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Report of the European Environment and Health Ministerial Board to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Committee on Environmental Policy



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Report of the European Environment and Health Ministerial Board to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Committee on Environmental Policy

The sixty-third session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC63) and the nineteenth session of the Committee on Environment Policy (CEP) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) represent the first opportunity to report in greater detail to the WHO Regional Office for Europe and UNECE governing bodies on progress towards meeting the commitments undertaken by Member States at the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2010 in Parma, Italy, and of resolution EUR/RC60/R7 on the future of the European environment and health process (EHP).

According to resolution EUR/RC60/R7, the European Environment and Health Ministerial Board (EHMB) is required to report annually to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe and to the CEP on achievements and areas in need of greater efforts, as well as on the activities, work plans and financial requirements of the EHMB and the European Environment and Health Task Force.

This report was endorsed by the EHMB at its fourth session in Belgrade, Serbia, on 19 April 2013. It takes stock of several achievements of the EHP since the Parma Conference, as well as of challenges in fulfilling the Parma commitments. It identifies opportunities for strengthened implementation, taking into account the most recent global and regional policy developments and advances in scientific knowledge.

This document should be read in conjunction with background document *Report on the European Environment and Health Process (2010–2013) to the WHO Regional Committee and UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy* and documents EUR/RC63/7 and EUR/RC63/7 Add.1 on the election of members of the EHMB under agenda item 6.

The RC63 and the CEP are invited to take note of the report and the accompanying background documentation.

Contents

	page
Introduction	1
Progress in implementing the EHP	1
Governance of the EHP	2
Governance of environment and health at national level.....	2
Non-Member State stakeholders	2
The Regional Office as the EHP secretariat.....	3
Challenges in the governance of the EHP.....	3
Challenges to the sustainability of the EHP.....	4
Ensuring that the Parma commitments are met and that progress is monitored	4
Supporting efforts to meet the Parma commitments.....	4
Monitoring progress after the Parma Conference	5
Challenges in meeting the Parma commitments	5
Setting priorities, integrating the EHP into major health and environmental policy frameworks and exploring future directions in environment and health.....	5
Exploring directions for work in the EHP until 2016	7

Introduction

1. The sixty-third session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC63) and the nineteenth session of the Committee on Environment Policy (CEP) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) represent the first opportunity to report in greater detail to the WHO Regional Office for Europe and UNECE governing bodies on progress towards meeting the commitments undertaken by Member States at the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2010 in Parma, Italy (the Parma Conference) and of resolution EUR/RC60/R7 on the future of the European environment and health process (EHP).

2. This is also an important opportunity to reflect on the challenges of putting the EHP into practice and to propose actions for strengthening its implementation. This must take into account the most recent global and regional policy developments and advances in scientific knowledge, opportunities for synergy with other relevant governance processes such as those underpinned by multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), and the initial strategic thinking leading to the preparation of the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2016.

Progress in implementing the EHP

3. An in-depth report on the work and the achievements of the EHP, including work done by the Secretariat of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, since the Fifth Ministerial Conference in 2010, is provided in the *Report on the European Environment and Health Process (2010–2013) to the WHO Regional Committee and UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy*. The present document therefore highlights only the main achievements, milestones and challenges in order to inform RC63 and the nineteenth session of the CEP and advise on issues that require the attention of and action by the governing bodies.

4. The three main areas of focus for the Environment and Health Ministerial Board (EHMB) and the Environment and Health Task Force (EHTF) within their respective mandates have been:

- providing governance for the EHP;
- ensuring the fulfilment of commitments made at the Parma Conference and monitoring progress achieved, namely by agreeing on a set of common indicators and monitoring tools; and
- steering the process by identifying challenges, reviewing priorities for implementation and future directions, responding to emerging environment and health challenges and the developing global and regional policy environment, and proposing actions to strengthen implementation of the EHP.

Governance of the EHP

5. The Regional Committee and the CEP have established a structure to govern the EHP, as proposed by the Parma Conference.¹ As the leading international intersectoral body for implementing and monitoring the EHP, the EHTF was constituted in 2011, together with the EHMB as the political face and the driving force of international policies in the field of environment and health, and to provide an adequate political profile and leadership to the EHP.

6. EHP governance is embedded in the overall governance structures of the Regional Office and the UNECE. Decisions of the EHMB and the EHTF of a strategic and policy nature are subject to the approval of the Regional Committee and the CEP. The EHMB advises the Regional Office and the UNECE on strategic directions of the EHP and priorities in environment and health in Europe, while the EHTF focuses on supporting the fulfilment of commitments made at the Parma Conference. This it does by providing platforms for sharing information, networking, intercountry collaboration and development, and tools for implementing and monitoring progress towards the fulfilment of those commitments. The EHTF provides the link between the EHMB, all 53 Member States in the WHO European Region and stakeholders.

Governance of environment and health at national level

7. The Parma Conference emphasized the importance of national action as the main driver of progress towards meeting the Parma commitments and targets, which ultimately depends on strong and functional multisectoral collaboration on environment and health within Member States. This was a major departure from previous ministerial conferences, which had concentrated mainly on the development of national environment and health action plans (NEHAPs) and children's environment and health action plans (CEHAPs) based on commonly agreed principles, priorities and blueprints. After the Parma Conference, it was left to the Member States to determine for themselves the format and content of intersectoral collaboration on environment and health at the national level.

8. Nevertheless, in the course of follow-up to the Parma commitments, it became apparent that although this setting allows greater flexibility in adapting to national conditions and existing policy frameworks (and therefore could be reasonably expected to catalyse action at the national level), it may still not be sufficient to push implementation forward. This calls for a further analysis of the stumbling blocks to action so that corrective measures can be identified and proposed, such as more active support from WHO and its partners, the further strengthening of national capacities for intersectoral action, more regular reporting, or the provision of a clear blueprint or model to follow. The possible role played by these enabling factors may be of particular relevance at times of financial crisis, which often results in reallocation of national resources and deflection of political focus away from voluntary commitments.

Non-Member State stakeholders

9. While the new governance mechanism provides a strong platform for the engagement of the UNECE, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the European Commission, through their membership of the EHMB, the engagement of other relevant

¹ *The European Environment and Health Process (2010–2016): institutional framework*. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2010, (www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/104443/Parma_EH_Conf_edoc07.pdf, accessed 10 May 2013).

intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations takes place through their membership of the EHTF.²

10. In addition, steps have been taken to support a greater involvement of youth representatives in all policy and technical meetings under the umbrella of the EHP and to facilitate the establishment of a European Environment and Health Youth Coalition to represent young people in the EHP. This is in line with Member States' commitment in the Parma Declaration to "ensure that youth participation is facilitated across all Member States at both national and international levels by providing them with assistance, resources and the training required for meaningful and sustainable involvement in all aspects of the process".

The Regional Office as the EHP secretariat

11. As requested by the Regional Committee in its resolution EUR/RC60/R7, the Regional Director took measures to strengthen the role of the Regional Office as the secretariat of the EHP and ensure the necessary and sustainable human, financial, organizational and technical resources and capacity. Under the present circumstances, and particularly considering the closure of its office in Rome at the end of 2011, the Regional Office has achieved this by consolidating its environment and health programmes and expanding the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health in Bonn. The Centre is the key resource for scientific support, policy advice and information to Member States and the EHP. As of May 2013, the search for the most appropriate person to lead the Centre was still under way, with a commitment from the Regional Office to complete the selection process as a matter of priority.

Challenges in the governance of the EHP

12. The EHP is a living example of effective intersectoral governance in international public health, addressing an important cross-cutting area where concerted action by the entire government is needed. The model that has been in place since 2010 differs from the previous EHP governance in including a strong policy dimension through the establishment of the EHMB. The first years of the new governance model point to several issues that need to be addressed: clarification of the roles and mandates of the EHTF and EHMB; ensuring strong engagement and commitment of the two main sectors involved (health and environment); supporting and ensuring action at the national level; effective ways of engaging other stakeholders (nongovernmental organizations, the private sector, the European Union, United Nations agencies and programmes) and ensuring continuity of work of the governing bodies when members are rotated due to changes of government or their mandates in the EHMB coming to an end.

13. Several measures have been identified to address these challenges. The EHMB has proposed establishing a communication network to follow up on communication and advocacy efforts of the EHP, and the secretariat has called for nominations for focal points in countries. The EHMB also decided to develop an intersessional workplan to support the implementation of its decisions between consecutive sessions, steered by the nominated alternates to EHMB

² The intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations that are members of the EHTF include: the Environment and Health Youth Coalition, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the European Commission, the European ECO Forum, the European Environment Agency, the Health and Environment Alliance, the International Trade Union Confederation, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Regional Environment Centre for Central and Eastern Europe, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and the World Health Organization.

members who work with the secretariat to ensure close links with the various stakeholders between meetings of the EHMB and EHTF. Steps are being taken to reinforce the role of national focal points as key facilitators of communication and technical collaboration within Member States, and between different levels of the EHP. Informal consultations with and among non-Member State stakeholders have been introduced, and a staggered calendar of elections for EHMB members has been proposed to the WHO and UNECE governing bodies. The Regional Office's Programme for Environment and Health Governance and Policy (EHG) has been strengthened to intensify collaboration with the different sectors and stakeholders.

Challenges to the sustainability of the EHP

14. The voluntary nature of the EHP makes it entirely dependent on the political interests of Member States and stakeholders and their active engagement in the process, including making available the necessary resources to provide the coordination and platforms for exchanging experience and steering the process.

15. The absence of mechanisms ensuring predictability and sustainability in the flow and amount of resources available to service the EHP continues to be an important challenge, made even more acute by the present financial conditions in most Member States. In particular, it has posed obstacles to the organization of annual regular meetings of the EHTF, the only regular meeting of which took place in October 2011 in Bled, Slovenia. According to the decisions taken in Parma, a minimum of one meeting per year should have taken place. The meeting held in The Hague, Netherlands, in May 2012, was not a regular meeting, but an extraordinary meeting convened to discuss the indicators presented by the secretariat in Bled. The EHTF has therefore not had a chance to discuss the full range of Parma Commitments and their implementation thus far.

Ensuring that the Parma commitments are met and that progress is monitored

Supporting efforts to meet the Parma commitments

16. The expanded capacity and competence of the Regional Office, primarily through its consolidated European Centre for Environment and Health in Bonn, has enabled an intensive provision of technical assistance to Member States, partners and stakeholders in their work towards fulfilling the Parma commitments. Over 30 Member States have received direct technical assistance and all 53 Member States actively participate in intercountry activities and in the governance of the EHP. New and updated tools for assessing environmental and occupational health threats, together with guidelines, have been developed in close collaboration with WHO headquarters, collaborating centres, partners and experts from across the European Region. As the development and provision of tools in different technical areas of environment and health often requires the collection of feedback and information from Member States, for example through surveys and questionnaires, this requires greater coordination of collection efforts.

17. The Regional Office has continued to support the implementation of relevant multilateral environmental agreements and programmes (such as the Protocol on Water and Health to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme and the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution), creating synergies and parallel and complementary mechanisms for pursuing the Parma objectives. Close collaboration has been maintained with other United Nations agencies and programmes (Food and Agriculture Organization of the

United Nations, United Nations Development Programme, UNECE, United Nations Environment Programme, World Meteorological Organization), with institutions and agencies of the European Union (several directorates general of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Environment Agency and the European Food Safety Agency) and other partners.

Monitoring progress after the Parma Conference

18. The EHTF adopted a set of indicators to be collected and reported on a voluntary basis, most of which rely on existing data, to monitor and measure the fulfilment of Member States' commitments under the Parma Declaration, with emphasis on the principle that monitoring should be a cost-effective means of supporting efficient implementation. These indicators will be used to report to the high-level mid-term review in 2014 and to the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2016, and will be included among the targets and indicators of the new European policy framework for health and well-being, Health 2020.

Challenges in meeting the Parma commitments

19. The main challenges to meeting the Parma commitments result from the comprehensive nature of the Parma Declaration. The EHMB and EHTF have repeatedly expressed concern about the broad scope of these commitments and pointed out the need for prioritization of activities. Even though the Parma Conference was the first to set time-limited targets, all but one of the commitments left ample room for interpretation. The EHTF reviewed these commitments, particularly in the process of developing indicators for monitoring follow-up to the Parma Conference, and has tried to achieve a consensus among the Member States on the interpretation of the commitments. A full review of progress will take place at the EHTF high-level mid-term review in 2014.

Setting priorities, integrating the EHP into major health and environmental policy frameworks and exploring future directions in environment and health

20. The EHMB and EHTF identified at an early stage the need for an overarching strategic reference framework to support the identification of priorities for the EHP, and in particular to guide the fulfilment of Parma commitments. They requested the Regional Office Secretariat to undertake a consultative process to: review concepts and paradigms in this area in the context of and in relationship to other global and regional conceptual and policy frameworks; provide much needed clarity on the mutual importance, relationship and relevance between environment and health; and initiate discussions on strategic directions as input to the preparation of the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2016.

21. The EHMB and EHTF also pointed out that Member States could be advised to focus their actions on achieving the five time-limited targets set out in the Parma Declaration, as well as to increase the cost-effectiveness of implementation by actively seeking synergy with other relevant processes, in particular those related to the implementation of MEAs relevant to the EHP.

22. In response to these requests, and taking stock of the main international policy developments that have occurred since the Parma Conference, namely the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) and the adoption of Health 2020 by RC62, the Regional Office has initiated a consultation process with the aim of

developing a proposal for a common set of principles, a conceptual framework and tools to support actions on priority areas.

23. Health 2020 focuses on a growing understanding of the relationship between health and development. Health is an important investment in and driver of development, as well as one of its most important results. Investment in health is critical to the successful development of modern societies and their political, social and economic progress. Health 2020 recognizes that the environmental determinants of health are of paramount importance for creating, maintaining and restoring health, and it identifies the creation of resilient communities and supportive environments as one of the priority areas for action in the European Region.

24. Rio+20 was characterized by the notion of the need to prevent human activities that cause unacceptable levels of environmental change that could transgress the interlinked planetary boundaries that define a safe operating space for humanity.³ It recognized that “health is a precondition for and an outcome and indicator of all three dimensions of sustainable development” (the three dimensions of sustainable development being society, environment and economy) and a commitment was made to establish or strengthen multisectoral national policies for the prevention and control of communicable and noncommunicable diseases, recognizing that reducing, inter alia, air, water and chemical pollution has positive effects on health. Of direct relevance to the EHP, the heads of government went on to state: “We are convinced that action on the social and environmental determinants of health, both for the poor and vulnerable and for the entire population, is important to create inclusive, equitable, economically productive and healthy societies.”⁴

25. The EHMB concluded that the EHP needs to recognize the interdependence of economic, social and environmental objectives and act accordingly, so that progress in one area can facilitate advances in others. This requires further work to identify policies that simultaneously benefit sustainability, health and equity in health. It requires an assurance that interventions and policies intended to improve one area (such as in the area of the “green economy”) do not have negative effects in others, and the identification and promotion of health-promoting development goals after 2015.

26. It also requires leading by example through an increased understanding of the role of the health sector as a major economic player, as a provider of jobs and services, and as a user of environmental resources, and of the important developments that have been made in knowledge and practice to develop green and sustainable health services.

27. The formulation of a coherent framework of common principles, values and approaches that would underpin specific actions within a context of promoting health in all policies and whole-of-government approaches would also reinforce the European Action Plan for Strengthening Public Health Capacities and Services endorsed by RC62 in 2012.⁵

28. Taking into account the need to provide a flexible and country-tailored framework for implementation and in line with the WHO Executive Board’s approach to setting priorities for the Organization,⁶ the EHMB has proposed developing a renewed vision for environment and

³ Rockström J et al. A safe operating space for humanity. *Nature*, 2009, 461:472–475.

⁴ *The future we want*. Outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. New York, United Nations, 2012 (document A/CONF.216/L.1*) (rio20.un.org/sites/rio20.un.org/files/a-conf.216-l-1_english.pdf, accessed 9 May 2013).

⁵ *European Action Plan for Strengthening Public Health Capacities and Services*. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2012 (document EUR/RC62/12 Rev.1). (www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/171770/RC62wd12rev1-Eng.pdf, accessed 9 May 2013).

⁶ *WHO reform: programmes and priority setting*. Geneva, WHO, 2012 (document EB130/5 Add.1) (http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB130/B130_5Add1-en.pdf).

health, based on an analysis of the effects attributable to environmental risk factors on health; the existence of policy commitments to address the issues; the availability of effective interventions; the interest of Member States to address these issues; and the value added by the EHP. Within this context, it is possible to define a flexible “portfolio for action” that would support the enactment of the proposed renewed vision, while recognizing and respecting diversity in priorities, capacities and available means in Member States.

29. The EHMB has suggested that this flexible portfolio of priorities should cover on the one hand the “unfinished” agenda in environment and health in Europe, which mostly requires local, national and subregional approaches, and on the other global and regional areas of concern, which require international collaboration, additional health impact assessment and new capacities, interventions and policy approaches to address complex, multidisciplinary and multisectoral problems.

30. The portfolio would consist of specific actions that could be taken by different stakeholders in the EHP, taking into account their specific needs, priorities, means and capacities. To support the implementation of the actions proposed in the portfolio, a web-based portal could be developed to facilitate access to the many resources already available that have been produced by WHO, UNECE, UNEP, the European Environment Agency, the European Commission and other intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations. These would include, inter alia, guidelines, methods and tools, case studies, training materials and databases.

Exploring directions for work in the EHP until 2016

31. Consistent with the above analysis of progress made, challenges to be overcome and opportunities offered by advances in policy and science, the following areas emerge for practical orientation of international and national efforts to move forward the implementation of the EHP:

- prioritize the fulfilment of the Parma commitments underpinned by time-limited targets;
 - maximize the opportunities provided by relevant on-going processes, in particular the implementation of Health 2020, MEAs, Rio+20 follow-up, and other policy frameworks identified by the Parma Declaration;
 - incorporate into national sectoral policies the development of sustainable and safe environments supportive to health;
 - reduce the environmental impacts and use of natural resources by the health sector through the development and implementation of less polluting and more energy- and water-efficient practices;
 - continue the work to identify and agree on priorities for the EHP, as part of the preparations for the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2016, and on the most appropriate mechanisms and tools to support action;
 - strengthen collaboration with the European Commission and its relevant agencies and the involvement of the Commission in the work of the EHMB; and
 - improve the predictability and sustainability of resources to support the implementation of the EHP at international and national levels, including the identification of new opportunities for resource mobilization.
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