

September 2019

Intersectoral action: social agriculture, environment and health

Synergy between sectors: fostering better health and environment through sustainable agriculture

Summary

The Health 2020 policy framework has been adopted by all Member States of the WHO European Region to address Europe's great social and health challenges, calling upon the health sector to reach out to, and work with, all the various sectors and parties in the continuing work of improving people's health and well-being.

Agriculture, environment and health are closely interlinked. Agricultural practices alter physical environments and create environmental risks, directly affecting the health and well-being of the populations living in these environments. By working together, the health and agriculture sectors can improve the environment and living conditions of people, reduce inequalities and support human development.

This in turn will foster healthy and resilient communities and economies in the WHO European Region and beyond.

The agriculture sector can improve the health of people and communities by:

- evaluating the environmental health implications of strategic agricultural policies, to identify both the pressures on health and sustainability and the opportunities for improving health;
- assessing trends in the agricultural use of resources (water and land), use of pesticides, fertilizers and chemicals, human and animal waste disposal and preventable health effects;
- underscoring the link between agricultural policies, environment and health when raising awareness and action along the entire food supply chain;
- incorporating health literacy into training health and environment professionals so they can draw links between agricultural policies, environmental exposure and health; and
- supporting shorter food supply chains that reduce food safety risks, reduce environmental impact and support the local economy and local communities – including public procurement policies that promote growing healthy foods in a manner that is environmentally and socially sustainable.

Key messages

The goal of Health 2020 is to significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality.



1

Health and well-being are public goods and assets for human development that contribute to strong, dynamic and creative societies.



2

Health and well-being are best achieved if the whole of government works together, and Health 2020 promotes whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.

HEALTH 2020



5

Social progress is best measured by objective indicators of health, health equity and well-being, and this includes the conditions in which people are born, live and work.



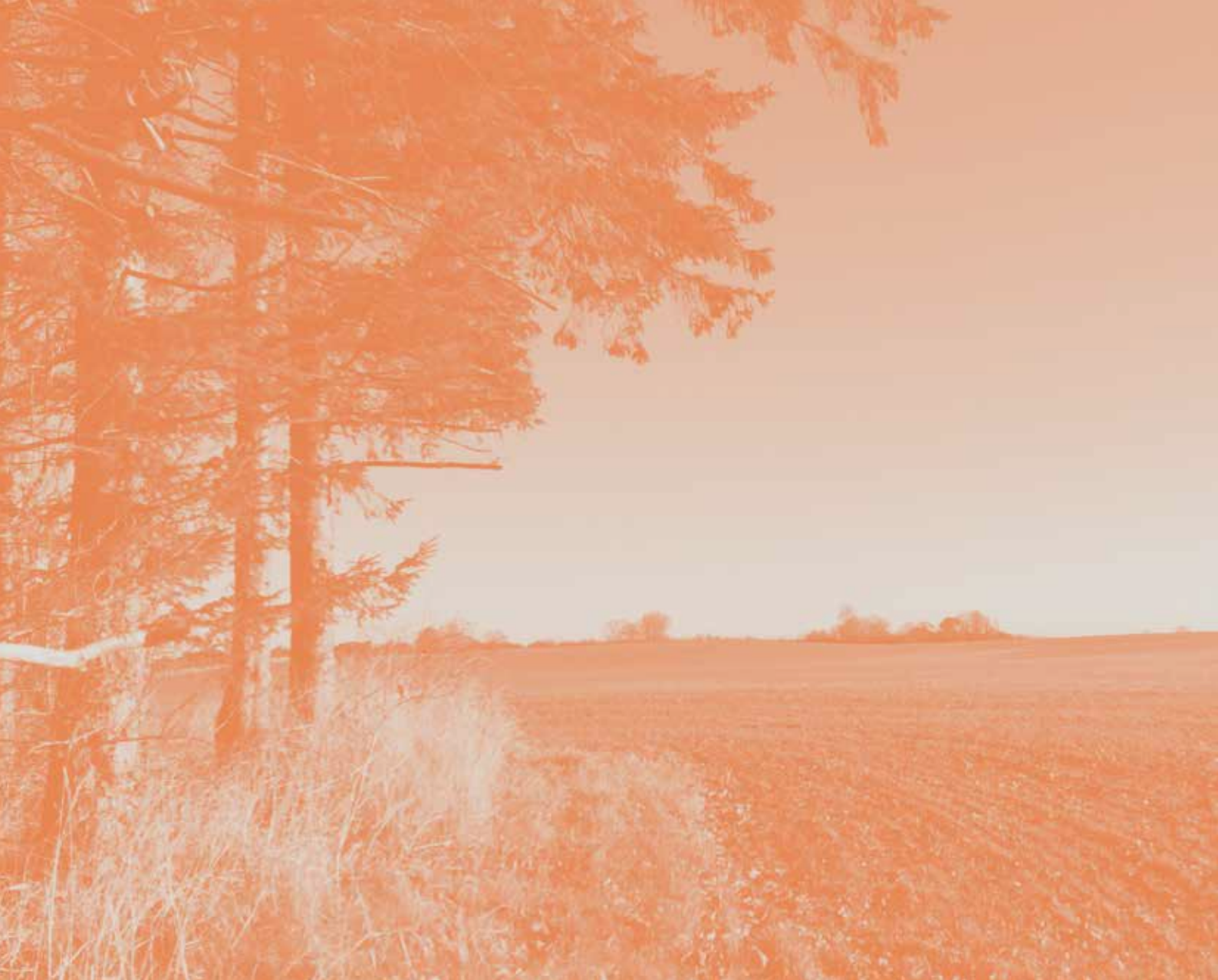
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Different countries, cities and communities have different starting-points: each is unique and can pursue common goals through different pathways.



3

Health and well-being can be improved and health inequalities reduced through the right policies and working with other sectors.



Strengthening the link between health, agriculture and environment

In 2012, all 53 countries in the European Region adopted Health 2020, the new common European health policy framework, and committed themselves to developing integrative policies that engage with all sectors in addressing the social and economic determinants of health and well-being.

Environmental hazards are a major determinant of health for current and future generations, are linked to many

health conditions and also influence the social determinants of health. Collaboration between agriculture, environment and health is critical across the global, regional and local levels to protect humans from the risks of hazardous, contaminated or unsustainable physical environments.

Health 2020: a framework for action

The goal of Health 2020 is to significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality.

All Member States of the WHO European Region have agreed to monitor progress against six common targets:

1. Reduce premature mortality in the European Region by 2020
2. Increase life expectancy in the European Region
3. Reduce health inequalities in the European Region
4. Enhance the well-being of the European Region population
5. Ensure universal health coverage and the right to the highest attainable level of health
6. Set national goals and targets related to health in Member States

What makes societies prosper and flourish can also make people healthy: policies that recognize this have more impact.

Building awareness and capacity to make health objectives part of society's overall socioeconomic and human development is an essential task. All policy fields, including health, need to reform their ways of working and employ new forms and approaches to policy. This applies to the global, national and local levels.

Synergy between sectors: agricultural policy as a tool to improve health and well-being

Strengthening the link between health and the agriculture sector

Humans have practised agriculture for millennia, shaping the living conditions of societies and influencing health and lifestyles. The agricultural sector therefore has huge potential to drastically improve public health.

Industrial agricultural practices, however, unleash major environmental risks to biodiversity and human health. As a huge contributor to climate change, environmental degradation and the exposure of humans to chemicals, the agriculture sector needs to incorporate health considerations into its policies to foster healthy and resilient societies.

The industrial agricultural system – driven by strong demand for food and animal feed – currently consumes fossil fuels, water and soil nutrients at unsustainable rates, and the resulting environmental degradation has huge consequences for public health. For example, agriculture uses the largest share of available fresh water worldwide, contributing to water shortages and worsening water quality. To counter the pressure, human and animal wastewater is increasingly used for irrigation, and if it is not safely managed, it risks propagating pathogens through food and source water.

Animal agriculture in particular is a major cause of concern for public health

and the environment. Resource-intensive meat production practices contribute to energy loss, with grains used to feed livestock rather than reaching humans. Pollution arising from animal waste also creates health risks, and extensive use of antibiotics on animals and crops for human consumption can develop human antimicrobial resistance and compromise the effectiveness of antibiotics for humans.

Meanwhile, large-scale land clearing for agricultural use results in deforestation, soil depletion and acidification; loss of biodiversity – including the loss of species with possible relevance to health. Land clearing can also undermine land use that benefits public health, such as accessible green spaces.

Agricultural workers and producers are often directly exposed to the pesticides, fertilizers and pharmaceuticals used in agricultural practice. These chemicals can reach humans and harm their environments through residues in food and drinking-water, accumulation in soil and fresh water and deposits of obsolete pesticides. In particular, the use of pesticides in industrial agriculture is associated with elevated cancer risks for workers and consumers and has been linked to endocrine disruption and mental health problems.

Agriculture workers are further vulnerable to occupational risks. The International Labour Organization has dubbed agriculture as one of the most hazardous economic sectors. Many rural communities depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, and their populations often comprise vulnerable subgroups. They are exposed not only to poverty and social exclusion but also to injuries and respiratory health problems as a direct result of their working conditions.

The agricultural workforce also includes many non-waged or informal workers (such as family workers, small-scale farmers and illegal migrants), who may be particularly vulnerable to health inequalities and disadvantage.

Synergy between sectors: collaboration to improve population health and prosperity

How can the sectors work together?

Health 2020 provides a platform for such joint working between the agriculture and health sectors. Working together, we have the power to intervene to address some of today's greatest health challenges, including health inequalities and social exclusion, and to support sustainable development while ensuring that individuals and communities are able to fulfil their highest potential.

KEY AREAS TO EXPLORE TOGETHER INCLUDE:

- identifying the environmental health implications arising from agricultural policies;
- developing joint policy responses to the health effects of agriculture and environment;
- creating and adopting common systems of measurement and accountability;
- evaluating the environmental health implications of strategic agricultural policies, identifying both pressure on health and sustainability and opportunities for improving health;
- assessing trends in agricultural use of resources (water and land), use of pesticides, fertilizers and chemicals, human and animal waste disposal and preventable health effects;
- underscoring the link between agricultural policies, environment and health when raising awareness and action along the entire food supply chain;
- incorporating health literacy into training health and environment professionals so they can link agricultural policies, environmental exposure and health; and
- supporting shorter food supply chains, which reduce food safety risks and environmental impact and support the local economy and local communities – including public procurement policies that promote growing healthy food in a manner that is environmentally and socially sustainable.

What can agriculture do to make a difference to health?

- Evaluate the impact of agricultural policies on health and environment, identifying pressures and opportunities
- Assess trends in agricultural practices and preventable health effects
- Limit animal agriculture's negative effects on health and environment, including contamination from animal waste or extensive antibiotic use in animals
- Support agriculture that reduces the use of agents with suspected or established noxious health effects (agroecology)
- Support shorter food supply chains, which reduce food safety risks and environmental impact and boost local economies. Public procurement policies can promote healthy, sustainably grown foods.
- Strengthen the surveillance and prevention of occupational risks, focusing on vulnerable workers
- Internalize the effects of unhealthy, unsustainable agricultural practices to promote sustainable, health-friendly agriculture with concrete market incentives

Collaborating to improve the well-being of people and communities

THE CHALLENGES

Agriculture strongly affects land and water and human health both locally and remotely. This also applies to the chemical agents used extensively across agriculture. Climate change is exacerbating these challenges

Due to the evolving models of agriculture (such as more intensive and specialized), rural communities are declining in many countries. The quality of the physical and social environment may be deteriorating

Agriculture workers are at higher risk of injury, acute poisoning, infectious diseases and chronic exposure to noxious agents than workers in other sectors. Many of these workers do not have adequate and safe employment conditions

Agricultural policies are unduly influenced by remote economic interests. As a result, the local interests of agricultural communities and consumers are not always adequately supported

THE RESPONSES NEEDED

Funding that is adequate and aligned with health needs to minimize out-of-pocket expenditure and address corruption and conflict of interest

Identify mechanisms in countries that can strengthen stewardship and build alliances with local civil society groups, health agencies and health advocates in rural communities. The quality of the rural environment will be enhanced by fully considering health, well-being and health inequities across the population, including vulnerable and marginalized groups

Occupational and para-occupational health and safety in agriculture can be further strengthened by employing a multiple context approach to better understand the role of various factors in shaping health: such as the workplace, exposure, lifestyles and social mechanisms. Advocating for decent and safe employment will help to create opportunities and ensure the predictability and regularity of income

A clear and evidence-informed formulation of the health and well-being situation of the people and communities most directly affected by agricultural policies will provide additional evidence when negotiating for more health-friendly policies for rural communities, producers and the general public

What can health do to make a difference to agriculture?

- Incorporating health literacy into the education of health and environment professionals so they can link agricultural policies, environment and health
- Continually update evidence on the health implications of agriculture and develop resources and tools to support intersectoral dialogue around this
- Underscore the link between agricultural policies, environment and health in raising awareness and action along the entire food supply chain
- Articulate public health concerns related to agriculture and environment related to policy-makers at all levels while connecting and empowering consumers, patients, health professionals and health advocates

United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a political mandate and transformative call for action

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by all 193 Member States of the United Nations at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015 in New York. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. They build on the successes of the

Millennium Development Goals while including new areas such as climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace and justice, among other priorities. The Goals are interconnected and require multisectoral and intersectoral action – the key to success for any one goal will involve tackling issues more commonly associated with another.

Health 2020

The Health 2020 policy framework has a political mandate. It has been adopted by all WHO European Region Member States and can be adapted to the different settings and realities that make up the Region. It describes how health and well-being can be advanced, sustained and measured through action that creates social cohesion, security, a good work–life balance, good health and good education. It calls upon the health sector to reach out to the many different actors within and outside government and provides inspiration and direction on addressing the complex health challenges of the 21st century. The framework confirms values, is based on evidence and identifies strategic directions and essential actions. It builds on the experiences

gained through previous Health for All policies and guides the actions of both Member States and the Regional Office.

Health 2020, the European policy framework for health and well-being, fully aligns with the 2030 Agenda. Both aim to improve health and well-being for all at all ages through whole-of-government, whole-of-society and health-in-all-policies approaches. Both tackle the social, economic, cultural and environmental determinants of health. The 2030 Agenda offers new momentum for the implementation of Health 2020. It presents a unique opportunity to renew national commitments to advancing health and well-being in the WHO European Region.

Reducing health inequalities: to reduce health inequalities, the following should be addressed.

LIFE-COURSE STAGE

- Social protection for women, mothers-to-be and young families
- Universal, high-quality and affordable early-years education and care system
- Eradication of unsafe work and access to employment and high-quality work
- Coherent, effective intersectoral action to tackle inequalities at older ages

WIDER SOCIETY

- Improved social protection according to need
- Co-creation and partnership with those targeted, civil society and civic partners
- Action to reduce social exclusion
- A gender equity approach

BROADER CONTEXT

- Tax and transfers to promote equity
- Long-term planning through links with other policies

SYSTEMS

- Greater coherence across sectors
- Comprehensive responses
- Regular reporting and public scrutiny

Transformative governance for action between health and agriculture

The adoption of the Health 2020 health policy framework for the WHO European Region in 2012 by all Member States, with governance for health as a twin strategic objective alongside improved health equity, marked an invigorated strategic approach in the European Region to strengthen governance for health and intersectoral action. This provides an excellent foundation for operationalizing and implementing the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, which calls for good governance, new models of partnership and scaling up of intersectoral work as the means to achieve global, regional and national goals and targets, and to meet today's complex global challenges. Moving towards models of governance that deliver through their design health, equity and well-being is an example of

the transformative response called for by the 2030 Agenda. Involving, managing, coordinating, developing accountability and coherence, and supporting the implementation of action between diverse actors across all levels of government and beyond are necessary to achieve global, regional and national goals and targets and to effectively address today's complex global challenges.

The transformative approach to improved governance is facilitated through whole-systems approaches at each individual level or node within a system (whole of government, whole of society, whole of city and whole of school) that engage all levels of governance within a system, from the international through the national and the regional to the local.

SDGs for action between health and agriculture



Capacity for intersectoral governance for health and well-being depends on three key factors:

1. The right to health, and sector mandates for multisectoral and intersectoral action for health and well-being
2. Resourcing and organization for multisectoral and intersectoral action for health and well-being; and
3. The capacity of institutions and individuals for designing, implementing and delivering multisectoral and intersectoral action for health and well-being.

Evidence base

Agriculture is a sector with significant and far-reaching implications for human health and well-being. These links between health, agriculture and environment mean that amenable actions can be adopted to benefit all sectors.

Agriculture affects the physical environment of rural communities, thus affecting human health. This means that agricultural policies can effectively leverage these dimensions and substantially reduce the adverse effects while maximizing health gains.

Although stronger evidence is needed on the links between agriculture and human health, existing knowledge is a strong basis for meaningful, intersectoral dialogue about how to harness agriculture's huge potential to contribute positively to the health of rural communities and consumers. Health 2020 promotes intersectoral collaboration, providing a platform for cooperation between the agriculture and health sectors.

Health 2020 sees the agriculture sector as a co-producer of health: a crucially

important policy area for society. It influences key determinants of health, employs workers who are often vulnerable and at risk, affects the environment and is a partner in striving for investment in government policies that are coherent in their policy goals. Working together, we have the power to intervene to address avoidable environmental effects on health to benefit communities.

For further information, see [the Concept note: assessment tool for governance for health and well-being](#).

Sustainable Development Goal targets for action between health and agriculture

GOAL

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL TARGET



Sustainable Development Goal 2:

End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round

2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons

2.3 By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment

2.4 By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality

2.5 By 2020, maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed

2.a Increase investment, including through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, in particular least developed countries

2.b Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round.

2.c Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives and facilitate timely access to market information, including on food reserves, in order to help limit extreme food price volatility.

3.9 By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination.



Sustainable Development Goal 3:

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages



GOAL

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL TARGET



Sustainable Development Goal 6:

Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

6.3 By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally

6.4 By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of fresh water to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity



Sustainable Development Goal 12:

Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

12.3 By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses

12.4 By 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment

12.7 Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities

12.8 By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature



Sustainable Development Goal 13:

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning



Sustainable Development Goal 15:

Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

15.1 By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements

15.2 By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally

15.3 By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world

The WHO Regional Office for Europe

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

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