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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
EUROPEAN CHARTER ON ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

Report on a WHO Working Group

Düsseldorf
28-30 August 1990

Note

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Introduction

The First European Conference on Environment and Health was held in Frankfurt-am-Main, Federal Republic of Germany, on 7-8 December 1989 and was attended by ministers of health and of the environment, together with senior officials, representing 29 Member States. The Commission of the European Communities was represented by the Commissioner of Environmental Protection. The Conference culminated in the adoption of a European Charter on Environment and Health, as a firm commitment to action. The Charter is a logical extension of the European health for all policy and targets adopted by the European Region of WHO in 1984 and also incorporates the basic philosophy of the World Commission on Environment and Development. It represents, in the words of the WHO Regional Director for Europe, Dr J.E. Asvall, a major step forward in the development of improved public health and environmental policies, at a time when political change is greatly enhancing the possibility of cooperation among Member States throughout Europe.

A Working Group was convened in Düsseldorf, Federal Republic of Germany, at the invitation of the Federal Minister for Youth, Family Affairs, Women and Health, on 28-30 August 1990, to contribute to the development of a strategy for implementing the Charter. It was attended by 18 participants from national environment and health administrations, local authorities, scientific institutions and a professional association of environment and health officers.

The meeting was opened on behalf of the Regional Director by Dr S. Tarkowski, Director, Environment and Health Service, WHO Regional Office for Europe, and the participants were welcomed by Professor H.-W. Schlipkötter, Medical Institute of Environmental Hygiene, Düsseldorf, who referred to the

long association between his Institute and the Regional Office for Europe.

The main objective of the meeting was to provide guidance for practical action by various parties from international organizations to individual members of the public. The recommendations of the meeting will be transmitted to the working group that is to develop an initial work plan for the new WHO European Centre for Environment and Health and will also serve as guidance for a series of subregional workshops on the implementation of the Charter.

Conclusions and recommendations

General

1. While socioeconomic conditions and environmental health priorities are clearly different in each country of the Region, the present unevenness in the quality of environment and health across the European Region is of concern and should be addressed by the Region as a whole. Emphasis should be given to the special problems of central and eastern Europe, and lifestyles of importance to health, including smoking, eating and drinking habits, should be addressed as a matter of high priority, at the same time as efforts are made to alleviate unsatisfactory environmental conditions.
2. The term environmental health poses difficulties in some European languages. It comprises those elements of human health that are determined by factors in the environment. It also refers to the theory and practice of assessing and controlling factors in the environment that can potentially affect human health. In WHO terminology, environmental health includes the direct pathological effects of chemicals, radiation and some biological agents and also the effects (often indirect)

on health and wellbeing of the broad physical, psychological, social and aesthetic environments, which include housing, urban development, land use and transport. In view of the difficulty of translation, the Charter refers throughout to "environment and health".

3. Since the approval of the Charter in Frankfurt on 8 December 1989, it has been translated into 17 European languages and widely disseminated, but as yet unevenly in individual countries. Many countries are using it, either as a comprehensive policy document on environmental health management or more selectively in relation to particular issues. Local authorities and a wide range of nongovernmental bodies are showing rapidly growing interest in the application of the Charter.

4. The objectives of the Charter can be achieved only by concerted action at local, subregional, national and international levels, involving government institutions, the private sector and nongovernmental organizations. Its objectives can be successfully achieved only by acceptance of the principle of intersectorality. "Bridge building" is therefore needed between sectors so that the necessary actions can be clearly defined and understood, and the costs and benefits of such actions can be established. Such a process will require a proactive approach at the highest levels of government, although much can be achieved by setting up a dialogue at the technical level between the various sectors concerned. This will be effective, provided that the health and environmental sectors have a sufficient remit to carry adequate weight in the subsequent decision-making process. Unless all concerned agencies regard environmental health as a holistic concept, the development of appropriate policies and programmes will be hampered.

5. Priorities for action are at present too often based on subjective opinions rather than on a systematic approach towards potential risks to health.

6. Many environmental health issues require international collaboration, either among neighbouring states or on a wider basis. While differing conditions and priorities must be taken fully into account, a harmonization of approaches or, in some cases, agreement on specific objectives and time scales will be necessary.

7. In spite of the large number of major environmental monitoring programmes now in progress, many have ill defined objectives and relatively few produce data of practical use for environmental health decision-making.

8. The establishment of the new WHO European Centre for Environment and Health is welcomed. It is imperative that the environmental health database be improved in all European countries. In the short term, the best use should be made of existing data to produce and publish as soon as possible a review and forecasting study of existing conditions in all 32 countries of the Region with predictions until the year 2010. The publication by the Netherlands Government Concern for tomorrow is an appropriate model. The Centre is also expected to play an increasingly important role in many aspects of technical cooperation. The Working Group hoped that other Member States and the European Community would actively contribute to and support the work of the Centre.

9. The principle of prevention must embrace the prediction of potential environmental health damage and the use of cost-benefit analysis, incentives, low-impact technologies and other measures to minimize the creation of harmful conditions.

10. While accepting that the principle of self-regulation has many applications, external monitoring and control mechanisms should be available for all aspects of environmental health management.

11. All elements of environmental health management should be accepted as essential and integral components of an overall health strategy, even if detailed responsibility for some of them remains with other sectors.
12. Good management, sound operating procedures and careful maintenance are important factors in the prevention of health hazards in the workplace. They require an awareness of the importance of environment and health considerations, appropriate training and well defined responsibilities.
13. Improved training facilities are required in many aspects of environmental health, for both specialists and generalists. Appropriate modules must be introduced into the training for many professional disciplines. Teachers should be taught the basic principles of environmental health and special attention should be paid to the education of young people, both in the classroom and through extracurricular project work. A considerable opportunity exists for positively influencing children who are now being affected by profound cultural change, encompassing a much greater appreciation of environmental conditions than previously existed.
14. In addition to the follow-up to the Charter at the European level, a subregional approach may have potential benefits, for example the holding of seminars on the appropriate implementation of the Charter in such areas as the Baltic, central European and Mediterranean countries.
15. The Regional Director would be requested to consider the selection of environment and health as the subject for the Regional Committee technical discussions in 1992.

16. The European Region is in a good position to develop and implement environmental health policies based on the Charter that will serve as a prototype for endeavours in other parts of the world.

Action at the national level

1. Entitlements and responsibilities

Notwithstanding the important roles of international bodies, provincial and local authorities, the private sector and nongovernmental organizations, the greatest responsibility for addressing the implementation of the Charter in individual countries normally rests with governments. (In a number of European countries, regional governments have major responsibilities for environmental and health services. Recommendations referring to the national level must therefore be applied in accordance with the circumstances applicable within individual Member States.) In addition, the Charter lays down that each government is responsible for ensuring that activities under its jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to human health in other states. Furthermore, each government shares a common responsibility for safeguarding the global environment.

It is therefore clearly necessary for governments to adopt appropriate regulatory frameworks and ensure that appropriate structures are in place. Governments have an important role in promoting behaviour by all sections of society that will have a good effect on the environment and health. They should grant access to information about all aspects of environmental health and encourage participation in decision-making. Governments have an important responsibility to promote the education of the general population, particularly children and students, in such issues. Reviews should be published regularly on the status and trends of environmental health in each country: a number of Member States have already embarked on such work.

2. Principles for public policy

In adopting laws and management systems that effectively safeguard the environment and health, governments should regard the environment as a resource for achieving continuing positive health and wellbeing.

Government planning of environmental resource management should be flexible enough and appropriate for adoption at local levels, but should give clear guidance on the basic approaches and criteria to be adopted.

Governments must build relevant environmental health considerations into all decisions about economic and social issues, including those with international dimensions. The Charter lays down that the health of individuals should take clear precedence over considerations of economy and trade. It also states that trade and economic policies and development assistance programmes affecting the environment and health should comply with the policy principles within the Charter and that the export of environmental and health hazards should be avoided.

Action on problems should be based on the best scientific knowledge. New policies, technologies and developments should not be introduced before an appropriate assessment has been made of their potential impact on the environment and health. Wherever possible, the best practicable environmental health option should be adopted.

Criteria and methods for environmental health monitoring should be clearly established, together with the provision of appropriate facilities for analysis, interpretation, publication and wide dissemination. Environmental guidelines and standards, and actions to secure compliance, should be based on the best available scientific knowledge. Guidelines and standards should be reviewed periodically in the light of new knowledge.

3. Strategic elements

Governments should define the specific responsibilities of public and private bodies for planning, monitoring and implementing appropriate measures to safeguard health. In view of the intersectoral nature of most environmental health issues, a proactive and coordinated approach must be developed at the highest levels of government. Setting up a continuing dialogue at the technical level among the various sectors concerned is also useful. The establishment of standing joint committees and the joint review of specific issues may be an appropriate way of addressing this need. Establishing and maintaining an effective flow of information and continued consultation between central, provincial and local levels of government are equally important.

Clearly, governments must have mechanisms for the effective monitoring and evaluation of the consequences of decisions made and actions taken. It is particularly important that appropriate means, including trained staff, should be available to ensure compliance with regulations.

In many cases, it is imprudent for authorities to wait for absolute proof that particular hazards are harmful to health where preventive action, based on reasonable deductions from the available evidence, could substantially reduce or eliminate the perceived risk.

As for transfrontier global issues, governments should seek active collaboration and any necessary support from other involved countries as well as from relevant international organizations.

4. Priorities

The Charter lays down that governments, without prejudice to the importance of problems specific to their particular countries, should pay special attention to a number of issues of general concern throughout the Region. They should systematically review their national priorities, taking into account those listed in the Charter, those relating to other international obligations as well as those of importance at the local level.

5. The way forward

In accordance with the Charter, governments should take all the necessary steps to reverse negative trends as soon as possible and increase the health-related improvements already taking place.

Every effort should be made to implement WHO's regional health for all strategy: targets 11 and 18-25 specifically refer to aspects of the environment and health. To this end, and particularly with the European Charter in mind, governments should carefully review and where necessary reassess their policies and priorities, including the adequacy of their regulatory and management systems. Both the environmental and health departments of government should take leading roles in this process, but the participation of all other relevant government sectors, including provincial and local authorities, should be ensured. Physical planning is a case in point. Experience gained in carrying out such reviews should be exchanged at an international level under the auspices of the Regional Office.

Each government of the European Region should establish a national focal point for contacts with the Regional Office concerning the implementation of the Charter.

Action at the local level

1. Entitlements and responsibilities

Local communities must accept responsibility for educating all age groups of the population about the health aspects of environmental issues. The paradigm of individual responsibility must be stressed, but only when an individual has adequate knowledge can he or she become responsible. This responsibility should be exercised as an important part of everyday life, for example when segregating garbage for recycling.

The Charter provides a stimulus for local initiatives to improve the environment and hence to safeguard and, where possible, enhance health. Examples of such local action are improved street cleaning, effective control of community noise, and encouragement to improve food safety.

Local authorities should keep the media informed about the environmental situation and changes therein that might influence human health. They should also supply information about ways of living that are beneficial both for human health and the environment. Local authorities and influential local institutions and firms should serve as good examples by buying "healthy" equipment, such as vehicles that are both quiet and provided with catalytic converters. Local authorities should work with a wide range of nongovernmental organizations, including professional associations and special interest groups, to support activities that can, within existing legislation, improve the environment and safeguard human health.

2. Principles for public policy

Environment and health management should be implemented at the most local practicable level. Local community planning, such as physical planning, finances

or education, should fully take into account health and environmental issues by adopting an intersectoral approach. This process should involve national, provincial and local agencies when operating at the community level as well as in their relationship with industry, other private bodies and nongovernmental organizations. In this connection, it is important to promote the principle that prevention is better than cure. Such an approach requires appropriately trained and well motivated staff.

A high proportion of health-related monitoring, including epidemiological studies, can be carried out appropriately at the local level. Such monitoring should adhere to harmonized principles and methods so that the results from different areas are comparable.

3. Strategic elements

The responsibility of different public and private bodies at the local level for policy-making, implementation and control should be defined from the outset. Although multidisciplinary and intersectoral action should be fully encouraged, personal and organizational responsibility should be both well defined and understood by all concerned. It should be exercised as an important part of everyday life.

Risk assessment should be fully taken into account when establishing local goals. Status and trends should be systematically monitored; all monitoring programmes should have clearly defined objectives that should be periodically reviewed and, if necessary, modified in accordance with real needs.

4. Priorities

Although local priorities may not always correspond to those at provincial, national and international levels, goals at other levels must be fully taken into account. Where it is appropriate for standards to be imposed locally, they should be drawn up in accordance with national and international criteria and guidelines.

Community planning is a powerful tool for the control of many hazards to health, including pollution. Transport is a dominating source of air pollution and noise: the development of strategies and plans for road, rail and other forms of transport should take health considerations fully into account. In this connection, the human health dimensions of environmental impact assessment are important and should be routinely incorporated into development procedures.

5. General

The experience of the Regional Office's Healthy Cities project is of great importance for the implementation of the European Charter. Such experience should be collated at the national level and effectively disseminated.

A key element in the local use of the Charter is the establishment of successful partnerships between both public and private bodies. These would encompass industry and commerce and all types of nongovernmental organization, including voluntary bodies such as churches and youth groups. Such partnerships require a highly motivated focal point, who might be drawn from either the public or the private sector.

The role of nongovernmental organizations

Nongovernmental organizations range from those working in an international or national sphere to those solely serving local interests. Their number and diversity give them increasing importance in society and they should be regarded as a significant element in the promotion of the Charter and furtherance of its objectives.

1. Entitlements and responsibilities

Nongovernmental organizations should be encouraged by all levels of government to participate in dialogue and, where feasible, in decision-making on issues related to the implementation of the Charter. They play an important role in raising awareness in individuals, in specific sections of society and in politicians and public authorities. They should be consulted as a matter of course on forthcoming issues; they are an important element in the process of questioning why particular policies, strategies, plans and projects are being developed.

Some pressure groups may, of course, be far from objective in their approach and the appropriateness of contact with particular organizations must be considered. On the whole, however, irrespective of the organization concerned, the opening of dialogue and the transfer of information should be encouraged.

In educational terms, nongovernmental organizations should be encouraged to organize conferences and seminars, to provide a forum for debate or to develop solutions to specific problems. An important element is the practical involvement of children and students in environmental health awareness, for example by participation in simple monitoring programmes.

2. Principles for public policy

Where appropriate, nongovernmental organizations should be involved in liaison committees and encouraged to play an active part in policy formulation. Education and/or training of members of such organizations may assist in the development of an intersectoral approach. Likewise, greater appreciation of the problems of government and other organizations, including industry, should lead to the development of a greater sense of understanding among the parties concerned and be an incentive to address issues in a more positive and harmonious way. The confrontational stance often taken towards or by nongovernmental organizations wastes valuable time, energy and resources and could in most cases be avoided by better communication.

3. Strategic elements

The role of individual nongovernmental organizations in specific categories of environmental issue should be identified.

Independent research carried out by such organizations should be encouraged and, where appropriate, assisted. In many cases, competent research may usefully be used to supplement official data, at local, provincial and national levels.

4. Priorities

Although priorities for action should be decided on an objective basis using scientific criteria, the interests and knowledge of nongovernmental organizations should be recognized and used positively. A recent successful example was the consultative process carried out in the United Kingdom before the publication of an official government White Paper on the environment. In Germany, the Expert Council for Environmental Affairs, an

independent body, issues regular reports on the current situation and trends. These were analysed in the 1990 German environment report, which draws extensively on the European Charter.

The role of the media

The media can perform a vital function by obtaining and interpreting information for the public. Journalists should be briefed as fully and accurately as possible and they should be encouraged to communicate this information effectively to the public. Neither concealment nor false scares are in the public interest.

Investigations carried out by television programmes and newspapers have often had a positive effect in changing the official stance on particular environmental health problems, by exposing scandals or a deliberate suppression of information and by focusing on issues not precisely considered to be a priority or not being addressed.

Official bodies should try to liaise with and open up a regular dialogue with the media, for example by holding briefing sessions, providing briefing documents, arranging seminars on specific issues of concern and publishing informative reports and statistical data. The willingness to discuss issues frankly and openly and in plain language will encourage a relationship of trust. This is particularly desirable in the field of risk assessment, where it could encourage a more objective public perception of relative risk for different categories of hazard.

The media should be encouraged to be both informative and responsible. Regular contact and the free flow of information will help to put issues and stories in perspective. The following key elements are

given as guidance to both the public and private sectors in establishing and maintaining productive relationships with the media:

- keep the media informed
- maintain regular contact
- give background information
- give risk assessment advice
- put issues in perspective using plain language
- be innovative.

The media can play an important part in promoting and implementing the Charter and hence in influencing decision-makers and all sectors of society.

Action at the international level

1. Entitlements and responsibilities

International organizations and agencies, when addressing issues related to socioeconomic development, should fully take into account the provisions of the Charter, based on the recognition that human health depends on a wide range of environmental factors and that action is required on an intersectoral basis. Many of the issues addressed by the Charter can only be solved by concerted international action.

The Regional Office should develop and harmonize throughout the Region systems for collecting and assessing relevant data in close collaboration with the Commission of the European Communities and other relevant bodies. Information on the relationship between environmental conditions and health status should thereafter be widely disseminated, with periodic updating.

International organizations and agencies have a responsibility to collaborate with the media and to provide them with full information on matters related to

the environment and health. The Regional Office, in cooperation with the media, should ensure that the Charter is widely known throughout the Region.

2. Principles for public policy

The Regional Office, together with other international organizations, should promote the adoption of sound policies on the health dimensions of environmental protection, as an integral part of its health for all strategy.

To ensure that Member States take actions that are based on the best available scientific knowledge, the Regional Office should provide guidance and assistance where necessary. Preventive and control measures should be based on consistent health criteria: WHO has an important role in this development and in the issuing of appropriate guidelines that may be used by Member States when formulating standards and control limits.

Environmental impact assessment is increasingly used to predict the effects of new developments on the environment. Although originally developed to predict the environmental consequences of specific projects, the concept may be widened to embrace the impact assessment of new policies, strategies, plans and programmes. So far, impacts on health have not always been adequately covered by such studies and the necessary techniques are complex and not yet fully developed. The Regional Office should encourage further work in this important area and be prepared to advise Member States on available methodologies and assist in training.

International organizations and bilateral agencies should ensure, as a principle of policy and in accordance with the wording of the Charter, that development assistance should promote sustainable development, with the safeguarding and improvement of human health as one of its integral components.

3. Strategic elements

The Regional Office should promote the concept that the environment should be managed as a positive resource for human health and wellbeing. Together with other international organizations, it should assist in the development of fiscal, administrative and economic means of reducing health risks in the environment. The study of case histories may provide useful experience for application elsewhere.

WHO should continue to develop scientific criteria and guidelines for the regulation of potential health hazards in the environment, together with guidance on the processes of risk assessment, evaluation and management.

The Regional Office, in close cooperation with other international organizations, should develop contingency plans for all types of accident that may have transfrontier consequences, so that prompt action can be taken when Member States ask for assistance.

The Regional Office should collaborate with Member States and with other international organizations to strengthen the environmental health database, to produce a geographical information system, and to develop small-area statistics, together with trend analyses covering the European Region.

The Regional Office should collaborate with Member States to develop the health aspects of environmental impact assessment, for inclusion in relevant international conventions and for application at policy, strategy and programme levels as well as to individual projects. This process should be referred to as environment and health impact assessment, in order to stress the importance of the health dimension.

The Regional Office should collaborate with Member States to apply epidemiology to environmental health issues, particularly in relation to chronic effects and in the development of protocols and coordination of multicountry studies.

The Regional Office should stimulate the training of both generalists and specialists to work in interdisciplinary teams. It should also provide guidance on the appropriate methods to use in education on the health aspects of environmental protection.

4. Priorities

The Regional Office should assist Member States, on request, to tackle the health-related aspects of the priorities listed in the Charter. In the preparation for the second ministerial conference to be held in 1994, the Regional Office should collaborate with Member States to monitor progress in tackling these priorities.

5. The way forward

More research is needed, particularly of an interdisciplinary nature. At a European level, the Scientific Advisory Board for the European Centre for Environment and Health should be responsible for making periodic overviews of perceived research priorities, based on a paper submitted as a background document to the Frankfurt Conference (see Annex 1, document ICP/CEH 211/12).

The development of more appropriate environmental health indicators by the Regional Office is important for monitoring progress, both in the achievement of the relevant targets contained in the European health for all strategy and in dealing with priorities listed in the Charter. These indicators will necessarily be very

different in nature, but in some cases should try to link to actual exposure. They should be selected so as to be as specific as possible.

Two parallel and closely integrated mechanisms should be established to advise the Regional Director.

(1) To take into account national policies, it would be advantageous to establish an all-country advisory committee, with emphasis on multisectoral participation, based on the successful precedent of the meeting of high-level officials in London in October 1989 before the Frankfurt Conference. The committee could meet every two years, to advise the WHO Regional Director on policy and programme matters and to review the situation and trends of all aspects of the relationship between environmental conditions and human health. The committee would be intended to provide a rapid and effective mechanism for exchanging information and pooling ideas.

(2) A small scientific committee should be set up, comprising an appropriate range of disciplines and experience. The members should be invited as individuals by the Regional Director, and would meet in alternate years to provide more detailed advice.

Annex 1

LIST OF WORKING PAPERS^a

- ICP/CEH 211/6 European Charter on Environment and Health.
- ICP/CEH 211/7 Environment and health: The European Charter and Commentary. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 1990 (WHO Regional Publications, European Series, No. 35). Sw.fr. 26.
- ICP/CEH 211/8 Strategy for implementation of the European Charter on Environment and Health: a discussion document.
- ICP/CEH 211/9 Environment and health, by Dr Graeme Matthew, Department of Health, London, United Kingdom.
- ICP/CEH 211/10 Prevention strategies, by Dr Graham Kermode, Bridle Lane, Rickmansworth, Herts, United Kingdom.

^a Copies are available from European Centre for Environment and Health, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Scherfigsvej 8, DK-2100 Copenhagen O, Denmark.

- ICP/CEH 211/11 Tools for environmental health management, by Dr J. Piotrowski
Institute of Environmental Research
Analyses, Medical Academy, Lodz,
Poland.²
- ICP/CEH 211/12 Research by Dr Barbara MacGibbon,
Senior Principal Medical Officer,
Department of Health, London, United
Kingdom.

² With contributions from Dr Olaf Axelson, Department of Occupational Medicine, University Hospital, Linköping, Sweden; Mr Eric Giroult, Health Planning/Ecology, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark; Dr Richard Stern, Risk Management Systems, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Annex 2

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Temporary Advisers

- Dr Michael Debrus
Deputy Director, International Health Relations,
Bundesministerium für Jugend, Familie, Frauen und
Gesundheit, Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany
- Mr J. Charles Dobson
Assistant Secretary, Department of Health, London,
United Kingdom
- Dr Reinhardt Dolgner
Head, Department of Epidemiology, Medical Institute
of Environmental, Hygiene, Düsseldorf, Federal
Republic of Germany
- Dr José I. Elorrieta Perez de Diego
Environment General Director, Service of the
Environment, Department for Land Ordinance,
Pamplona, Navarra, Spain
- Dr Kees A. van der Heijden
Director, Toxicology and Environmental Protection,
National Institute of Public Health and
Environmental Protection, Bilthoven, Netherlands
(Rapporteur)

Mr Graham Jukes

Under Secretary, The Institution of Environmental
Health Officers, London, United Kingdom

Professor Robert Kroes

National Institute of Public Health and
Environmental Protection, Bilthoven, Netherlands

Dr Jerzy Kwiatkowski

Deputy Director, Environmental Coordination and
Management Unit, Ministry for Environment
Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry, Warsaw,
Poland (Vice-Chairperson)

Dr Marten Lagergren

Assistant Undersecretary of State, Ministry of
Health and Social Affairs, Stockholm, Sweden

Dr Uri Marinov

Director General, Ministry of Environment,
Jerusalem, Israel

Dr Bengt Mollstedt

Deputy Lord Mayor, Gothenburg, Sweden

Professor Beat Roos

Medizinischer Berater der HMI-Gruppe, HMI Management
AG, Berne, Switzerland (Chairperson)

Professor H.-W. Schlipkötter

Director, Medical Institute of Environmental
Hygiene, Düsseldorf, Federal Republic of Germany

Professor Vittorio Silano

Director, Department of Food Hygiene and Nutrition,
Ministry of Health, Rome, Italy

Dr B. Stalder

Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und
Reaktorsicherheit, Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany

Dr Anthony Vassallo
Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health,
Valletta, Malta

Dr Jan K. van Wijngaarden
Senior Consultant, Ministry of Welfare, Health and
Cultural Affairs, Rijswijk, Netherlands

Dr Janos Zakonyi
Ministerial Chief Counsellor, Ministry for
Environment, Budapest, Hungary

WHO Regional Office for Europe

Dr S. Tarkowski
Director, Environment and Health

Mr J. Ian Waddington
Programme Coordinator, European Centre on
Environment and Health