8th Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context serving as the 4th Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, Vilnius, Lithuania, 8-11 December 2020

High-level Statements: Statement by ministers and high-level representatives (Item 7)

Dear Chair, Honourable Ministers, Dear Secretary, Distinguished delegates; Good afternoon!

On behalf of WHO, we thank the Government of Lithuania for hosting the meeting. On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Espoo Convention and the 10th anniversary of entry into force of the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment, WHO wishes to commend the Member States and the UNECE Secretariat to the Espoo Convention and its SEA Protocol for their leadership and long-term commitment to protecting the environment, including health. We appreciate highly the valuable work carried out over these years by the Parties and the Signatories, the Secretariat, the Bureau and the Working group, as well as by non-governmental organizations and others. We also extend our appreciation for inviting WHO to participate at the Meeting of the Parties and the opportunity to deliver this statement.

The Convention and its Protocol have set milestones in bringing environmental, including health, considerations into the decision-making and planning, adding transparency and improving environmental governance. The protocol is the first-ever legal instrument that acknowledges the necessity of engaging health authorities in the assessment of the impacts of health on policies, plans, programmes and projects - an achievement of which WHO is proud of having contributed to.

We strongly hope that the important work of the Bureau, the Implementation Committee, as well as the Secretariat will continue in a successful way, overcoming remaining challenges to the practical implementation of both the Espoo Convention and its Protocol, which are instrumental to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. They also have the potential to play an important role in a sustainable and healthy recovery from the current pandemic crisis and in supporting local living environments that enable health and well-being and promote safer, healthier and better lives,
as prioritized in the WHO European Programme of Work “United actions for better health in Europe”, which was adopted by the European Member States at the WHO Regional Committee last September.

Both, the Convention and its Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment are instrumental to the achievement of this vision. Even more so at the present point in time: while the COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding, and many countries are living through the second wave as we speak, important decisions are in the making on the way forward to revive our economies and societies. For example, when thinking of promoting a Circular Economy, instruments like the convention and its Protocol can help to ensure that we are aware of the broad health implications of Policies, Plans and Projects, and make informed decisions that will deliver better health and sustainable environment for all. This would also align to the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, which highlights a few prescriptions to ensure that we keep on track to protect health and the planet as we recover from the pandemic.

Importantly, the Convention and the Protocol can be very powerful instruments to support countries in achieving the ambitious objective of eliminating the most significant threats to the environment and to human health and build a better future, as also emphasized in the Vilnius Declaration.

In this context, the capacity to operationalize the Protocol, through the provision of good guidance, takes a special place and sense of urgency. WHO stands ready to further support the development of the Guidance on Health in Strategic Environmental Assessments under the Protocol. We recall that with the adoption of the Protocol, Parties had acknowledged “the benefits to the health and wellbeing of present and future generations that will follow if the need to protect and improve people’s health is taken into account as an integral part of strategic environmental assessment, and recognizing the work led by the World Health Organization in this respect.” The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown more than ever that environment and health are intrinsically linked. We therefore call on you to translate the broader definition of environment and health, that you had adopted, into actionable steps that deliver the full potential of the Protocol as a key instrument to protect our environments, our health and our planet.

We thank the Member States and the Secretariat for the good work that has already taken place in this direction, and stand ready to support the next steps on this path.

11 December 2020