



World Health  
Organization



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Environment Programme

## First Inter-Ministerial Conference on Health and Conference in Africa Health Security through Healthy Environments

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Cité de la Démocratie, Libreville, Gabon, 26–29 August 2008

### Background Document

#### 1. Introduction

The environment is one of the primary determinants of individual and community health, and exposure to physical, chemical and biological risk factors in the environment can harm human health in various ways.

Africa carries a hugely disproportionate disease burden compared to the rest of the world. It is estimated that the global burden of disease (GBD), measured by the loss of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) per 1000 persons, is heaviest in the sub-Saharan African region, with 538 DALYs, versus Latin-America and Caribbean's 190, Asia's 387, and the Eastern Mediterranean's 277. The most developed regions have an average of 127 DALYs per 1000 persons.

The African continent is rich in natural resources and has a potentially strong human resource base to sustain flourishing economies. Yet the continent's natural wealth is being seriously undermined by over-exploitation, pollution and mismanagement, resulting in serious ecosystem degradation. Government structures mostly lack the resources to enforce regulatory measures to prevent unsustainable practices. Furthermore, the human resource base in Africa is seriously undermined by ill-health and poverty, which further fuels environmental degradation; to meet their immediate basic needs poor communities can exploit the natural resources available to them unsustainably.

There is great concern over ecosystem degradation and the loss of biological diversity it entails, and Africa's poor ability to deal with the impacts of rapid local and global change.

While Africa possesses the potential for sustainable development, its realization hinges in great part on a deliberate effort to address the crucial environmental and health problems that are hindering the continent's socio-economic advancement.

Africa is currently off-track on most of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including those related to health and the environment. In 2004, the coverage of safe

drinking water and safe sanitation was 56% and 37% of the population respectively, and only 1 out of every 5 children slept under a treated mosquito net in 2005. The high burden of respiratory, diarrhoeal, and parasitic diseases affecting vulnerable groups in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. children, women, and men earning their livelihoods from agriculture) can be attributed to environmental determinants.

Africa continues to face the “traditional” challenges of poor access to safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation; absent or poorly designed irrigation and water storage systems; and inadequate and poorly constructed road infrastructure, housing and waste disposal systems. Yet the continent must now also deal with new and emerging challenges, including the effects on health of climate change, accelerated urbanization and air pollution.

Increasingly, African Governments are becoming motivated to improve environmental conditions in order to protect the health and wellbeing of their populations.

Ministries of health have a relatively long history, usually dating back to colonial times, while ministries of environment have been formed more recently as a result of emerging environmental concerns. The ministries are mandated to deal with the two distinct, but related areas, and may or may not have formal or informal links.

In an effort to catalyze these linkages, the WHO and the UNEP in partnership with the Government of Gabon are organizing the first-ever **Inter-ministerial Conference for Health and Environment in Africa** in Libreville, Gabon, from 26–29 August 2008. The Conference is about unleashing the power of synergy between the health and environment sectors.

In addressing health and environment issues shared by the two sectors, these issues will be considered from the perspective of their concrete contribution to national development goals as defined by the African Ministerial Conference on Environment (AMCEN), the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), country poverty-reduction strategies, and other processes, and translated from the global MDGs.

## **2. Objectives**

The Conference will explore the evidence base for the bi-directional links between health and environment. It intends to succeed in building a strategic health and environment alliance that will influence development policies at the macro-economic and sectoral levels, impact on existing investment frameworks and resource allocation criteria and procedures, and lead to tangible outcomes in the short to medium terms.

### **2.1. General objective**

The general objective of the conference is to secure political commitment for catalyzing the policy, institutional and investment changes required to reduce environmental threats to health, in support of sustainable development.

## **2.2. Specific objectives**

The specific objectives of the conference are

- a) To demonstrate the importance of recognizing the inter-linkages between the environment and health to achieving sustainable development.
- b) To promote an integrated approach to policy making in the health and environment sectors that values the services that ecosystems provide to human health.
- c) To agree on specific actions required to leverage the needed changes in institutional arrangements and investment frameworks for mitigating environmental threats to human health.

## **2.3. Expected outcomes**

The most important outcome of this first Conference will be the creation of an enhanced awareness among ministers of health and environment of the mutual relevance of each other's policies, strategies and programmes. Ministers of health will gain a better appreciation how assessment and management of environmental risks to health can contribute towards reducing disease burdens and impart sustainability and resilience to already achieved health advances. Ministers of environment will gain a better grasp of how improved community health can contribute to an improved state of the environment, more sustainable use of natural resources and increased support for environmental issues (as a determinant of health) from other sectors.

The specific outcomes of the conference are expected to be as follows:

- a) The inter-linkages between environment and health, and their importance for sustainable development, are better understood by ministers of health and ministers of environment.
- b) An integrated approach to policy making that values the services that ecosystems provide to human health is adopted.
- c) The actions required to leverage the necessary changes in institutional arrangements and investment frameworks to reduce environmental threats to human health and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals are identified.
- d) A declaration, "The Libreville Declaration", and Action Plan are adopted.

## **3. Structure of the conference and method of work**

A two-and-a-half-day scientific and technical conference will take place to discuss the scientific evidence and programmatic issues. The conference will be structured around two main themes: "Environmental threats to human health in Africa: evidence base and health impacts" and "Existing mechanisms and opportunities to address health and environmental challenges". Under each of these themes a number of topics will be addressed based on technical papers prepared by experts and sent to country delegations before the conference. Each of the main themes will form the subject for a keynote presentation by an internationally recognized personality during the conference. The outcomes of the discussions will be summarized and presented to the ministers.

Immediately following the scientific conference a one-and-a-half-day ministerial conference will review the report of the scientific conference and agree on a draft declaration (The “Libreville Declaration”) and Action Plan. These will be submitted to the African Union of Heads of States Summit for consideration and adoption at one of its forthcoming sessions.

#### **4. Languages**

The conference will be held in English and French with simultaneous interpretation.

#### **5. Participants**

The following groups of participants will be invited: country delegations, scientific experts, partners and special guests.

- a) *Country delegations.* A standard country delegation will be composed of the minister of environment, the minister of health, an expert from the ministry of environment and an expert from the ministry of health. Countries may bring additional participants provided they inform the conference secretariat well in advance.
- b) *Scientific experts.* A number of international experts will be invited to give keynote speeches on specific themes of interest for the conference.
- c) *Partners.* These will include the UN agencies UNIDO, UNDP, FAO, WMO, UN-Habitat, UNECA, WFP, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, UNIFEM and UNFPA; secretariats of binding and non-binding conventions (Stockholm, Basel, Rotterdam, UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD, SAICM, and Bamako Conventions); development banks (AfDB, World Bank); and relevant nongovernmental organizations.
- d) *Special guests.* High-profile individuals involved in the protection of the environment will be invited to share their vision for the future.

#### **6. Follow-up actions:**

##### *Within 6 months*

- The Declaration resulting from the conference as well as an Action Plan will be submitted to an African Union Heads of States Summit for adoption. *Within 6–12 months*
- WHO, UNEP and partners will provide technical support to governments to initiate the implementation of the principles of the Declaration and Action Plan.
- WHO, UNEP and partners will initiate resource mobilization for the implementation of the Action Plan.

##### *Beyond one year*

- WHO, UNEP and other partners will continue to provide technical support to governments to implement the principles of the Declaration and the Action Plan.
- Progress and achievements will be assessed in each participating country.
- A second inter-ministerial meeting will be organized to review achievements and plan the way forward.

## **7. Provisional Agenda**

### *Technical Segment*

1. Opening of the session
  - i. Welcoming and introductory remarks by official of the Government of Gabon
  - ii. Remarks by the Regional Director, UNEP Regional Office for Africa
  - iii. Remarks by the Regional Director, WHO Regional Office for Africa
  - iv. Welcoming remarks and official opening statement (Minister to be identified)
2. Organization of the session
  - i. Election of officers
  - ii. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work
3. Keynote presentations
  - i. Environmental threats to human health in Africa: evidence base and health impacts
  - ii. Existing mechanisms and opportunities to address health and environmental challenges
4. Key thematic issues in health and environment linkages
  - i. Traditional and current environmental risks to human health
  - ii. Economic and Development Dimensions of Environmental Risk Factors to Human Health
  - iii. Contribution of Ecosystems Services to Human Health and Wellbeing
  - iv. Policy frameworks for Addressing Health and Environmental Challenges
  - v. Tools and Approaches for Policy Making in Environmental Management and Public Health
  - vi. New and Emerging Environmental Threats to Human Health
  - vii. International Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks
  - viii. Health Impact Assessment
5. Prospects for action (addressing the obstacles and challenges, gaps in policies, institutions and investments)
  - i. National policy, institutional and investment frameworks and capacities
  - ii. National programmes and implementation modalities
  - iii. Effectiveness of international agreements & investment policies
  - iv. Governance
  - v. Stakeholder engagement and participation (individuals, communities, municipalities, civil society, private sector and other economic sectors)
  - vi. Advocacy and social mobilisation
6. Draft Declaration and Plan of Action
7. Other matters
8. Summary of discussions and main recommendations of the meeting
9. Closure of the meeting

*Ministerial Segment*

1. Opening of the high-level ministerial session
  - i. Welcoming and introductory remarks by (Official of Government of Gabon)
  - ii. Message by the United Nations Secretary-General
  - iii. Statement by Dr. Margaret Chan, Director-General, WHO
  - iv. Statement by Mr. Achim Steiner, Executive Director, UNEP
  - v. Address by the President of the Republic of Gabon
  
2. Organization of session
  - i. Election of officers
  - ii. Adoption of the agenda
  - iii. Organization of work
  
3. Keynote addresses
4. Review of the report of the meeting of health and environment experts
5. Review of the draft Declaration and Plan of Action
6. Other matters
7. Adoption of the Declaration and Plan of Action
8. Adoption of the report of the high-level ministerial session
9. Closure of session