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Statement at the Working Group on Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment

Ninth meeting, Geneva, 24–26 August 2020

Item 5. Promoting ratification and application of the Convention and the Protocol: Draft guidance on assessing health impacts in strategic environmental assessment;

Dear Chair, dear Secretary, distinguished delegates, esteemed colleagues, ladies and gentlemen;
Thank you for giving me the floor!

WHO recognizes with appreciation the valuable work carried out by the consultants, the Secretariat, and the EIB in developing the Draft guidance on assessing health impacts in strategic environmental assessment, and the task force for their thoughtful comments supporting the revision process. In our view the document responds very well to the request of the working group to assist Parties and future Parties to the Protocol in efficiently and consistently addressing relevant health impacts in practical application of strategic environmental assessments. As requested, it supports the assessment of the health dimension when conducting strategic environmental assessment with the overall aim of achieving a high level of protection of the environment, including health. We appreciate that the document provides necessary clarifications in this regard within the frame of the Protocol on strategic environmental assessment. It calls for proportionate reflection of potentially significant health impacts within the strategic environmental assessment as requested in the Protocol and does not create new obligations in relation to the Protocol.

The Protocol on strategic environmental assessment is a legal instrument that broke new ground, as it is the 1st internationally adopted instrument that explicitly reflects the importance of including health when assessing environmental impacts. It also reflects the interrelation of the environment and health, and the engagement of both sectors and their respective expertise in the conduction of strategic environmental assessments. However, the Protocol also raised important practical challenges regarding how to include health impacts in the overall assessment, and how to develop processes for a meaningful consultation with the relevant health authorities. This guidance was developed to help addressing these challenges.

The need for such guidance appears particularly urgent now: many countries are in the process of making important decisions to reboot their economies in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis: it is of the utmost importance that these decisions will not result in a long-term burden and damage for health and the environment.

As stated in the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19 attempting to save money by neglecting environmental protection, emergency preparedness, health systems, and social safety nets, has proven to be a false economy – and the bill is now being paid many times over. The world cannot afford repeated disasters on the scale of COVID-19, whether they are triggered by the next pandemic, or from mounting environmental damage and climate change. Going back to “normal” is not good enough. Also the EU Green Deal reflects the necessity in providing an action plan to boost the efficient use of resources by moving to a clean, circular economy and to restore biodiversity and cut pollution.

The Espoo Convention and its Protocol are among the crucial instruments to support countries in achieving a healthy and green recovery from COVID-19 through further intersectoral collaboration in addressing environment, including health impacts. Environmental assessments as environmental impact assessment and strategic environmental assessment are well developed tools that can play an important role here and need to be further strengthened. WHO will do its best to support member states to increasingly join forces between environment and health, and to start speaking the same language, make use of the synergies of their respective roles, use their respective expertise for more informed decisions, coordinate, avoid overlaps, and therefore save time and resources. The two sectors are on the “same side” – and need each other to address the increasing pressures on environment and health. The draft guidance is one more step to support these joint efforts.

In conclusion, we would very much like to see this guidance adopted at the upcoming 8th Meeting of the Parties and realized in the framework of the next workplan of the Protocol, being applied as a useful methodological tool for a better implementation of the Convention and its Protocol. We would appreciate and support if further case studies and best practices would be carried out by interested MSs and partners based on the draft document in order to advance the practice of assessing environmental, including health impacts further.

Thank you for your attention!