



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR

Europe

Regional Committee for Europe

EUR/RC71/17(G)

71st session

Virtual session, 13–15 September 2021

2 August 2021

210772

Provisional agenda item 14

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Progress report on the implementation of the European Environment and Health Process

This annual report describes Member States' collective progress in implementing the European Environment and Health Process, as well as the efforts made by the WHO Regional Office for Europe to support this implementation. It outlines developments, achievements and reporting requirements in line with the commitments made through the adoption of resolution EUR/RC67/R4 at the 67th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2017.

This report is submitted for consideration by the Regional Committee at its 71st session.

Background

1. This report provides an overview of the progress made under the European Environment and Health Process (EHP) since the 70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe. The report has been drafted in consultation with the Chair, the co-Chair and members of the Bureau of the European Environment and Health Task Force (EHTF).
2. Through Regional Committee resolution EUR/RC67/R4, Member States endorsed the Declaration of the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, held in Ostrava, Czechia, on 13–15 June 2017. They also committed to using it as an intersectoral, international and inclusive platform for attaining the environment- and health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. The EHP is thus integral to the roadmap to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the WHO European Region and is an important element for achieving the goals of the Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023. It is also the platform for implementing the WHO global strategy on health, environment and climate change (document A72/15 noted by the Seventy-second World Health Assembly in decision WHA72(9)) and several other World Health Assembly resolutions addressing air quality (WHA68.8); climate change and health (WHA61.19); and drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WHA64.24 and WHA72.7).
4. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EHP is also supporting the implementation of the “prescriptions” formulated in the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, as well as resolution WHA73.1 on COVID-19 response.
5. At the regional level, the EHP is aligned with and contributes to the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health in Europe” (EPW). In particular, the EHP supports EPW core priority 3, promoting health and well-being.
6. The work undertaken under the EHP is supported by the work of the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health (ECEH) in Bonn, Germany, which is part of the Division of Country Health Programmes, in a whole-of-office collaborative approach.

Implementation of the Ostrava Declaration and Regional Committee resolution EUR/RC67/R4

Development of national portfolios for action and priorities for environment and health in the context of COVID-19

7. The WHO Secretariat conducted a survey addressed to the members of the EHTF to identify how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the environment and health agenda at the national level, and whether the portfolios for action on environment and health, whose development is one of the main commitments made by Member States through the Ostrava Declaration, remain a relevant tool to support countries in their national response from an environment and health perspective.
8. The results of the survey indicated that the following were issues of the highest relevance: safe and reliable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services; sustainable,

resilient recovery from the socioeconomic crisis caused by the pandemic; air pollution; inequalities in environment and health; and low-carbon healthy energy transition. The survey also indicated the need for more technical support to address risk communication, air quality, and inequalities in environment and health. Most respondents also agreed that national portfolios could support the response to the COVID-19 crisis in their countries.

Tenth meeting of the EHTF

9. The tenth meeting of the EHTF took place virtually on 17–18 February 2021. The meeting was attended by representatives of 37 Member States and 13 institutional stakeholders and international organizations.

10. The EHTF adopted an accelerated roadmap towards the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, which is planned to take place in 2023. The roadmap links the work of the EHTF to the vision set out in the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, and with emphasis on implementing the EPW at regional level. The roadmap also considers the developments of the European Union’s Green Deal initiative. The implementation of the roadmap will be marked by a series of high-level public events known as the “Bonn Dialogues”. The Dialogues will contribute to the identification of the commitments to be submitted to the Seventh Ministerial Conference. The Dialogues will be complemented by a campaign showcasing existing and forthcoming initiatives taken by Member States and EHP stakeholders to “build forward better” in the recovery from COVID-19 and to strengthen the prevention of, preparedness for and resilience to current and potential future pandemics from an environment and health perspective.

11. The EHTF also adopted its updated Rules of Procedure and elected Dr Tamas Pandics from Hungary as its new Chair, representing the health sector, and Ms Brigit Staatsen from the Netherlands as its new co-Chair, representing the environment sector.

EHTF Working Group on Health in Climate Change

12. The eighth meeting of the Working Group on Health in Climate Change established under the EHTF took place virtually on 8–9 December 2020. The meeting was attended by more than 100 participants from 35 Member States. It focused on the latest evidence related to the health challenges of climate change; the health and economic co-benefits of cutting carbon emissions; the important role of the health sector in steering adaptation and mitigation efforts; and the opportunity to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic on a pathway compatible with achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change. The ninth meeting of the Working Group, held on 19–20 May 2021, focused on shaping the health argument and articulating key messages that could further promote health-oriented climate action from the perspective of the WHO European Region, in preparation for the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties, to be held in Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on 1–12 November 2021.

EHTF Working Group on Collaboration of Local and Subnational Authorities

13. The Working Group on Collaboration of Local and Subnational Authorities was established by the EHTF to support Member States of the Region in the implementation of the

commitments made through the Ostrava Declaration at the subnational and local levels. The Working Group will work in close synergy with the WHO European Healthy Cities Network and the WHO Regions for Health Network. Following a call for nominations, the Working Group held its first virtual meeting on 20 January 2021 to set the foundation for its programme of work.

Twenty-sixth session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Committee on Environmental Policy, Geneva, Switzerland, 9–10 November 2020

14. At its Twenty-sixth session, the Committee on Environmental Policy was informed about progress in the European Environment and Health Process.¹ The Committee noted with appreciation the information provided.

Main developments in environment and health in the European Region

15. The ECEH has continued to support Member States' efforts to fulfil global and regional commitments by developing methodologies and tools, conducting assessments and reviews, supporting capacity-building initiatives and advising on policy options.

Supporting Member States' responses to COVID-19 from an environment and health perspective

16. The ECEH has continued to work closely with the WHO Health Emergencies Programme and WHO headquarters to support the response to the COVID-19 pandemic from an environment and health perspective. Support was provided to the development and publication of technical guidance and advocacy initiatives to promote safe WASH practices, address urban transport and mobility during and after the outbreak, reduce the risk of heat-health issues for vulnerable populations under lockdown conditions, and prevent and mitigate clusters of COVID-19 at workplaces. The ECEH has coordinated two expert consultations – one on state-of-the-art knowledge and one on public health needs related to the surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 in wastewater. This work has been referred to in the European Commission recommendation of a common approach to establishing systematic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 and its variants in EU wastewaters. The ECEH has also implemented a series of public webinars addressing the links between various aspects of environment and health and the COVID-19 pandemic, including on safe WASH practices, protection from hot weather, transport and mobility, chemical safety, environment and health inequalities and urban redevelopment.

Developments under multilateral environmental agreements and policy platforms of direct relevance to the EHP

17. The Fifth High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment took place virtually on 17–18 May 2021 at the invitation of Austria. The meeting adopted a political declaration on “Building forward better by transforming to new, clean, safe, healthy and

¹ See document ECE/CEP/2020/4.

inclusive mobility and transport” (the “Vienna Declaration”), a powerful and inspiring set of commitments that can support innovative and healthy transport and mobility policies, actions and partnerships across the Region, together with the first-ever Pan-European Master Plan for Cycling Promotion.

Strengthening capacities and providing tools to address environment and health challenges

18. On the normative front, ECEH finalized the updated WHO Air Quality Guidelines, a global public health resource whose development is led by the ECEH, and whose launch is planned in the third quarter of 2021.

19. To further promote the use of WHO tools, online capacity-building activities were organized, such as the masterclasses organized in collaboration with the Government of Moscow and the WHO Country Office in the Russian Federation in December 2020, to be continued in September 2021, and online training activities on chemical safety.

20. To support the strengthening of the resilience of communities and health systems to climate change through increased adaptation, ECEH published an update of the evidence underpinning its guidance on developing heat-health action plans.

21. To support countries in implementing World Health Assembly resolution WHA72.7 on water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities and the WHO/UNICEF global call on the Hand Hygiene for All Global Initiative, ECEH supported and published several country assessments of WASH in health care facilities based on the global SDG 6 indicators.

Strengthening partnerships for environment and health

22. During the reporting period, the ECEH worked on several fronts to strengthen and develop existing and new partnerships for environment and health. Examples include:

- (a) the launch of a joint WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe)–United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Hub value proposition and service offering to support Member States in their efforts to address climate change by advancing more resilient, sustainable development outcomes that take into consideration ongoing and future climate-related impacts;²
- (b) contributions to the United Nations Issue-based Coalition on Environment and Climate Change and its task teams, promoting enhanced coordination among the United Nations agencies in the Region and supporting the work of United Nations country teams by facilitating their access to existing technical guidance and responding to requests for country support; and
- (c) contributions to the European Climate and Health Observatory hosted by the European Environment Agency in partnership with WHO/Europe and others.

² See https://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/library/hiv_aids/climate-change-health-europe-central-asia.html.

Conclusions and future plans

23. WHO/Europe, through the ECEH, will continue to support Member States in implementing their environment and health commitments and will leverage the new supportive policy environment provided for by the EPW, the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, the European Green Deal, and the outcomes of the Fifth High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment and of the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference which will take place in November 2021. In preparation for this conference, and working in close cooperation with WHO headquarters, ECEH hosted in May 2021 a regional consultation with Member States and nongovernmental stakeholders to support the development of strong health messages and advocacy to support adaptation policies that increase resilience of health systems to climate change, and mitigation policies that deliver health co-benefits, such as those that address both climate change and air pollution.
24. The ECEH will lead capacity-building initiatives, including subregional events, to address topics of common interest to Member States. In October 2021, it will host the Bonn Environment and Health School, a flagship initiative that supports the strengthening of capacities in Member States to address persistent and emerging environment and health challenges, with an emphasis on the development of leadership for intersectoral policy-making and strengthening of technical capacities.
25. The ECEH will continue to perform its normative functions in terms of the coordination and management of global guidelines (such as on air quality) and regional guidelines (such as on environmental noise). It will also continue to support the development and implementation of guidelines led by WHO headquarters, such as on drinking water, and lead the development of guidance on heat health and of standard operating procedures, for example, for human biomonitoring for exposure to mercury.
26. In line with the emphasis in the EPW on supporting local living environments that enable health and well-being, the ECEH will strengthen its work in support of healthy urban and subnational policies, working in collaboration with the WHO European Healthy Cities Network and the WHO Regions for Health Network, and supporting the implementation of the workplan of the Working Group on Collaboration of Local and Subnational Authorities.
27. The ECEH will continue to act as secretariat to the EHP, focusing on supporting the preparations for the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, expected to be held in 2023; to the Protocol on Water and Health and implementation of its programme of work for 2020–2022; and to the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme, where it will focus on the implementation of the commitments made at the Fifth High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment. The ECEH will continue to chair the Joint Task Force on the Health Aspects of Air Pollution under the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, including organizing annual meetings and implementing the workplan. The ECEH will also provide support to the implementation of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management, including on the development of national chemical roadmaps, and to the implementation of the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context and other relevant conventions.
28. The ECEH will develop and update tools and methodologies to support health impact assessments of environment and health policies.

29. The ECEH will continue to provide technical assistance in the event of environment and health emergencies, including those caused by extreme weather events and chemical emergencies, and to work with the WHO Health Emergencies Programme and within the framework of the all-hazards approach of the International Health Regulations (2005).

30. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ECEH will continue to support Member States through the recovery phase, focusing on supporting approaches that “build forward better”, in line with the WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, and advocating post-pandemic recovery policies that can deliver environment and health co-benefits and support further progress towards achieving the environment- and health-related SDGs.

31. In this context, the ECEH will work to advance the understanding among policy-makers of the health implications of economic policies that result in environmental degradation, which in turn, through the global triple crises posed by climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution, increase our vulnerability to the risk of pandemics, noncommunicable diseases, water and food scarcity, and disasters. This work will include close collaboration within WHO/Europe and WHO headquarters to promote a broader notion of the “One Health” approach, as advocated by the WHO Director-General, in order to “address the full range of issues that affect the relationship between humans, animals and the planet, including deforestation, intensive agriculture, pollution and climate change”.³ The ECEH will also follow up on the recommendations to be issued by the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development that will seek action to identify, assess and respond to risks arising from human activities, including climate change, emerging zoonotic infections and antimicrobial resistance.

32. The ECEH will continue to address new and emerging issues, such as waste management in the context of the circular economy, environmental sustainability of health systems, assessment of new technologies, the influence of green and blue spaces on health, the impacts of land recycling and brownfield conversion, and risk communication in environment and health. To this end, the ECEH remains engaged in partnerships that will seek to prioritize the environment and health research agenda, notably under the European Union’s Horizon Europe research and innovation framework programme and its project, the Health Environment Research Agenda for Europe (HERA).

33. From a managerial perspective, the ECEH portfolio has been expanded to include violence and injury prevention. The ECEH needs, however, to further strengthen its human resources in critical priority areas – such as air quality, climate change, sanitation, and health impact assessment – in view of the growing demand for support in these global and regional high-priority areas, as well as in areas related to planetary health; links between health, nature and biodiversity; and the environmental sustainability of health systems.

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³ See <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-148th-session-of-the-executive-board>.