



FIRST INTER-MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICA

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

Background Document

Introduction

The environment is one of the primary determinants of individual and community health. Environmental conditions can adversely influence human health in many ways — through exposures to physical, chemical and biological risk factors, and through related changes in our behavior in response to those factors. Africa carries a hugely disproportionate disease burden. It is estimated that the global burden of disease (GBD) measured by the loss of Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) per 1000 people, is heaviest in the sub-Saharan Region with 538 as compared to Latin-America and Caribbean 190, Asia 387, the Eastern Mediterranean 277 and the most developed regions with 127 DALYs per 1000 people.

The African continent is rich in natural resources and it has a potentially strong human resource base to sustain flourishing economies. Yet this potential resource is seriously undermined by ill-health and mismanagement of the continents natural wealth resulting in considerable ecosystem degradation. While Africa possesses the potential for sustainable development, the conditions for these to come to fruition are dismal unless a deliberate effort is done to address these crucial environmental and health problems which are among the leading factors hindering economic development in the continent.

Yet the human resource base is seriously undermined by ill-health –relative to its population size, The natural resource base of the continent is under threat from pollution and over-exploitation, leading to considerable ecosystem degradation, because poverty forces communities to use the natural resources available to them unsustainably to meet their basic needs and because government structures lack the resources to enforce regulatory measures. So while Africa possesses the basic ingredients for sustainable development, the conditions for these to come to fruition are dismal.

Africa is currently off track to reach most targets of the Millennium Development Goals, both the health related ones and those related to the environment. According to the most

recent estimates, in 2004, the coverage for safe drinking water and safe sanitation was 56 and 37% of the population respectively and only 1 out of 5 children slept under a treated mosquito net in 2005. The burdens related to respiratory diseases, diarrhoeal diseases, parasitic diseases affecting the vulnerable groups among the African population (children, women, including pregnant women, and men earning their livelihoods in agriculture) all have a substantial fraction attributable to environmental determinants.

While the continent continues to face traditional challenges such as lack of access to safe drinking water access to safe hygiene and sanitation; poorly designed irrigation and water systems; road and building construction activities; inadequate housing; poor waste disposal and water storage. Yet, it also has to cope with new and emerging issues, including the effects on health of climate change, accelerated urbanization and air pollution.

From the environmental perspective, there is concern over the loss of biological diversity (including ecosystem products and services, and medicinal plants), ecosystem degradation, and lack of capacity to deal with the impacts of rapid local and global change.

Increasingly, a motivation is emerging on the part of African Governments to improve environmental conditions in order to protect the health and wellbeing of their populations. In all countries, ministries of health have a relatively long history, usually dating back to colonial times, while ministries of environment have emerged more recently as a result of emerging environmental concerns. They are mandated to deal with two distinct (though related) areas and, depending on the specific country in question, there may or may not be formal or informal links between the two.

In response to this phenomenon, 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.

Nowhere in Africa, the power of synergies between health and environment sectors has been used to its maximum potential. The First African Inter-Ministerial Conference on Health and Environment in Africa is about unleashing this potential power.

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 they have been defined by the AMCEN (African Ministerial Conference on Environment), the NEPAD, in PRSPs, 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. The Conference intends to succeed in building a strategic health and environment alliance that will be able to influence development policies at the macro-

economic and at the sectoral levels, to have an impact on existing investment frameworks and resource allocation criteria and procedures, and lead to tangible outcomes on the short to medium term.

2.1. General Objective:

The general objective of the conference is to secure political commitment for catalysing 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 interlinkages between Environment and Health, and their importance for sustainable development.
- b) To promote an integrated approach to policy making that values the services that ecosystems provide to human health both in health and environment sectors.
- c) To agree on specific actions required to leverage the necessary changes in institutional arrangements and investment frameworks for reducing environmental threats to human health.

2.3. Expected outcomes:

Most important in this first Conference will be the creation of enhanced awareness among ministers of health and of environment of the mutual relevance of each others policies, strategies and programmes. Ministers of health should obtain a better appreciation how assessment and management of environmental risks to health can contribute to reducing disease burdens, can reduce the costs incurred by environment-related ill-health and can add sustainability and resilience to already achieved health advances. Ministers of environment should obtain a better appreciation of how improved community health status can contribute to an improved state of the environment, to a more sustainable use of natural resources and to an increased support for environmental issues (as a determinant of health) in other sectors. The outcomes of the conference as they are expected are as follows:

- a) Inter-linkages between Environment and Health, and their importance for sustainable development are better understood both 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) Actions required to leverage the necessary changes in institutional arrangements and investment frameworks for reducing environmental threats to human health and in order to achieve Millennium Development Goals are identified.
- d) A declaration “The Libreville Declaration” and an action plan are adopted.

3. Structure of the Conference and Method of work:

Step 1: A 2.5-day scientific and technical conference will take place to discuss the scientific evidence and the 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 & opportunities to address the health and environmental challenges”. Under each of these themes a given number of topics will be addressed based on technical papers that will be prepared by experts and sent to country delegations before the conference. Each of the main themes will be a subject for a keynote presentation by an international recognized leading personality. The outcomes of discussions will be summarized and presented to the ministers.

Step 2: A 1.5-day ministerial conference (back to back with the scientific conference) will consider the report of the technical and scientific conference. The 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 African Union Summit of Heads of states for consideration and adoption at a next session of the African Union Heads of States.

4. Languages

The conference will be held in two languages: 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 wishing to bring additional participants will be able to do so provided they inform the secretariat well in advance.
- b) *Scientific experts:* a number of international experts will be identified and invited to make key note presentations on specific themes of interest for the conference.
- c) *Partners:* UN agencies (UNIDO, UNDP, FAO, WMO, UN-HABITAT, UNECA, WFP, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, UNIFEM, UNFPA), Secretariats of binding and non binding conventions (Stockholm, Basel, Rotterdam, UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD, SAICM, Bamako) development banks (AfDB, WB) and NGOs.
- d) *Special gests:* high profile people involved in the protection of the environment will be invited to share their vision of the future

6. Follow-up actions:

Within 6 months:

- The declaration resulting from the conference as well as the action plan will be submitted to a next summit of heads of states of the African Union for adoption.

Between 6 months and 1 year:

- WHO, UNEP and other partners will provide technical support to governments to initiate implementation the principles of the declaration and the action plan.
- WHO, UNEP and partners, will use the declaration and the action plan to initiate resource mobilization activities for implementation of the action plan.

Beyond One year:

- WHO, UNEP and other partners will continue to provide technical support to governments to initiate implementation 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 for the way forward.