action, as appropriate". The ministers also agreed to invite ministers of health, as well as of other relevant sectors such as transport and forestry, to their future conferences.

12. At the Budapest Conference, ministers are expected to decide that the Environment and Health process in Europe should continue and that ministerial conferences on environment and health should continue to be held at five-year intervals, to evaluate achievements and set new priorities.

13. The Environment and Health process needs to take note of the follow-up procedures of global processes such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development, as well as of other regional and subregional initiatives, in particular the European Commission's Environment and Health Strategy and ongoing collaboration under the treaties and programmes of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

14. The process should keep a broad, flexible perspective and a *pan-European focus*. It should build upon past achievements and ensure continuation of ongoing activities, developing and consolidating issues already presented at previous ministerial conferences while identifying new and emerging issues in response to the current situation. Cooperation between countries should be based on issues that are common to them and not solely on political or geographical groupings.

15. The process should emphasize the *public health* impacts of environmental problems and promote the incorporation of health aspects into environmental and sectoral policies. There is a need to heighten public health policy-makers' awareness of the linkages between health and the environment and to strengthen the role of the health sector in national and international processes. The terminology used in documents of future international events under the Environment and Health process in Europe should better reflect its broader approach and its public health perspective, emphasizing the protection of human health from environmental risk factors.

16. Throughout the whole process, *Member States* should strengthen or set up mechanisms to identify their own priorities with regard to environment and health and ensure the implementation of activities at national level as effectively as possible.

² *Declaration by the Environment Ministers of the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)*. Geneva, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2003 (document ECE/CEP/94Rev.1).

17. *WHO has a unique role* in the Environment and Health process and should not duplicate efforts made by other organizations. WHO should continue to use its vision and expertise to mobilize the whole European Region in a common strategic discussion on an international scale that can be subsequently taken up by other international fora. WHO should also continue to provide information and technical support and facilitate international partnerships.
18. *WHO and the European Commission* should strengthen their *collaboration* in attaining common goals in environment and health, by recognizing the difference between their mandates and ensuring that the added value of such cooperation is beneficial to all parties involved. There is a need to develop the future of the Environment and Health process in Europe and the roles of the different actors in it in the light of the enlargement of the European Union (EU).
19. The process should be *forward-looking* and sensitive to changes in the situation. Special topics for further development under the Environment and Health process after Budapest could be children's health and the environment, environmental information systems (indicators), and risk analysis.
20. The Environment and Health process could also provide evidence and arguments for, and promote greater understanding and harmonization of, the approaches for *developing legislative measures* to protect human health from environmental risks. There is a need for international guidance on strengthening and harmonizing environmental health legislative approaches and measures.
21. The formulation of policy for the Budapest Conference has been innovative in that it has been a process "by the Member States and for the Member States". This principle should be carried through to the implementation phases. Ownership by the Member States and the continuous involvement of national governments in the follow-up to the Budapest Conference would ensure a higher level of implementation of its decisions. There are several mechanisms for achieving a pan-European participatory process in the post-Budapest period.
22. The ministers may wish to invite the WHO Regional Office for Europe to convene an *intergovernmental meeting* in 2007. The meeting would be the major milestone between Budapest and the next ministerial conference. The purpose of such a meeting would be to review the progress made in implementing the decisions taken at Budapest and to propose the overall theme and agenda for the next ministerial conference. Such a meeting should also be attended by representatives of the European Commission and the relevant EU agencies, and relevant intergovernmental organizations. The WHO Regional Office for Europe could be asked to ensure proper representation from civil society organizations.
23. In Budapest, ministers may also wish to commit their countries to *reporting on the progress made* in implementing the conference decisions at the intergovernmental meeting to be held two to three years after the Conference. Such reporting could be done in a standardized way, to ensure "benchmarking". At that intergovernmental meeting, countries would also have an opportunity to share their experience in implementing the Budapest decisions, should they so wish.
24. The ministers may consider establishing *national mechanisms for collaboration* between the health and the environment sectors and other key stakeholders as appropriate. Such mechanisms would then determine the national focal point for the Environment and Health process in Europe, to facilitate coordination between the national and international activities.

25. The *participation of civil society* in the Environment and Health process in Europe has brought new perspectives and ways of implementing its outcomes. Such participation should be encouraged in the future. Countries might choose to include representatives of NGOs in their official delegations to the meetings. Another way would be to involve international federations of NGOs at the different levels of the process. Public participation in implementation of the decisions of the Environment and Health process should also be given more importance at international, national and local levels. The Healthy Planet Forum, which will be the NGOs' parallel event in Budapest, could discuss ways in which European civil society could participate in the formal mechanisms of the Environment and Health process and present recommendations to ministers for their consideration at the Fourth Ministerial Conference.

26. It is important to *involve economic sectors* in the process but this has not been achieved very successfully up to now. One possible way of ensuring this is through their international organizations and representatives, as appropriate. New mechanisms for international collaboration with economic sectors need to be developed. Such mechanisms could, for example, be the inclusion of health and environment issues on the agendas of European and subregional economic forums, the establishment of partnerships, participation in networks, and stimulation of voluntary initiatives.

27. The future role of EEHC and the representation of Member States and organizations on the Committee, as well as its terms of reference, were discussed by a drafting group set up at the Preparatory Meeting on the Budapest Conference Declaration (Copenhagen, 29–30 January 2004), and they were subsequently presented to and endorsed by the Fourth Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting held in Malta on 25 and 26 March 2004. At this meeting it was decided that for a body to deliver on its terms of reference in an efficient manner, it should be of a manageable size, and suggestions were accordingly made to change the current composition of EEHC. It was clear that Member States' representation on the present EEHC was heavily outnumbered by the presence of major international organizations and NGOs.

28. The composition of EEHC to date has been as follows:

- **Eight** Member States (four health representatives and four environment representatives);
- European Commission (Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection, and Directorate-General for the Environment);
- European Environment Agency (EEA);
- International Labour Organization (ILO);
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD);
- Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe;
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF);
- United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE);
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP);
- World Bank;
- World Health Organization
- Major groups comprising:

- Two nongovernmental organizations – Ecoforum and European Public Health Alliance;
- Local government – International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI);
- Business – World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD);
- Trade unions – International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU);
- Environment and health professionals – International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH).

29. While recognizing the full value of EEHC, the International Steering Committee in its evaluation process clearly indicated that EEHC has reached its maximum capacity (see paragraphs 1 and 11 above). Moreover, the same body recommended quite clearly that Member States' representation on EEHC should be increased, an idea that received very strong support from participants in the plenary session at the Preparatory Meeting on the Conference Declaration, from members attending meetings of the drafting group, as well as at the Malta Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting. This can only happen if sufficient space is created on EEHC to make full use of the responsibilities and political opportunities provided by Member States. Furthermore, meetings organized to date have been funded by voluntary donations from Member States, and hosted by those represented on EEHC.

30. Participation in the Malta meeting recognized that NGO representation on the present EEHC consists of one organization from the health sector and one from environment, and that this should not be decreased any further. On the other hand, international and intergovernmental organizations are represented on the Committee in a larger number, which allowed for restructuring to secure more adequate representation of more active organizations in the future. It was therefore suggested that some of these could be removed from the core group, although the business sector should still be represented by WBCSD, and trade unions by ICFTU.

31. The mechanism for election of members to EEHC was discussed in detail during the Fourth Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting held in Malta. Many suggestions were made to change this mechanism. However, it was concluded that established procedures for election could not be changed. Ministers should propose candidates for elections held at the WHO Regional Committee for Europe or the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy. Member States have a responsibility to select the right candidates. This would help to ensure that Member States who are part of the new committee are active, representative and useful to the future of the Environment and Health process in the European Region of WHO.

32. The main purpose of EEHC should be to facilitate the Environment and Health process in Europe, by providing guidance for future projects, advice on the follow-up of the process and a forum for bringing together the Member States and important international stakeholders, who are all committed to improving health and the environment in Europe. The Committee should have clearly specified terms of reference and should be held responsible for fulfilling its functions. The Committee should have a specific workplan, as specified by its terms of reference, and would be expected to report annually on its activities and the fulfillment of this workplan to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, as well as to the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy.

33. In order to maintain adequate active involvement of the Committee, the Budapest Declaration should incorporate a recommendation to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe

that environment and health is again placed as a priority issue on the agenda of WHO's European Region. A budgetary report should be made annually to those Member States, organizations and institutions that finance the Committee's activities. As was stressed several times during the Copenhagen meeting, the Environment and Health process has become one "by the Member States for the Member States", and transparency should therefore be increased. This has to be taken into consideration. The composition of the new committee would therefore need to include more Member States, ideally representative of the different geographical sub-regions in Europe.

34. There should be up to 10 seats for members from the countries, 2 seats each for the European Commission (1 for health and 1 for environment), and 1 seat each for UNECE, UNEP, OECD and WHO. Besides its one seat, WHO would also continue to serve as the secretariat of the EEHC. WBCSD and ICFTU would also maintain one seat each on the Committee, while other international organizations would be able to participate as observers or guests. NGO representation should be maintained by having one NGO representative from the health sector and one from the environment sector.

- a) EEHC will be responsible for preparation of the first intergovernmental meeting, to be held as a mid-term review by the end of 2007. The Ministers at Budapest may therefore wish to recommend to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe and the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy, that members of EEHC should be elected to serve up to the mid-term review in 2007, at which time new elections should be held for representatives to serve up to the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, to be held in 2009. However, it is foreseen that in the future, this Committee may wish to recommend an extension of its term of office following the mid-term review, to allow continuity in preparations for the Fifth Ministerial Conference.
- b) Half of the seats from the Member States' quota should be for representatives of the health sector (ministry of health, health agencies, leading public health scientists) and the other half for representatives of the environmental sector.
- c) Election of Member States on the Committee should continue to be made through the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, for the health sector, and through the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy, for the environmental sector. The election from both sectors should be made on the same criteria.
- d) Nominees should be officials who have a basic understanding of the Environment and Health process and international experience in the field; it would be an asset if candidates for membership from Member States had the support of other countries, preferably within their sub-region.
- e) One representative of WBCSD and one representative of ICFTU should be nominated by their own organizations.
- f) Health and environment NGOs should coordinate the nomination of one representative per sector.

35. The proposed composition of the new EEHC is therefore:

- **Ten** Member States from the European Region of WHO (five health representatives and five environment representatives);

- European Commission (Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection, and Directorate-General for the Environment);
- European Environment Agency (EEA);
- United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE);
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP);
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD);
- World Health Organization (WHO), also serving as secretariat.

And major groups comprising:

- Two NGOs – one representing the health sector and one representing the environment sector;
- Business – World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD);
- Trade unions – International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

36. The terms of reference proposed for the new EEHC are:

- To oversee coordination and implementation of the outcomes of the European Environment and Health process (for example, the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe), taking into account other relevant processes and programmes, and to help promote and ensure reporting back on the implementation of actions decided by Budapest Ministerial Conference.
- To foster the exchange and dissemination of information among relevant actors in the field of environment and health and to propose regional activities, encouraging the involvement of all Member States in the Region as well as other relevant stakeholders, thereby increasing interest in the Environment and Health process.
- To promote cooperation and coordination with associated organizations and related processes, and in particular the links between the Environment and Health process, the Environment for Europe process and the European Commission's Environment and Health Strategy, taking into account the recommendations of the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development.
- To assist in identifying environmental health issues that require collaborative action or further study, including the possible promotion of subregional activities, and to make recommendations for further action to the WHO Regional Office for Europe (including its related bodies such as the Regional Committee and the Standing Committee of the Regional Committee), as well as to other appropriate organizations/bodies.
- To further develop the Environment and Health process in Europe by facilitating and promoting partnerships with relevant stakeholders and intersectorality in the field of environment and health that lead to sustainability.
- To report annually to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe and to the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy on achievements and areas needing greater efforts, as well as on the Committee's activities, work plan and financial requirements.
- To provide all Member States in 2007, through the WHO Regional Committee for Europe and the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy, with a detailed

proposal for the agenda of the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2009, to be hosted by

37. The ministers may also wish to call upon WHO to ensure an adequate mechanism for follow-up of the CEHAPE. To this end, EEHC will be asked to establish a CEHAPE task force with the participation of Member States, international organizations and NGOs, in order to facilitate and stimulate implementation of the CEHAPE, with particular attention paid to the sharing of best practices and the dissemination of information and experiences among the Member States. The task force may also help to monitor the implementation of these outcomes, provide advice to countries and act as a driving force for international collaboration in these areas. Such a group would be composed of representatives of interested Member States, and its purpose would be to pilot initiatives, share experience, develop best practices and recommendations, and assist and mobilize other countries in the implementation process. The follow-up of decisions taken at Budapest on emerging environmental health issues could be organized through the establishment of working groups, panels and networks.