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Annual report of the European Environment and Health Committee

The annual report of the European Environment and Health Committee (EEHC) for 2007–2008 is hereby submitted to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe at its fifty-eighth session.

Actions within the area of the environment and health are implemented within the overarching framework of the WHO European Country Strategy and its current phase of Strengthening health systems in the European Region, and in accordance with the priorities set out in the biennial collaborative agreements with 33 Member States.

The EEHC report is presented in written form only. Any issues to be taken up on this subject should be raised during the general debate on the first morning of the session.

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Summary

1. This report is submitted in accordance with the provision contained in the Declaration adopted at the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Budapest, June 2004) and endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in resolution EUR/RC54/R3, that the European Environment and Health Committee (EEHC) should report annually to the Regional Committee and to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Committee on Environmental Policy. It summarizes the work done and decisions taken by the EEHC since the fifty-seventh session of the Regional Committee and the twelfth session of the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy.

Introduction

2. The Declaration adopted at the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health called for an intergovernmental mid-term review (IMR) meeting to be convened, so as to ensure reporting back on the status of implementation of the Conference commitments. This took place in Vienna from 13 to 15 June 2007. The purpose of the meeting was for all participants to review the progress made with regard to the Budapest Conference commitments and to plan the next steps in preparation for the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health. In the concluding session of the IMR meeting the representative of Germany, speaking on behalf of the European Union member countries as well as 22 other Member States and some intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), highlighted the key role of the European Environment and Health Process in ensuring that these commitments are met. The IMR meeting reached the following conclusions:

- the overarching theme of children should continue to be the driving force of the process;
- the involvement of other sectors and groups (children themselves, the health community, young people, vulnerable groups, the business community) should be made more visible;
- emphasis should be placed on access to water and sanitation and on ways of assessing the implementation of international commitments;
- measures to tackle gender inequity in environment and health need to be given higher priority;
- attention has to be paid to emerging issues, including advanced and innovative technological solutions; and
- tools for assessing the progress made, as well as for policy-making, are very important. These include not only environment and health impact assessments but also other instruments that need further development, such as those to measure the cost of (in)action and the environmental burden of disease.

3. With the IMR meeting, the EEHC completed the first post-Conference phase of reporting back on progress made. After that meeting, the focus of the European Environment and Health Process and the EEHC shifted to discussing and steering preparations for the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health. This phase was initiated with the elections to membership of the EEHC that took place at the fifty-seventh session of the Regional Committee in September 2007. Officials from five Member States were chosen to represent ministries of health on the Committee, the criteria applied being the experience of the candidates as well as the geographical part of the WHO European Region that they represented. The Member States selected were Cyprus, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Norway. The other five seats, for officials representing the environment sector, had already been decided on by the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy at its meeting held in the spring of 2007. The Member States elected through that process were Austria, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Uzbekistan. Four young people elected by the youth network were also accepted as official members of the EEHC (two focusing on implementation of the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe – CEHAPE, and two on the work of the EEHC itself). One of these elected young people is from Hungary, one is from the Russian Federation and two are from the United Kingdom.

4. The first meeting of the new EEHC was held in Bonn on 25 and 26 October 2007. The meeting had three main objectives: to discuss the terms of reference and rules of procedure of the newly elected Committee; to discuss the outcome, conclusions and recommendations of the IMR; and to have a first round of discussions on the preparations for the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, to be held in Italy in 2009. At this meeting, Dr Jon Hilmar Iversen from Norway and Dr Corrado Clini from Italy were elected as co-chairpersons of the EEHC. Based on the conclusions of the IMR, the newly elected EEHC members agreed that the priorities in preparations for the next ministerial conference should be:

- to ensure more involvement of new stakeholders such as local authorities and young people, as well as better integration of the business community;
- to ensure better use of legal instruments;
- to prioritize the special needs of the newly independent states (NIS) and south-eastern Europe (SEE);
- to ensure particular attention is paid to gender issues, as well as to social inequalities. Social inequity needs to be considered not only between but also within countries;
- to help Member States assess the economic implications of the burden of disease arising from environmental factors (e.g. the costs of action versus those of inaction); and
- to place more emphasis on key themes such as climate change.

5. There was general agreement that the Fifth Ministerial Conference should continue to focus on children's health and environment issues, to ensure sustainability in the next phase, at both international and national levels, with adequate financing through increased voluntary donations from Member States. The WHO Regional Office was also asked to further strengthen the European Environment and Health Process in terms of resources, and the EEHC Secretariat was asked to continue to provide technical assistance to Member States in contributing to the Process, by further exploring the issue of introducing time-bound targets/goals and by considering more compelling funding mechanisms.

6. The members agreed on new terms of reference and accepted proposed changes of to the rules of procedure of the Committee. As a result, meetings of the CEHAPE Task Force have been incorporated into those of the EEHC, thereby decreasing the amount of travel needed, especially in this phase of more preparatory events for the Ministerial Conference. The members felt that this was more cost-effective and would result in greater transparency of the EEHC's procedures and discussions, thereby ensuring that all parties were involved in, and felt ownership of, the preparations. To maximize the effect of this new arrangement, it was also agreed that the EEHC meetings should become high-level preparatory meetings for the next Ministerial Conference. However, the EEHC members would also meet in an executive session of two or three hours, where Conference-related matters would be discussed, so that the EEHC could steer the preparations.

7. During this meeting, pledges of voluntary donations to meet the operating costs of the EEHC were kindly made by Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy and Norway. Moreover, Italy offered to host the First High-Level Preparatory Meeting (and EEHC meeting) in March 2008, and Kyrgyzstan extended its offer to host a subregional meeting in the summer or autumn of 2008.

Topic-oriented meetings

8. In line with the decisions taken at the October 2007 meeting of the EEHC, the Italian Ministry of the Environment kindly hosted the First High-Level Preparatory Meeting, as well as the executive session of the EEHC, in Milan. The meeting focused on regional priority goals (RPGs) 1 and 2 of the CEHAPE, which include morbidity and mortality arising from water and lack of sanitation, as well as from the lack of safe transport and of physical activity. The participants also discussed the provisional agenda of the Ministerial Conference and the next preparatory steps.

9. Representatives of Member States called for the European Environment and Health Process to continue to provide countries with assistance in meeting the commitments they had made at the Budapest Conference, including those within the CEHAPE. In general, participants felt that more attention should be focused on capacity-building within countries, and that more tools for policy-making (specifically, economic instruments and those for risk communication) would help increase the degree of implementation. There was also a call to identify ways in working with new partners, in particular local and regional authorities, private industry and NGOs. Most participants said that more emphasis should be placed on climate change, including both mitigation and adaptation strategies, given the importance of such a global issue and the need to address it in a cross-cutting manner across the four RPGs in the CEHAPE (there was no consensus on having a new, separate RPG on this issue).

10. At their executive session, the EEHC members expressed the need for more environmental input into the programme of the Conference. The members of the Committee from the environment sector felt that the first preparatory meeting had been too health-oriented and that a more balanced approach needed to be taken towards the Conference. As suggested by Dr Clini, one of the co-chairpersons, the EEHC agreed that WHO Secretariat would work closely with the European Environment Agency (EEA) in order to ensure a more balanced programme for the preparatory meetings and the Conference itself. The other co-chairperson, Dr Hilmar Iversen, suggested that since the EEHC represented a partnership of equals between representatives of the health sector and the environment sector, the latter could strengthen the EEHC Secretariat by seconding one or two technical assistants to it. In that regard, Dr Clini expressed a commitment to facilitate cooperation by appointing experts in support of the activities. As a first step, the WHO Secretariat had a meeting with EEA staff at the WHO Regional Office in May 2008, when the Second High-Level Preparatory Meeting, as well as the Conference programme and documentation, were discussed.

11. The members of the EEHC also discussed the main theme of the Conference. Following the suggestions made by Member States, the EEHC endorsed the need for a title that would make direct reference to children, health, the environment and globalization. The WHO Secretariat agreed to develop a title and a communication strategy that would take those elements into consideration and to present them to the Second High-Level Preparatory Meeting. The youth members of the EEHC also reported on the progress made by the youth network in ensuring that structured, relevant comments were made at the EEHC executive sessions, as well as at the high-level preparatory meetings. The youth delegates presented their plan of action for the period up to the Conference, including the need for annual youth events and a “back-to-back” event at the Conference itself. They asked for financial assistance with organizing these events, so that there could be full youth involvement in the preparations for the Conference.

12. The EEHC endorsed the date and place of the Second High-Level Preparatory Meeting and EEHC meeting: they will take place in Madrid, Spain from 22 to 24 October 2008, at the kind invitation of the Spanish Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs. This meeting will deal with RPG 3 (respiratory disorders arising from indoor and outdoor air pollution) and RPG 4 (morbidity and mortality arising from physical, biological and chemical agents and the workplace). The meeting will also address climate change, the main “pillar” for Conference preparations, as well as other priorities such as building bridges to established political processes, socioeconomic and gender inequities, and the specific needs of NIS and SEE countries related to these RPGs. This meeting is to be held immediately after an international public health symposium on environment and health research, also to be hosted by the Spanish Government. The EEHC extends its thanks to the Spanish Government for making all this possible.

13. The first meeting of the drafting group for the main policy document of the Ministerial Conference was held in Brussels on 12 and 13 June 2008. Participants debated whether there was in fact a need for a main policy document and whether it should be a statement, charter or declaration. They all agreed that, since previous ministerial conferences had endorsed a declaration as a main policy outcome, firm ongoing political commitment should also be expressed at the Fifth Ministerial Conference. However, the declaration should be succinct and should refer back to the commitments made at the previous conference. The declaration would thus be a tool to give added value to implementation of the Budapest

Declaration, rather than a committal document on new priorities. There should be emphasis on the global challenges that Member States in the WHO European Region could address regionally. The EEHC thanked the Belgian Federal Public Service for Health, Food Chain Safety and the Environment for hosting and chairing the meeting, and it gratefully accepted the offer from the Ministry of Health of Andorra to hold the next drafting group meeting in November 2008, after the Second High-Level Preparatory Meeting.

14. The EEHC has also received an offer from the Ministry of Health of Luxembourg and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Affairs (DG Sanco) to host a thematic meeting in preparation for the Fifth Ministerial Conference. The Luxembourg meeting will be held on 28 and 29 January 2009, to discuss three key issues: addressing obesity through spatial planning that encourages physical activity; addressing respiratory diseases arising from indoor and outdoor air pollution; and addressing the public health impacts of climate change. A meeting of the drafting group for the declaration will also be held in connection with this meeting. The German Ministry of the Environment has offered to host the Third High-Level Preparatory Meeting and EEHC meeting in Bonn in the spring of 2009.

Current status of country implementation of the Budapest Conference commitments

15. The EEHC Secretariat has been asked by the countries' official environment and health focal points, as well as by EEHC members, to continue to monitor (on an annual basis) the status of implementation of the Budapest Conference commitments in countries through a web-based map. The latest update, made at the end of 2007, shows that eight national plans including child-specific actions (i.e. children's environment and health action plans – CEHAPs – or national environment and health action plans – NEHAPs) are already being implemented, while 16 Member States are redrafting their national action plans to address the CEHAPE RPGs. Four countries are preparing a national action plan for the first time, while 13 countries have opted for stand-alone CEHAPs (unlinked to other national plans). Five other countries have incorporated child-specific actions into other national plans – not necessarily related to the environment and health – and are already implementing the actions agreed on. In addition, many Member States have set up national coordination groups or held national coordination meetings to address the commitments within the CEHAPE.

16. In June 2007, the IMR noted the following:

- 15 countries were working on RPG 1 (Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan);
- 11 countries had reported action on RPG 2 (Albania, Austria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia);
- 15 countries had reported activities related to RPG 3 (Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovakia);
- 19 countries were carrying out work on RPG 4 (Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and the United Kingdom); and
- 6 countries were specifically taking action on the commitments within the Budapest Declaration (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

17. The EEHC noted that some countries have preferred to draw up plans and carry out work based on country assessments known as environment and health performance reviews (EHPRs). EHPRs have been conducted in four countries (Estonia, Montenegro, Poland and Slovakia) and a report on these reviews

was presented at the First High-Level Preparatory Meeting, held in Milan. The aim of these reviews is to assess the policy and institutional framework for the environment and health, taking account of the institutional set-up, the policy-making and legal arrangements, the degree and structural functioning of intersectoral collaboration and the tools available for action. The results of these EHPRs are presented to national policy-makers in a final report.

18. Since these EHPRs have been carried out, Slovakia has reported increased implementation of its Budapest Conference commitments, by revising its legislation on health impact assessment and including health issues in environmental impact assessments. This new law, adopted in 2007, will be fully enforced by 2010 and, to ensure greater capacity in the country, an intersectoral mechanism has been set up to share experiences from all impact assessments. It has been recognized that there is a need to harmonize data collection by the different institutions in the country and to establish an appropriate data management structure. Poland is also drafting a national CEHAP based on the results and recommendations of the national EHPR and is in the process of setting up four task forces to better formulate, implement and monitor CEHAP action on each of the four RPGs. Other countries have committed themselves to drawing up national plans based on the recommendations of their EHPRs. By the end of 2008, seven further EHPRs will have been carried out in Belarus, the Czech Republic, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Malta, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.