



World Health  
Organization



République  
Gabonaise



United Nations  
Environment Programme

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

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### EXPECTED OUTCOME OF CONFERENCE

The Libreville Declaration aims to secure political commitment for catalyzing an integrated approach to policy and to obtain the institutional and investment changes required to reduce environmental threats to health. Using an evidence base for bi-directional links between health and environment, awareness about the value of establishing inter-linkages between health and environment ministries will be created and will result in future collaborative actions in support of sustainable development.

### ISSUES BRIEFING: Challenges and Solutions

#### Traditional and Current Environmental Risks to Human Health:

- **Problem:** Africa is a continent where traditional environmental risks factors to human health have not been resolved. This situation is compounded by other priorities such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and widespread poverty. Underlining reasons for this situation in most countries include inadequate or flawed policies, weak institutional capacities, shortage of resources and low general awareness of environmental-health linkages among policy makers and in the community.
- **Solution:** It is suggested that governments consider re-orienting their national policies to foster a greater contribution of environmental management towards public health. These actions include: national frameworks and mechanisms for inter-sectoral action, investment in infrastructure, building from past and current experiences, revitalizing expertise in the respective fields, and increasing communication and community education to raise awareness about impacts on the individual.

#### Economic and Development Dimensions of Environmental Risk Factors to Human Health:

- **Problem:** The goods and services provided by bio-diverse ecosystems, upon which particularly the poor may rely for a healthy livelihood, are not meaningfully taken into account in market-driven development processes. This leads to continued degradation of these natural resources, and negative health impacts. In addition, Africa's rapid urbanization and modernization have resulted in environmental and health risks that disproportionately affect the disadvantaged and vulnerable socioeconomic groups. Macroeconomic considerations tend to override sustainable environment and health policies.
- **Solution:** African countries need to be able to monitor, prevent, or mitigate risks that may develop into full-scale environmental and health crises by strengthening their national institutes of health and environment, to *inter alia* assess the impacts of development projects, and to ensure the integration of objectives related to health and the environment into national poverty reduction strategies and development plans.

#### Contribution of Ecosystems Services to Human Health and Well-being:

- **Problem:** One challenge to achieving the Millennium Development Goals is recognition of the inter-linkages between environment and human health and well-being. The unsustainable use of ecosystems in many parts of Africa is likely to cause serious and irreversible ecological change, depriving local populations of the foundations for their health and wellbeing. Some 60% of the world's vital ecosystem services are already degraded or under pressure, and the health impacts of this situation are already being felt, particularly among the world's poor and vulnerable populations.
- **Solution:** Solutions require political commitment, concerted action and shared responsibility between health and environment sectors and civil society. Countries should mitigate the underlying causes of ecosystem damage, while simultaneously improve human health, capacity building, dissemination of knowledge and good practices.

#### Policy Frameworks for Addressing Health and Environmental Challenges:

- **Problem:** Although there is growing recognition among policy makers in Africa of the close interrelation of health and environment, in many countries national health-sector policies have been developed separate from those on the environment. Planning and service delivery also takes place without deliberate integration.
- **Solution:** For more effective responses to the health and environment challenges facing the continent, governments in Africa should consider mainstreaming health and environment linkages into national development agendas, and develop the human capacity for assessment, regular monitoring, and evaluation process.

#### **Tools and Approaches for Policy Making in Environmental Management and Public Health:**

- **Problem:** Technologies for the management of environmental risks to human health have been developed. The successful application of such technology in most African countries revolves around access to relevant tools and the capacity to deliver vital evidence-based knowledge on environmental-health linkages. The translation of evidence into policies and programmes is also a complex issue compounded by the limited or ineffective legal and regulatory frameworks in Africa.
- **Solution:** It is proposed that governments integrate health and environmental impact considerations into economic development processes; support integrated policy assessment of the health and environment linkages using qualitative and quantitative valuation methodologies; define priorities based on such an assessment; identify knowledge gaps; refine normative health and environment standards and guidelines; support local applied research to build technical capacity; and strengthen cooperation among key actors to answer practical policy questions.

#### **New and Emerging Environmental Threats to Human Health:**

- **Problem:** While Africa continues to cope with traditional environmental risk factors to human health, the continent, in addition, now has to deal with new and emerging challenges in a context of already strained health systems. Emerging issues include persistent organic pollutants, electronic waste, radiation, new occupational risks, and climate change.
- **Solution:** Governments may wish to consider including in their policy agenda the monitoring of new and emerging environmental threats; reviewing their emergency preparedness plans to ensure that the management of new or emerging environmental risks factors has been adequately addressed; developing and implementing awareness-raising campaigns on the most important risks factors; and undertaking community sensitization and education.

#### **International Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks:**

- **Problem:** Over the past two decades, legislative and regulatory frameworks have been developed to address environment-health linkages. Though the extent to which these instruments have been streamlined within existing national legislation has not been formally documented, there are apparent weaknesses in the international and national regulatory mechanisms, implementation of such mechanisms, institutional and operational deficiencies, and lack of capacity to manage crises.
- **Solution:** The Revised International Health Regulations (2005), now being implemented in all African countries, provide a more cohesive approach to health and environmental risk management. Further work is needed in building awareness and understanding of these environmental agreements among country-level policy makers. In order to facilitate coordinated national implementation of conventions and international agreements that relate to health and the environment, governments may wish to consider establishing inter-sectoral mechanisms to monitor and to make policy proposals for the implementation of existing and future conventions and international agreements, and build their local capacity to raise awareness of these instruments.

#### **Health Impact Assessment (HIA)**

- **Problem:** Health impact assessment (HIA) provides an important decision-making tool through which health issues can be addressed upstream in development planning and design. HIA can assist in the determination of scope, assessment, appraisal, and formulation of management plans in the development of project implementation. While most African countries have a framework for environmental impact assessment (EIA), there is a lack of awareness of what HIA is and minimal capacity to apply it.
- **Solution:** The development of national HIA capacity building is the main means through which one can respond to these challenges. It is recommended that African health and environment ministries should consider establishing strategic alliances around issues of HIA, carry out needs assessment for HIA capacity building, analyse the current EIA policy and legal frameworks, and engage in the development of HIA capacity building packages by WHO and partners.

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