



World Health
Organization



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United Nations
Environment Programme

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

**WHO and UNEP Join Forces to Combat Environmentally-Related
Diseases in Africa**

**The First Inter-Ministerial Conference on Health and Environment kicks up next
week in Libreville, Gabon**

Brazzaville/Nairobi, 22 August 2008 - Diseases caused by changes in the environment accounts for a significant number of deaths in the African continent. In 2002 alone unsafe water, pollution, poor sanitation, inadequate waste disposal, insufficient disease vector control and exposure to chemicals claimed about 2.4 million lives. In a bid to address this challenge, the First Inter-Ministerial Conference on Health and Environment in Africa will be held in Libreville, Gabon, from 26-29th August 08 under the slogan “Health security through healthy environments”.

Jointly organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and hosted by the Government of Gabon, the conference is expected to attract hundreds of delegates including Health Ministers, Ministers of Environment, high-level experts, academics, policy makers, bilateral & multilateral institutions and NGOs.

The conference - the first of its kind in Africa - aims at securing political commitment for catalyzing an integrated approach to policy and at obtaining the institutional and investment changes required to reduce environmental threats to health.

It is estimated that the burden of disease is heaviest in the African region, and a quarter of this disease burden may be associated with environmental changes. High levels of air

pollution, both inside and outside, unsafe water supplies, inadequate sanitation and unhygienically prepared food are widespread in many parts of the continent. Emerging environmental risks such as ecosystem degradation and climate change pose a further threat to the health of communities in the region.

Dr Luis Sambo, Regional Director of the World Health Organisation for Africa said: “African countries share common ecosystems and the impact of the environment on health transcends national borders. Accelerated efforts are required to deal with the outbreak of diseases caused by changes in the environment. This conference is a step towards future collaborative efforts between the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and Ministries of Health and Environment to implement integrated activities that promote health and sustainable development.”

The Conference will explore the evidence base for the bi-directional links between health and environment. It intends to build 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.

Angela Cropper, UNEP’s Deputy Director said: ““While our knowledge has been increasing about how ecosystems and species and the quality of the environment relate to human health, there is a lag in concerted policy and action to address this relationship. Bringing together Ministers of Environment and Health in this Conference is an opportunity to lay the basis for doing so in and on behalf of the continent of Africa. We need to make sure that this partnership between WHO and UNEP endures and gets stronger, in order for the United Nations System to offer to Africa the quality of technical and policy support which will be needed.”

Note to editors

The four-day conference will involve a ministerial session preceded by a meeting of government experts.

Specific technical discussions will focus on issues such as: Economic and development dimensions of environmental risk factors to human health; Contribution of ecosystems services to human health and wellbeing; Health impact assessment; International legislative and regulatory frameworks; New and emerging environmental threats to human health; Policy frameworks for addressing health and environmental challenges; Tools and approaches for policy making in environmental management and public health and Traditional and current environmental risks to human health- (Background documents for the Conference are available on the conference website

<http://www.unep.org/health-env> or on the WHO AFRO, website:

<http://www.afro.who.int>

One of the major highlights of the conference will be the launch of the Health and Environment Linkages Initiative (HELI) synthesis report for Decision makers, on 28 August 2008. HELI is a joint WHO-UNEP initiative aimed at ensuring that environment and health considerations are given their proper weight in decisions, particularly in the context of economic development. (More information on HELI can be accessed on:

<http://www.who.int/heli/en/>)

Other side events will include the Communications Round Table (Media Panel), launch of the Poverty and Environment Partnership Report, an event on Children's health and environment in Africa: Responding to current and another one on emerging threats and International agreements and regulatory frameworks for chemicals and waste.

For more information about the conference, please contact:

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