

*Environmental Health*

*Europe*

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# HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT :

*Report 1983*

*a.*

REPORT ON A  
CONSULTATION  
COPENHAGEN  
29-30 March 1983



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
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## I. Introduction

The scope and purpose of the Consultation is given in Annex I and the list of participants in Annex II. Professor A. Lafontaine was elected as Chairman and Mr W. Lewis as rapporteur. Following a brief introduction in which the Secretary reviewed the background to the Consultation, the Agenda was adopted (Annex III).

The principal questions which needed to be addressed by the meeting were identified as:

- what is the present status and what are the trends in environmental health in the European Region, both as regards research and management?
- acknowledging that environmental health services are fragmented, are they adequately coordinated, both in research and management?
- how are potential risks assessed and what part does such a process actually play in national decision-making?
- is there need for a more systematized methodology in risk assessment?
- what should be the future role of the WHO Regional Office for Europe in relation to environmental health?

It was agreed that an immediate objective of the Consultation was to provide EURO with advice on the feasibility and desirability of organizing a Conference on Health and the Environment, which would be attended on a multisectoral basis by director-generals of relevant departments of governments or their equivalents.

## II. Discussion

At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr Waddington described the environmental health programme of the Regional Office for Europe in the context of preventative care and risk reduction. The sectoral approaches to water supply and sanitation, pollution control, food hygiene, chemical safety and occupational health had all been developed to a major extent in most European countries, but there was now an increasing need for a more coordinated approach, taking fully into account the multisectoral nature of the environmental health problems faced by an industrialized society. The subject could not be separated from other aspects of socio-economic development, nor from factors of personal lifestyle.

Whereas the major thrust of many environmental programmes during the last twenty years had been towards protection of the natural environment and of flora and fauna, there has been a growing realization that human health consideration must be regarded as central.

The timing of the Consultation was considered to be particularly appropriate, as many countries within the European Region were reconsidering their approach to environmental research and management and there was a rising tide of concern among the population, particularly in relation to the effects on human health of new factors in the occupational and general environment.

During the ensuing discussion particular emphasis was placed on the following points:

- (a) There was a need to increase public trust in the decision-making process and to encourage informed awareness of the issues involved, so as to counterbalance the sensationalism and distorted priorities of the less responsible media.
- (b) There was a need for improved coordination among governmental bodies concerned with different aspects of environmental health in view of the multisectoral nature of the subject and its interdisciplinary implications. Fragmentation of responsibilities was considered to be counter-productive to the optimal use of resources; the lack of clear overall objectives in the multiplicity of environmental monitoring programmes was cited as an example.
- (c) Changing technology, such as the introduction and likely proliferation of biotechnology, required a thorough understanding of the potential health impacts on society. Such information must be gathered in time for its utilization as an important component of national policy formulation and decision-making.
- (d) Environmental pathways leading to man need to be much better understood: the accumulation of PCBs and other organochlorine compounds in human milk was given as an example, where the health significance was at present far from clear.

- (e) The process of risk evaluation was considered to be in an embryonic stage and was in many cases unsatisfactory, even though it frequently resulted in decisions involving substantial distortions to socio-economic development.
- (f) The degree to which man can remain adaptable to a wide range of environmental insults is not fully understood and genotoxic effects must receive increasing attention.
- (g) Environmental health can no longer be considered a purely national concern as many issues involve transfrontier aspects such as food safety, air and water pollution, disposal of hazardous wastes and the migration of populations for either work or leisure.
- (h) Indoor climate must be regarded as an important subject for study in view of increased emphasis on energy saving and the wide range of potentially harmful products which can be utilized in building construction and fittings.
- (i) Personal lifestyle was thought to have considerable interrelationship with environmental health factors, but doubts were expressed by a number of participants at the extent to which some of these could be changed, whereas there was a clear societal responsibility to reduce the risk of adverse factors in the environment beyond the control of the individual.
- (j) The coordination of existing information systems relating to many aspects of environmental health, e.g. contingency planning for emergencies, needs to be strengthened, at both national and international levels.
- (k) The four elements determining the health of man as proposed by Lalonde, i.e. health care system, environment, lifestyle and biological factors, need to be reviewed in order to reassess the relative importance of the environmental health related components in such a system.
- (l) There is a need to promote more systematic accumulation and evaluation of morbidity and mortality data in relation to occupational and other environmental risks.

### III. Recommendations

1. The Consultation recommended that a multilingual working group be convened towards the end of 1983 to review the following topics:
  - (a) Current status of environmental health in the European Region;
  - (b) Future trends in environmental health in Europe and international collaboration in promotion of solutions of environmental health problems;
  - (c) Current strategies in environmental health, particularly relating to the decision-making and management processes involved in complex environmental issues;
  - (d) Current status of assessment and evaluation of environmental health risks, including basic approaches, concepts and methodology of risk assessment;
  - (e) Priority-setting (including social, psychological and economic considerations) in relation to environmental health risks;
  - (f) Development of multisectoral policies and interdisciplinary research and management, with suitable mechanisms for coordination.
2. As working papers for this meeting, it was proposed that the following be prepared:
  - (i) Current status of environmental health in the European Region;
  - (ii) Future trends in environmental health in the European Region;
  - (iii) Methods employed in priority setting relating to environmental health and their limitations;
  - (iv) Limits and constraints of existing methods of health risk assessment, e.g. problems associated with dose/response relationship, of extrapolating animal data to man and of relating high animal dose to low human dose;
  - (v) Multisectoral policy and interdisciplinary research and management approaches to environmental health problems.

It was suggested that the authors responsible for papers (i) and (ii) should have the opportunity of studying problems and priorities in the various parts of the Region, at an early preparatory stage of their work.

It was recommended that the participants of the working group should represent various sectors both within and outside government and should also include a broad spectrum of professional disciplines.

3. The Consultation advised that it was not at present opportune for EURO to organize a conference to be attended by senior level representatives of the different sectors of government dealing with the subject. A decision as to whether to proceed with such a conference should be deferred until after the Vienna working group.

4. In reviewing the status and trends of environmental health within the European Region, the Consultation concluded that EURO had an important task in providing guidance to governments and coordinating international efforts, particularly in relation to discussion points (a) to (1) in Section II of this report.

5. Finally, the Consultation strongly favoured the setting up of a multisectoral forum to advise the Regional Director/Regional Committee of trends and priorities within environmental health. The forum should meet at least once a year. It could come to be regarded as an important mechanism for guidance to European governments.

Annex I

SCOPE AND PURPOSE

A preparatory and exploratory meeting to identify and clarify the state of the art in environmental health, the trends which have developed since 1977 in socioeconomic, scientific/technical, administrative and legislative terms and to advise WHO on the scope and purpose of a proposed working group to be held in late 1983.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe naturally places special emphasis on the problems of human health and well-being in an industrialized society. As a consequence, a major element of its programme concerns the impact of the changing environment on man, including such factors as chemical safety, occupational health, pollution of air and water, radiation protection and public health aspects of housing.

It is proposed to hold a European working group to be attended by senior decision-makers concerned with the management of environmental risks and related research, in October 1983 in Vienna. This will provide guidance to WHO and the Member States in planning for future action. The working group might well be followed by a European Conference to be held in 1984/85 which it is envisaged will be attended at Director-General or equivalent level within governments.

Successful environmental management in relation to the protection of man from adverse effects of development is essentially a multi-disciplinary task involving many fields of endeavour. It is essential that available resources should be deployed in an optimal way and this requires effective coordination. Particularly in the present economic climate, it is important that priorities are clearly identified so that limited funds may be utilized in the most effective manner. Present shortcomings in coordination and decision-making processes at all levels will be reviewed by the working group.

The whole pace of technological change has accelerated to the point where it is necessary to take a prospective view so that the potential environmental health effects of new developments can be anticipated. The ramifications of this on governmental decision-making will also be reviewed.

Annex II

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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Invited, but unable to attend

Dr Ben Hassine, Algeria  
Dr Stanley Johnson, United Kingdom  
Dr Martin Holdgate, United Kingdom

Annex III

AGENDA

1. Trends in environmental health research and management in Europe
2. Administration and coordination of environmental health research and management in Europe
3. The role of WHO Regional Office for Europe in relation to environmental health
4. Agenda and arrangements for working group on environment and health to be held in Vienna, late 1983.

Annex IV

LIST OF BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

1. European Regional Programme on Chemical Safety, Draft Progress Report (July 1981 - December 1982)
2. Human Ecology and Health, Report of a WHO Working Group, Mexico, February 1982 (MNH/82.10)
3. Health for All Target Setting Group on Reduced Risks, Report, Copenhagen, September 1982 (ICP/GPD 003(10))
4. Planning Consultation on Organohalogen Compounds in Human Milk and Related Health Hazards, Report, Copenhagen, November 1982 (ICP/RCE 903(23) Rev.1)
5. WHO Regional Office for Europe - Internal Structure
6. Health Aspects of Chemical Safety, Interim Document 3, Progress Report, July 1981
7. Regional Strategy for Attaining Health for All by the Year 2000 (EUR/RC30/8 Rev.1)
8. Health and the Environment (Public Health in Europe 8)
9. Food Safety Services (Public Health in Europe 14)
10. Annual Report of the Regional Director, 1981
11. Report of a Consultation on the Programme in Environmental Pollution Control, Vienna, September 1977 (ICP/PPE 002)
12. Summary Report of a Working Group on Health Implications of Biotechnology, Dublin, 9-12 November 1982 (ICP/RCE 602(1)(S))