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Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment and Public Participation

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates, friends and colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here and participate to this extraordinary meeting of the Parties for the adoption of the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment.

The clear reference to health throughout the Protocol being adopted today will not go un-noticed. This is an excellent response to the requests coming from environment and health constituencies at the London Ministerial Conference in 1999, and also coming from the meetings of the parties to the Aarhus and Espoo Conventions.

In London the Ministers recognized the need to incorporate health as part of the assessment of policies, plans and programmes affecting environment and development, thus drawing the political basis for a new approach. The Parties of the Espoo Convention took up the challenge and we want to express our appreciation for the way the health sector has contributed to the whole process and to the drafting of the Protocol.

As an outcome of this commitments and efforts, we have now a greater understanding of the way environment and health links should be addressed in strategic assessments. This result was achieved through joint work in meetings with experts in both areas. Issues pertaining to the application of HIA and SEA were clarified on the basis of well-prepared documentation and dialogue throughout the drafting.

We firmly believe this Protocol clearly represents an important milestone. It opens the door for adequate evaluation of health impacts as part of environmental assessments, thus addressing one of the main concerns of the populations with respect to environmental and development policies. The implementation of the provision of the Protocol will allow for a proper HIA to take place tackling not only the potential negative impacts on health, but also the improvements which may be linked to socio-economic development in specific contexts.

In addition, the Protocol clarifies that, in order to facilitate their effective implementation, the Parties are willing to integrate environment and health assessments, rather than have parallel procedures. This is congruent with the approach being proposed in the European Union and in many development agencies aiming to integrate different evaluations.

Moreover a scientifically sound identification of the specific health impacts of concern to be considered within the Strategic Environment Assessment will facilitate the understanding and the dialogue with stakeholders about those health effects and possibly avoid paralyzing conflicts and unjustified anxiety.

Within this framework, there is now a need to make available information and methods for those commissioning and implementing SEA when dealing with health. WHO is launching a HIA web gateway to facilitate access and exchange of experience, tools and methods. At the next European Conference on Environment and Health to be held in Budapest in June 2004, and addressing children, environment and health, this approach will be further expanded through an "information platform" which will be proposed to the Conference with the purpose of facilitating policy making and promote knowledge based choices. We intend to build on these developments and scale up our support to member states, developing guidelines, tools and capacity building opportunities that specifically address issues of health assessments in SEAs.

WHO firmly intends to continue being a partner in the implementation of the Protocol as it has been in its development. We would like to express here our appreciation for the contribution given by member states and other IGO to the process. We are grateful to the Czech Republic for acting as the vice chair for health in the negotiations and to Poland for ensuring that key issues regarding public participation and access to information and environmental justice were fully taken into account in the drafting of the Protocol. We would also like to thank Norway for wisely leading the process of the negotiation and UNECE for being the secretariat for this development. And finally we wish to thank all individuals and institutions that have contributed to the preparation of the Protocol thus making possible this important step.

We look forward to continuing to work together towards our common aims, and the successful implementation of this key policy instrument.

Thank you

Kiev, 21 May 2003