



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE  
COPENHAGEN

53 223

EUR/ICP/CEH 255(S)  
13214  
Original: English  
EUR/HFA target 19  
22 November 1994

# Planning Meeting on the WHO Global Environmental Epidemiology Network in Europe (GEENET-Euro)

Summary Report on a WHO Meeting

Bilthoven, Netherlands, 20 April 1994

## ABSTRACT

To improve communication between environmental epidemiologists in Europe, the activities of the WHO Global Environmental Epidemiology Network (GEENET) will be expanded in a special project partly supported by a programme funded by CEC. A one-day meeting organized by the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health discussed the structure, organization and management of the project, to be known as GEENET-Euro. It should be a network of national networks, with the countries of central and eastern Europe the main focus of its work. The network should become operational by the end of 1994. Preliminary discussions on operational aspects and the content of the work are to be concluded at the next meeting with a wider representation of member countries.

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**TARGET 19**

**ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT**

*By the year 2000, there should be effective management systems and resources in all Member States for putting policies on environment and health into practice.*

**Keywords**

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH  
EPIDEMIOLOGY  
ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION  
EUROPE

## Introduction

The development and strengthening of environmental epidemiology is an important factor in evaluating the impact on health of environmental pollution, and for the appropriate definition of prevention strategies. The WHO Global Environmental Epidemiology Network (GEENET) was established in 1987 as a means of strengthening education, training and research on the health effects of environmental hazards. Among its more than 1700 participants registered in May 1992, 393 were from Europe, but only 63 of these were from the countries of central and eastern Europe. The need for further strengthening the discipline in Europe, and in eastern Europe in particular, calls for an intensification of action in the Region.

The meeting, organized by the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health (ECEH) discussed the structure, organization and management of the European environmental epidemiology network (GEENET-Euro). The participants agreed on a strategy, timetable and plan of activities for implementing the network, to be carried out by ECEH together with the collaborating members of GEENET in Europe.

The work is expected to be partially supported by a programme funded by the European Commission (CEC) and directed at strengthening co-operation in science and technology with the countries of central and eastern Europe. In that programme the following countries were considered: Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The implementation of the project is to be coordinated by the Dutch National Institute of Public Health and Environmental Protection (RIVM) in Bilthoven, in close cooperation with ECEH. The present meeting included the project proposers as well as representatives of GEENET and ECEH. Dr Erik Leuret chaired the meeting, and Dr Carlos Dora acted as Rapporteur.

## Conclusions and recommendations on the structure and implementation of GEENET-Euro

GEENET-Euro should be a network of networks. A national network of environmental epidemiology should be developed within each of the participating countries. The national networks would be linked to the European network, and through it to the existing GEENET. The structure should facilitate links within the country and at regional and global levels. However, the extent and scope of information can be specific for national or regional levels only (for example, part of the information can be in the national language).

National networks should be based on a focal point. The selection criteria agreed on were that the person should be:

- active in environmental health policy and/or research;
- able to speak English;
- motivated and willing to develop a national network; and
- employed by a national institution of good repute providing access to the necessary facilities (such as photocopier, post, fax and telephone, and with the potential for electronic mail) and committed to the network's activity.

The focal point would facilitate the implementation of the network in the country (including the creation of information exchange and translation of selected materials) and would participate in the regional meetings of focal points. Within the first year of the project, the focal points should present a list of national network members and an overview of current national needs and activities in environmental epidemiology, such as training and research.

The regional management of the network would be assured by an administrative assistant employed part time in Bilthoven under a grant from CEC.

An advisory board would oversee and guide the activities of the national focal points and of the administrator, and decide how to spend the funds provided by the CEC project. The advisory board would be formed by the CEC project proposers and a representative of GEENET. To limit management expenses, executive members of the advisory board would coordinate the daily activities of the project. They would also take executive action unless expenditure exceeded 10 000 ECU, when the agreement of the advisory board would be necessary. Dr Erik Leuret, coordinator of the CEC project, and Dr Michal Krzyzanowski would act as executive members of the advisory board.

The following schedule of activities was agreed on.

1. Preparation of questionnaire to identify focal points.
2. Signature of contract with CEC.
3. Sending out of questionnaires to identify potential focal points.
4. Selection of focal points by the advisory board (by 15 October 1994).
5. Meeting of advisory board and focal points to define detailed activities and action plan (November 1994).

## **Content and operational aspects of the network**

The content and operational aspects of the network were discussed and are listed below. A comprehensive discussion on these and other aspects of the network would be taken up by a wider representation of the network participants at the meeting planned for November 1994.

### *General aspects*

1. The following types of activity should be undertaken by the network:
  - facilitation of collaboration in etiological studies, health risk assessment, evaluation of interventions and policy analysis;
  - identification of funding opportunities, particularly western European sources available for work in eastern Europe;
  - promotion of the use of standard protocols and research methods to ensure appropriate quality and to facilitate comparison of the results.
2. The target population of the network should include professionals working on health and environmental issues in etiological research, health risk assessment, surveillance, policy-making and government. The network should liaise directly with middle-level professionals and not only with heads of institutions.
3. Most project funds should go to the countries of central and eastern Europe and support network activities; spending on the advisory board should be kept to a minimum. Supporting attendance at conferences was thought to be an inappropriate use of the project's limited resources as it would benefit only a few individuals and the outcomes were uncertain.
4. The implementation of national networks in Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia could be supported through the CEC project. Financial support for networks in other countries had to be identified. Additional funds should be sought to extend the network for other countries, especially the republics of the former Soviet Union.

### *Operational aspects*

1. Individual participation in the network should be confirmed every 12 months, in order to check for use and changes of address.
2. The impact of the project should be assessed. Methods of evaluation should be specified at the meeting in November 1994.
3. Selected focal points should initially be appointed for one year, at which time performance should be assessed.
4. There would be a need to ensure that the information in the network was circulated speedily by the focal point, especially regarding such matters as deadlines for research funding applications.
5. Information could be made available through electronic mail to those participating in the network. This would make it possible for questions to be put by users of the network and responded to by other users. This open communication could allow other network users to comment on the responses given and constitute a kind of "peer review". RIVM would be exploring this possibility. The use of electronic mail should be included as part of training in environmental epidemiology.
6. GEENET-Euro should project a clear image and be visible.

### *Content of the network's work*

1. The network could develop and maintain a "Who's who of environmental epidemiology", i.e. an inventory of experts together with their areas of expertise and experience.
2. Information produced and circulated in the network should include inventories of training courses, teachers and teaching materials, library sources, ongoing etiological research, health risk assessment studies, abstracts of recent work that has not necessarily been peer reviewed, and experts and their respective experience.
3. The European network would, by design, promote GEENET activities in the Region and would benefit from regular GEENET activities.