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

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**Policy Frameworks for Addressing Health and Environmental
Challenges**

Executive Summary

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the Earth Summit, underscored the important inter-linkages that exist between the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development, all of which hinge on good health. The UN Millennium Development Goals also address the important environment–health linkages (Goals 4, 5 and 6), as does the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which is particularly related to the newly agreed Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM). The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD)’s Human Resources Development Initiative urges the integration of health and environment policies. In 2002, The WHO Regional Committee for Africa adopted *Resolution AFR/RC52/R3 on Health and Environment: A Strategy for the African Region*, which underlines the links between health, environment and development. Although there is growing recognition among policy makers in Africa of the close interrelation of health and the environment, in many countries national health-sector policies have been developed separate from those on environment. Planning and service delivery also takes place without deliberate integration. For more effective responses to the health and environment challenges facing the continent, governments in Africa must mainstream the health and environment linkages into national development agendas, and develop the human capacity for assessment, regular monitoring and evaluation of the process.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CEHA	Centre for Environmental Health Activities
EMRO	Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office, WHO
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NEHAP	National Environment and Health Action Plan
SAICM	Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management
WEHAB	Water, Energy, Health, Agriculture and Biodiversity, WSSD
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development

1. Background

1. Agenda 21 of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (the Earth Summit) laid down the foundations for a long-term international policy framework for the environment and sustainable development. Since then, the global push for sustainable development has intensified, resulting in international and national actions, and has cascaded into more specific sectoral policies and instruments.
2. The Rio conference itself resulted from earlier processes. Since 1987, major agreements on health and environment have been reached at more than 20 key international meetings. These meetings have identified several key health issues and challenges, with increasing focus on the need to improve the health of the poor and vulnerable. The meetings held during the last decade or so have also addressed important health and environment linkages and recommended actions ranging from phasing out ozone-depleting substances to addressing the growing threat of hazardous chemicals, wastes and persistent organic pollutants (POPs).
3. Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development underscores the important inter-linkages between the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development, all of which are underpinned by good health. Agenda 21 recognizes these linkages, as well as the complexities inherent in ecosystem dynamics and their interface with human health and livelihoods.
4. The Millennium Declaration that was adopted by the world community also addresses the environment–health linkages. Millennium Development Goal 4 on reducing childhood mortality, Goal 5 on improving maternal health, and Goal 6 on combating major diseases, can only be reached through improvements in environmental health. Water-related diseases such as diarrhoea and cholera kill an estimated 3 million people a year in developing countries, the majority of them children under the age of 5; and pollution and heavy physical exertion during pregnancy can make women less fit for childbirth and put them and their unborn children at greater risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. DFID/EC/UNDP/World Bank (2002) estimate that up to a quarter of the total burden of diseases in developing countries may be associated with environmental risk factors, and preventive environmental health measures are as important and sometimes more cost-effective than treatment.
5. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) has strong elements of environment–health linkages, particularly related to the newly agreed Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM). African countries have been active in coordinating country efforts towards SAICM implementation, and have agreed on regional priorities for health and environment to improve the management of chemicals in order to reach the WSSD goals. The Johannesburg Plan recognizes

the need for concerted efforts to integrate health and environment actions, thus providing a framework for policy development. It urges actions to address the causes of ill health, including environmental causes, and their impact on development, with particular emphasis on women and children. Chapter 6, section 54 calls for the strengthening of the capacity of health care systems to deliver basic health services to all in an efficient, accessible and affordable manner aimed at preventing, controlling and treating diseases, and for a reduction in environmental health threats.

6. In the Human Resources Development Initiative of NEPAD, in sub-section (iv) of the Environment Action Plan, the impact of the environment on health is expressly recognized under paragraph 128, which urges the need to treat health and environment as integral. The action plan explicitly recognizes policy interlinkages, the inter-relatedness of biophysical and anthropogenic factors, and their influences on human well-being, including health. Although implementing a multi-sectoral plan through existing sectoral structures at the national level can be challenging, it can open new opportunities for policy integration at the subregional and national levels.
7. In the area of biotechnology, the Biosafety Protocol serves as a supplementary agreement to the Convention on Biological Diversity for ensuring the safe handling and use of living modified organisms (WEHAB Working Group, 2002). Many African countries are parties to this protocol and are expected to contribute to its implementation.
8. In 2002, the WHO Regional Committee for Africa adopted *Resolution AFR/RC52/R3 on Health and Environment: A Strategy for the African Region*. The resolution stipulates that “the regional committee, aware of the intricate links between health, environment and development, concerned about the increasing poor quality of life and the negative health outcomes resulting from neglect and deterioration of the environment in the region...requests member states to *inter alia*, take into account in their national policies and strategies, health problems resulting from the environment.” Since then, countries have been moving ahead with the development of national policies for health and environment and related national strategic plans.
9. The design and application of sustainable policies that address the environment– health linkage require a sound understanding of the nature of the political, social and economic frameworks within which these policies and associated tools are to be applied. A case in point is the application of the so-called economic incentives (sometimes called market-based instruments), such as marketable permits to pollute or otherwise stress the environment, charged per unit of stress. Some of these market-based incentives, especially recommended in the wake of economic liberalization in Africa, have not always taken full account of the socio-economic contexts of African countries.

2. Issues and challenges

10. Policy makers in Africa need to match their appreciation of the linkages between health and environment with strategic responses to deal with environment-related health issues on the continent. A challenge to this action is the differential standing of environment and health in national development agendas. Whereas health is generally among the top 4 priority areas in national development strategies, environment remains much lower. As a result of this disparity, any progress made in improving the health of the population is eroded by the impact of environmental-related diseases. Furthermore, the non-existence or ineffective application of policy tools that deal with environmental health issues exacerbates the situation.
11. In urban and rural areas of Africa with high infant mortality the principal interventions ought to be the provision of safe water, sanitation, food security and basic primary health care. This points to the vital importance of inter-linkage among ministries during the planning and policy-making stages, as well as in service delivery.
12. The extent to which national policies in African countries have been translated into comprehensive national action plans is still unclear. Furthermore the health policy formulation process has mainly evolved within ministries of health, with little or no substantive inputs from environment ministries. In many countries, health policy has been developed in parallel with national environment policies, although the two policies should serve as the basic framework for one other. However, an increasing number of disease prevention and control programmes, both at regional level and national levels, are incorporating health and environment interventions into their packages. This needs to be accelerated.
13. Policy implementation remains a critical issue in Africa. This may be due to the lack of policy review and insufficient well-trained national expertise. Systematic policy evaluations are also often not undertaken. National Environment and Health Action Plans (NEHAPs) are government documents that address environmental health problems in a comprehensive, holistic and inter-sectoral way. They are normally drawn up in cooperation with a wide range of partners, including professional and technical experts, national, regional and local authorities and nongovernmental organizations. These must be translated into action.

3. Proposed actions

14. The appropriateness of the policy actions taken in response to the health and environment challenges will depend upon the soundness of the knowledge base regarding the state of the environment and the driving forces, pressures, and

effects/impacts on health of changes in the environment. As a means to achieving effective responses to health and environmental challenges, governments may wish to consider

- a) Mainstreaming health and environment linkages in national development strategies and the development agenda, including the implementation of the WHO Resolution on Health and Environment (AFR/RC52/R3).
- b) Strengthening the assessment of environment–health linkages by supporting the National Environment Outlook Reports, incorporating the necessary environment–health issues in demographic and health surveys, and commissioning special studies on key aspects of the health and environmental challenges in which knowledge is deficient.
- c) Instituting periodic assessments of the national institutional capacity for the application of policy tools for resolving health and environmental challenges, and using the results of such assessments to determine the relevance and applicability of policy tools.
- d) Undertaking periodic monitoring and evaluation of country performance on the enforcement of existing environmental and health policies and laws.
- e) Providing capacity development support to institutions responsible for the enforcement of health and environmental policies.
- f) Enabling access to information on various policies by non-government actors and fostering their contribution to the enforcement of the various policy tools in use.

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