

WHO Regional Office for Europe – Extended Statement

Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, Geneva, 2-5 June 2014

High-level segment: 10. Statement by ministers and high-level representatives

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognizes with appreciation the valuable work carried out by the Parties and the Signatories, the Secretariat, the Bureau and the Working group, UNECE, as well as non-governmental organizations and others; and we strongly hope that this important work continues in a sustainable and successful way.

WHO's Regional Office for Europe wants to reinforce its commitment to continue working in partnership with the UNECE and other partners in Member States, civil society, other intergovernmental organizations and the academic world to foster the application of SEA as well as EIA and to make sure that significant health effects are taken into account under the Protocol as well as under the Espoo Convention and the Directives on EIA and SEA of the European Union.

WHO considers these multilateral agreements as key instruments to foster and ensure the integration of environment and health considerations into the preparation and adoption of policies, plans, programmes, and projects. Importantly, they can be very powerful instruments to support countries in achieving the ambitious objective of eliminating the most significant environmental threats to human health. A task, which is at the core of WHO's mandate; and a task WHO Member States took on their agendas nearly 25 years ago, launching the European Environment and Health Process (EEHP) on the occasion of the First Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Frankfurt in 1989, and established the European Centre on Environment and Health with its office now in Bonn to support them in this endeavour.

Evidence and knowledge about what influences health and disease in populations have been accumulating for decades, and it is by now widely acknowledged that many factors affect individual and population health. These *health determinants* include individual characteristics such as age and gender as well as lifestyle factors. But health determinants are also increasingly influenced by policies, plans, programmes or projects in numerous sectors, for example, the physical and social environment, transport, housing, employment, social support, crime and community safety and education as well as the health care system. The science and practice of public health aim at understanding how all these determinants influence human health and, on this basis, how to promote health and preventing disease.

In recent years, the *social determinants of health* have moved to centre stage. The term refers to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels. The social determinants of health also shape health inequities — the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries.

For humane, ethical and practical reasons, health protection and disease prevention are preferable to cure. In other words, whichever fraction of the burden of disease is avoidable should be avoided ("*primacy of prevention*").

Although important aspects of health and disease are not completely understood, a large fraction of ill health (in terms of both morbidity and premature mortality) is caused by recognized and avoidable factors; and much of this fraction is determined by factors outside the control of the health sector. Health can be seen as being "produced" as well as "damaged" or even "destroyed" by multiple societal sectors. This is the basis for the *Health in All Policies* approach, nowadays a widely accepted notion.

Acknowledging that health determinants are largely influenced by societal drivers other than the health sector, it is an obvious consequence to advocate that health should be considered adequately by all sectoral policies, programs, and projects in order to secure health, minimize health risks, and maximize health opportunities. Impact assessment, conceived with the goal of exercising foresight, anticipating consequences of policies and plans, and managing the decision process, is therefore ideally suited to address the public health challenges. In other words: health is an essential element in any impact assessment approach.

Hence, since the first discussions of the opportunities these international instruments create for integration of health concerns into development planning at the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, held in London in 1999, WHO has been supporting UNECE. Adequate coverage of health within environmental assessments is strongly supported by WHO and by the European Environment and Health Process. At the Fourth European Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Budapest, Hungary, 2004) the ministers of environment and the ministers of health, adopting the Conference Declaration, recall the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Protocol on SEA to the Convention on EIA in a Transboundary Context, that acknowledges the benefits to the health and well-being of present and future generations that will follow if the need to protect and improve people's health is taken into account as an integral part of SEA. The Ministers committed themselves to "*taking significant health effects into account in the assessment of strategic proposal under the Protocol*" (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2004).

Further integrating health into environmental assessments continues to be of great relevance to WHO in its general mandate on public health and its specific remit on European Environment and Health Process. And we would like to invite you to actively participate in this process through your respective ministries and organizations.

To create resilient communities and supportive environments is one of the pillars in the Health 2020 strategic and policy framework of WHO Regional Office for Europe. This can only be achieved through fostering intersectoral action to protect health through supporting action across government and society.

Having that in mind, assessing health issues as the integral part of SEA and EIA is one of the imperatives. And one of the key issues mentioned over these days was the importance to build social acceptance and trust through a transparent process. In our opinion integrating health in this process can help to achieve this aim as usually for the public health issues are of great concern. Hence, we would like to see the health sector to be really and meaningful involved at an early stage in SEAs – as foreseen by the Protocol on SEA – but also and especially in environmental impact assessments, being in a transboundary or non-transboundary context.

Consultation with Member States and a recent review of the inclusion of health aspects into environmental assessments revealed a lack of guidance on and resources for the integration of health into environmental and strategic impact assessment as well as a lack of knowledge in the health sector e.g. on planning issues.. Therefore, WHO is continuing its work on developing further guidance on integrating health in environmental assessments, and seeks support and funding as appropriate. For this we call also on your support in helping us build this capacity jointly e.g. through joint workshops as we have done in a recent project, co-funded by the European Commission, on capacity building in environment and health (CBEH) in 8 Members States (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Poland), with the aim to further integrate health into environmental and strategic impact assessments. Information of the outcomes of this project can be found here: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/health-impact-assessment/activities/building-capacity-in-environment-and-health>. Another forthcoming publication in cooperation with IAIA and EUPHA is a review on the integration of health in different forms of impact assessments including SEA, Sustainability Assessment and Social Impact Assessment developed by lead experts in their field.

The opportunities provided by the Convention and the Protocol deserves to be further promoted with many sectors of civil society, including the health sector itself, as until now there is still limited knowledge and experience in the application of environmental and strategic impact assessment within the health sector. For this we also call on your assistance and cooperation to gain more practical experience. We are especially interested in cooperating in concrete assessments at the policy level, and look forward to such interactions. One of our future projects is in this regard the establishment of an international network of environment and health impact assessment experts to further foster the integration of health into environmental impact assessments, through knowledge exchange and assist Member States in capacity building activities.

As you can see more work needs to be done, and we look forward to opportunities to do this in partnership with you.

Thank you for your attention!