

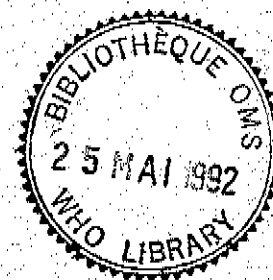


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Workshop on the European Charter on Environment and Health in the Baltic Countries

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ABSTRACT

Severe environmental degradation in several countries around the Baltic is having an adverse effect on people's health. Ten Baltic countries met at a WHO workshop to assess how the principles of the European Charter on Environment and Health on community participation and intersectoral and international cooperation could be applied to control these problems and improve the environment in the interests of human health and wellbeing. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the St. Petersburg region of the Russian Republic said they would welcome assistance from other Baltic countries, as well as the rest of the international community, and drew up a list of their priorities in matters of policy, infrastructure, scientific and technical issues, training and information exchange.

TARGET 18

POLICY ON ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

By the year 2000, all Member States should have developed, and be implementing, policies on the environment and health that ensure ecologically sustainable development, effective prevention and control of environmental health risks and equitable access to healthy environments.

Keywords:

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY
HEALTH PROMOTION
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
LATVIA
LITHUANIA
POLAND
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
CCEE

The First European Conference on Environment and Health was held in Frankfurt-am-Main, 7-8 December 1989 at ministerial level. It culminated in the adoption of a European Charter on Environment and Health. A WHO Working Group discussed the implementation of the Charter in Düsseldorf in August 1990. One of its conclusions was that a subregional approach could have potential benefits, and it suggested that this might be inaugurated by holding workshops on the Charter in such areas as the Baltic, central European and Mediterranean countries.

The first of such workshops was held in Stockholm, 25-28 November 1991. The countries surrounding the Baltic Sea form a geographical entity and in many respects share a common cultural identity. Several countries adjacent to the Baltic are suffering from severe environmental degradation which in some places is having significant adverse effects on people's health. Substantial problems in any one of these countries can have effects throughout the Baltic area.

Scope and purpose

The Workshop was attended by 38 representatives of countries in the Baltic region: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the USSR. The participants had a wide range of expertise and experience in public health, epidemiology, environmental management, social sciences and administration. Three representatives from the Nordic Council and the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission were also present.

The Baltic area faces serious environment and health problems. In several countries, a weak economy and the absence of democracy has led to the depletion, exploitation and misuse of natural resources to a degree that has had serious effects on the population's health.

The European Charter provides an appropriate basis for intensified collaboration among the Baltic countries, to tackle existing problems and progressively enhance the quality of the environment in the interests of people's health.

Following the presentation of country statements that reviewed the main issues and identified the principal problems and means of solving them, the participants discussed potential areas for mutually advantageous collaboration. They then developed practical conclusions and recommendations for implementation, embracing policies, infrastructures, scientific and technical cooperation, training and information exchange.

Conclusions and recommendations

Policy issues

1. External support is urgently needed to reduce environmental hazards that are prejudicial to human health in several countries of the Baltic region.
2. The principles and strategies of the European Charter on Environment and Health provide an appropriate framework for action. Preventing unacceptable environmental conditions should be the preferred option, but in many instances unsatisfactory conditions already exist and these require urgent remedial action.

3. Intersectoral cooperation must be encouraged especially between authorities responsible for human health and the environment. At the local level, this may be more easily achieved, but inadequate interaction between sectors at any level can seriously impede progress.
4. Effective environment and health management necessarily involves the active involvement of many governmental agencies, at central, provincial and local levels, together with the private sector and a wide range of nongovernmental organizations. Intersectoral action is essential. No single model can be proposed that will be appropriate for all the countries of the region: each country will need to develop its own mechanisms within its overall administrative and legislative structure. Nevertheless, certain models have been found to be inappropriate and lessons can be learned from the past and from bad experience elsewhere.
5. Each sector must be responsible for the aspects of environmental health that relate to its own activities and should be accountable for its actions. Nevertheless, one authority should have overall responsibility for protecting health from environmental conditions, with an obligation to coordinate the activities of all the sectors involved.
6. Environmental health policies must be supported by appropriate and effective legislation. Collaboration is needed to develop frame laws and, in view of increasing international trade, these should be harmonized and made compatible among the countries of the region.
7. Necessary preventive or control actions cannot always await conclusive evidence of damage to health. Appropriate risk assessment procedures must be built into environment and health policies.
8. The Charter stresses the principle of community participation in decision making and action at the local level. Governments should therefore be encouraged to enable local communities to take appropriate and effective action to reduce environmental health hazards. Some issues, nevertheless, require international cooperation. In many cases collaboration among the countries of the Baltic region could help them arrive at common solutions to shared problems.
9. The public must be helped to gain a more realistic understanding of environmental risks. The media have an important part to play in this process.
10. The countries of the Baltic region need to strengthen their environment and health databases, and this will help them develop appropriate health indicators. "Concern for Europe's Tomorrow", a short-term programme of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, will be of help: it is expected to culminate in 1993 in a comprehensive report on environment and health status and trends throughout the European Region. This report is being put together in close collaboration with other European work to collect data on the state of the environment, including the follow-up to the Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" at Dobris Castle, Czechoslovakia, in July 1991.
11. Each country should develop its own strategy and structural base for the implementation of the European Charter on Environment and Health. Information on such developments should be forwarded to the Regional Office for the benefit of other countries.

12. As to administrative structures for environment and health management, the participants endorsed the principles laid down in the report of the Working Group on the implementation of the Charter that met in Düsseldorf in 1990.

13. Countries that used to have centralized economic systems need widespread reforms of their management and control structures in the interests of environment and health protection. The retraining of managers and staff should facilitate the delegation and definition of responsibilities in all areas and at all levels.

Prevention and control strategies

14. It must be accepted that, with limited resources, not all problems can be addressed simultaneously. Priorities for actions to improve environmental conditions must therefore be set systematically at all levels.

15. Land-use planning is a key element of environmental health management.

16. Environmental impact assessment, including its health dimensions, is an important procedure to predict the effects of new developments.

17. In view of the magnitude and complexity of environment and health problems, the prevention and control of potential hazards are increasingly being recognized as an essential part of the production process. The role of control agencies inevitably changes when internal environment and health management procedures are adopted. External control will, however, continue to be a necessary element of overall environmental health management.

18. Environmental audit is an important tool for pinpointing shortcomings and assessing the effectiveness of environmental health management within industrial plants and other enterprises.

19. Especially in the countries of the Baltic, administrators and professionals at all levels need multidisciplinary training to improve decentralized decision-making and facilitate their interaction with population groups and the media.

20. Governments should study recent developments in the use of economic incentives as tools for the improvement of environment and health conditions. The Regional Office has done valuable work in this field.

21. The countries of the Baltic region are at present facing many and complex problems of environmental degradation. They should, as a first step, look at the possibility of making short-term and low-cost technological improvements to production plants and municipal services. At their present stage of development, relatively small investments may bring high returns in improvements to the environment and health. When more thorough modernization is undertaken, it should take into account the use of clean technologies.

22. Success stories, including those involving bilateral or multilateral cooperation, should be shared among those countries of the Baltic region experiencing similar problems in environment and health management.

23. The important issue of transfrontier pollution has led to the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area. These are important instruments for environmental management, but more emphasis needs to be placed on the effects on human health of both air and water pollution in the countries of the Baltic region. The organizations involved should urgently address this issue in collaboration with the Regional Office.

24. The participants welcomed the work of the Regional Office on the contingency planning of national and community action for all types of emergency in nuclear power production and noted that a detailed draft plan was being submitted to the health administrations of the countries of the Baltic region. They considered the management of high-level nuclear wastes to be an important issue for the countries of the region.

Research, surveillance and assessment

25. In many instances immediate remedial action can be taken on the basis of existing knowledge about the health hazards of environmental exposures and conditions. In other instances, however, further research is urgently required. Research is necessary to set priorities for cost-effective action on environmental health problems. The lack of well trained personnel in the environmental health area to carry out relevant research is a serious limitation in several countries.

26. Although research must continue to be directed at a wide range of environmental health problems in the region, such studies should not impede the progress of urgently required prevention and control actions.

Epidemiological studies should be initiated on the environmental component in cancer, respiratory diseases, allergies, cardiovascular diseases, reproductive outcomes and child health. Epidemiological studies should be directed particularly towards sensitive and high-risk groups.

Collaboration in the field of environmental health research should be encouraged. The Regional Office should explore ways of setting up an inventory of planned and existing international cooperative research programmes in the region.

27. Epidemiological surveillance is necessary to enable conclusions to be drawn about important health outcomes such as mortality, cancer and birth defects. Health-related surveillance of the environment is necessary to enable health risks to be evaluated: their magnitude, regional differences, time trends and the effects of mitigation measures.

28. Comprehensive overviews must be made of the environmental situation as it is currently known, based on sources, emissions, pollutant levels and environmental effects. Procedures for health-related surveillance of the environment must be initiated and maintained. The possibility of developing new national/regional registries for cancer, mortality, birth defects, food- and waterborne infections and accidents should be explored in areas lacking such registries. Data input and output systems from such registries should be standardized. Quality assurance should be inherent in all environmental surveillance programmes. Methodology must be harmonized on an international level to attain a high quality in the surveillance programmes. National/regional networks should be set up for data collection and dissemination.

The WHO European Centre for Environment and Health should continue to explore the feasibility of using geographical information systems as a tool for environment and health management in the Baltic countries, in close collaboration with the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission.

29. Health-based risk assessment is a necessary foundation for remedial and preventive action. Health-risk assessment should integrate all known data on exposure and health effects and should, wherever possible, be quantitative, stating the inherent uncertainties. The biological rationale for quantitative health-risk assessments should be specified.

30. Training programmes need to be developed in both health-risk assessment methodology and environmental health impact assessment. The countries in the western part of the Baltic region are encouraged to take a major role in developing such training programmes and making them available to the other countries in the region. Where appropriate, the health-risk assessment methodology should be harmonized so that it can be applied throughout the region. Networks to exchange information on assessment principles and practices should be developed among the Baltic countries.

Priorities for the newly democratized countries of the Baltic region

31. During the workshop, the participants from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the St Petersburg region of the Russian Republic agreed on a number of general priorities and these were later supplemented by written submissions from the countries concerned. A summary of their overall priorities is given below.

32. Guidance should be available on the standardization of monitoring methodology and the optimization of surveillance networks, so that a more precise evaluation can be made of the relationship between environmental conditions and health status, as a basis for decision-making and for any necessary further research. The countries named would welcome assistance from other Baltic countries and from the international community. These efforts should be coordinated by the Regional Office, including the development of multi-country collaboration in environment and health surveillance. This work has high priority in the Regional Office's "Concern for Europe's Tomorrow" programme.

33. Special priority should be given to improving knowledge of the effects of environmental conditions on vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women and children, as a basis for any necessary remedial measures. The Regional Office should coordinate any necessary research.

34. Technical and financial support is urgently required to improve facilities for the study of the health effects of environmental factors.

35. Detailed advice is needed on the application of environmental impact assessment, including its health components, at policy, programme and project levels, with the cooperation and support of other Baltic countries.

36. Guidance is needed on alternative measures for mitigating environmental pollution of concern to human health and wellbeing, including both technical solutions and those using economic incentives. The pulp and paper industry was singled out as being of particular importance.

37. Studies on the so-called liquidators (who decontaminated and cleaned up the Chernobyl power plant in the aftermath of the nuclear accident) are urgently required, together with medical help and counselling for those concerned.

38. Assistance is required to classify occupational diseases and resolve specific work-related problems.

39. Following the recent fundamental political changes, educating the general public and special interest groups is an important priority that will require international assistance.

40. Training personnel in many disciplines and at all levels in the various aspects of environmental health is of utmost importance. In particular, they need to learn about the application of good practice in both the public and private sectors, focusing on such questions as decentralized decision-making, internal quality control and environmental auditing. Politicians, administrators and professionals need multidisciplinary courses in the field of management, intersectoral cooperation, environmental impact assessment and health-risk assessment and in communication skills. Assistance is required both for the organization of courses and for the provision of fellowships for study abroad.

41. The European Charter on Environment and Health forms an appropriate basis for action. Help from the Regional Office and from other countries is required to convey its message to all levels of governmental agencies at central, provincial and local level, to the private sector, to a wide range of nongovernmental bodies and to the general public.