

Implementation of the European Environment and Health Process

Progress report

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. Available evidence shows a high and largely preventable burden of disease as well as large inequalities in exposures to environmental hazards between and within countries, further exacerbated by the grave and mounting threat of climate change to human beings' physical and mental health and well-being as well as the planet's health.

This report is submitted to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe at its 72nd session, in accordance with resolution EUR/RC67/R4.

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BACKGROUND

1. This report provides an overview of the progress made under the European Environment and Health Process (EHP) since the 71st session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC71). The report has been developed 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 (the Ostrava Declaration). They also committed to using the Declaration as an intersectoral, international and inclusive platform for attaining the environment- and health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. The EHP is integral to the roadmap to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the WHO European Region. It is aligned with and contributes to the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health in Europe”, and is an important element in achieving the goals of the Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2025. The EHP 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 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 and the relevant recommendations of the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development, endorsed by RC71 in 2021, promoting a fair and green recovery based on social, environmental and health standards.
5. 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.

PROGRESS AND IMPLEMENTATION AT REGIONAL LEVEL

Overview of the environmental burden of disease in Europe¹

6. It is estimated that in the European Region each year, at least 1.4 million people die prematurely due to polluted environments; this corresponds to at least 15% of Europe’s total deaths. Environmental risk factors are responsible for around 26% of ischaemic heart disease, 25% of strokes and 17% of cancers in Europe. Cardiovascular deaths and diseases from environmental exposures are three times higher in low-and middle-income countries than in high-income countries.
7. Air pollution, both ambient (outdoor) and household (indoor), is the biggest environmental risk to health, being responsible for over 500 000 deaths per year in the Region, with up to a 15 times difference in the mortality rates reported by countries. Ischaemic heart disease is the leading cause of death attributed to ambient air and household pollution in all Member States. Although air quality has gradually improved in parts of the Region, air pollutant concentrations still exceed the WHO Air Quality Guidelines in many areas. Exposure to air pollution disproportionately affects disadvantaged socioeconomic groups of the population in urban environments with high levels of motorized traffic and low access to green space.

¹ Data is based on WHO estimates of the environmental burden of disease in 2016, as analysed in The European health Report 2021 (see <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/352131/9789289057608-eng.pdf>), and on the report of the International Panel on Climate Change, Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (see <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2>).

8. The mortality rate attributed to exposure to unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene services in the Region is the lowest globally and in 2016 accounted for 0.3 deaths per 100 000 population. This is equivalent to around 2700 deaths per year. Projecting from current development rates, however, the Region is not on track to meet SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2 on ensuring safely managed and equitable sanitation and drinking-water services and hand hygiene for all in all settings. Greater attention and accelerated efforts are needed to achieve universal access to safely managed and climate-resilient sanitation and drinking-water services by 2030, with particular attention on health care facilities.

9. The mortality rate attributed to unintentional poisoning in the Region was 1.1 deaths per 100 000 population in 2019, the same as the global average. Mortality from unintentional poisoning decreased by 10.9% between 2015 and 2019. The increased attention to hygiene and clean environments brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increased exposure to hazardous products at home. As a result, based on the data available, the number of home accidents with disinfectants and cleaning products, such as bleach, hand sanitizers, ethanol and hydrogen peroxide, seem to have increased.

10. The contributions of *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* and *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change* to the Sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),² show that climate change is a grave and mounting threat to our physical and mental health and well-being and to a healthy planet. Since the previous IPCC report, new evidence and awareness of the current impacts and projected risk of climate change on health, well-being, food production, migration and conflict have emerged, including a greater body of evidence on the adverse impacts of climate change on mental health, particularly for children, adolescents, elderly people and people with underlying health conditions. The rapid and dangerous warming of the climate in the European Region, which is experiencing accelerated temperature rises and unprecedented frequency and intensity of heat waves, has significant health implications. Climate-sensitive foodborne, waterborne and vector-borne disease risks are projected to increase under all levels of warming without additional adaptation. In particular, the risk of dengue will increase with longer warm seasons and a wider geographical distribution, including in the European Region. These findings emphasize the importance of effective mitigation measures, in addition to measures to adapt to climate change.

11. Altogether, this evidence clearly indicates that achieving the SDGs related to environment, climate change and health requires redoubling efforts and investments to address a largely preventable burden of disease and the large inequalities in environmental exposures that exist between and within countries.

Implementation of the commitments taken under the Ostrava Declaration

Work of the EHTF and its working groups

12. The 11th meeting of the EHTF took place virtually on 9–10 December 2021. The meeting was attended by more than 110 representatives of 31 Member States and many institutional stakeholders and international organizations. The meeting's primary purpose was to discuss the preparation of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, which will be held in 2023 in Budapest, Hungary. The meeting offered an interactive platform for the exchange of experiences, challenges encountered and solutions identified in the implementation of the Ostrava commitments and in achieving green and healthy recovery from COVID-19 in the European Region. The EHTF reviewed its programme of work for 2022–2023 and the implementation programme of the Bonn Dialogues on Environment and Health. The EHTF also elected the new EHTF Bureau for the coming year.

13. The main commitment made in the Sixth Ministerial Conference was to develop national portfolios for action on environment and health. Since then, 18 countries have fulfilled this commitment, either as part of already existing instruments or by developing a self-standing document. A review carried out ahead of the 11th meeting of the EHTF revealed that 11 of these 18 countries had developed their portfolios in 2021.

² See <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2> and <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3>.

This recent acceleration may indicate that some Member States see the portfolio development as useful in the context of national plans for recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. This seems to be supported by several countries having reported using recovery funds to support environmental improvements, notably to address air pollution. However, as only a small number of countries have upheld this commitment to date, a more in-depth analysis is needed of the reasons that have prevented a higher level of compliance (beyond the major and prolonged disruption caused by COVID-19).

14. The Working Group on Health in Climate Change promoted the Health Programme of the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), including a WHO Regional Office for Europe side event, “Act now! Policies and tools for health-centric climate action”, on advocating policies and WHO tools for health-centric climate action. The policy requests and activities laid down in the Working Group strategic paper “Zero regrets: scaling up action on climate change mitigation and adaptation for health in the WHO European Region” were presented in the context of the Health Programme, and Member States were called on to sign health sector commitments to develop climate-resilient and sustainable low-carbon health systems. The WHO Regional Director for Europe, appearing at the side event, urged WHO European Member States to consider subscribing to the COP26 Health Programme and sent a letter to all 53 Member States to that effect.

15. The Working Group on Collaboration of Local and Subnational Authorities, which works in close synergy with the WHO European Healthy Cities Network and the WHO Regions for Health Network, advanced its work on documenting governance approaches to the coordination of work on environment and health across different levels of government, identifying challenges to coherent action and mapping inspiring good practices from across the Region.

16. Under multilateral environmental agreements and policy platforms of direct relevance to the EHP, preparations have begun for the sixth Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health, which will take place in Geneva on 16–18 November 2022. The Meeting’s high-level segment will focus on COVID-19, climate change, and water and health. The meeting is expected to result in the adoption of a programme of work for the period 2023–2025 that frames and responds to regional priorities in the area of water, sanitation, hygiene and health.

17. In the follow-up to the Fifth High-level Meeting on Transport, Health and Environment, held in May 2021, the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme marked its 20th anniversary with an event hosted by France in the context of its presidency of the Council of the European Union. The event, entitled “20 years of the Pan-European Programme on Transport, Health and Environment”, was held in Paris on 13–14 January 2022.

Towards the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health

18. At the 11th meeting of the EHTF in December 2021, the Hungarian Government announced that it would host the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Budapest in 2023. The EHTF entrusted its Bureau to oversee the preparation of the Conference and the drafting of its political outcome document, the Budapest Declaration.

19. The preparatory process is following a two-pronged and inclusive approach: the drafting will be informed by (i) a series of consultations with Member States and stakeholders, including at the subregional level, and additional input will be provided by the Bonn Dialogues on Environment and Health (a series of high-level public events addressing advances in science, policy and practice, the first two of which took place in late 2021, the first on air quality and health in the “building forward better” context and the second on nature, biodiversity and health) and by (ii) an analysis of the implementation of the Ostrava commitments, a review of progress achieved in the Region in the SDG targets related to environment and health, an assessment of the European environmental burden of disease, and a reflection on the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for the environment and health agenda. The feasibility of developing an analysis of climate-relevant actions taken by Member States will also be assessed.

20. At its 27th session (3–5 November 2021, Geneva), the Committee on Environmental Policy of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe was informed about the recent developments under the EHP, with a focus on the preparation of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health.

Main activities of the ECEH

21. Under the coordination of the ECEH, the new WHO Air Quality Guidelines were launched on 21 September 2021. These provide guideline levels for six air pollutants (particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, ozone and carbon monoxide), interim targets to facilitate implementation, and good practice statements for certain types of particulate matter (sand and desert dust, black or elemental carbon, and ultrafine particles). The achievement of the recommended air quality would protect population health worldwide.

22. The new Guidelines have been picked up in policy processes, including in the ongoing revision of the air quality legislation of the European Union. The ECEH continues to support Member States in the implementation of the Guidelines, including by organizing science policy dialogues (already held in Bulgaria and Poland), developing a compendium of relevant tools and instruments, and implementing capacity-building activities on air quality and health.

23. The ECEH organized the second online edition of the Bonn Environment and Health School in 2021 to support Member States in building technical and leadership capacities through transformative public health training, supported by a problem-based learning process. The Bonn School attracted more than 100 participants from 40 countries and was supported by a faculty of more than 40 lecturers and course facilitators. The School has also established a cross-sectoral collaboration and exchange network to build a community of practice for environment and health professionals across the Region.

24. The COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in emerging zoonotic diseases in recent decades have led to a growing recognition of the importance of the One Health approach, an integrative, cross-disciplinary approach to designing and implementing actions and policies at the human–animal–environment interface. The role of the environment and its links to health in the One Health approach have often been overlooked and therefore need to be better understood. To fill this gap, the ECEH has developed a report to define the role of the environment in the One Health approach. The report supports Member States in addressing the call of the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development report for operationalization of the concept of One Health in all settings where health and well-being policies are developed, and in stepping up investments and reforms in health and social care systems.

25. The ECEH supported Member States' efforts to implement their commitments under the COP26 Health Programme. Specifically, in May 2022, the ECEH convened a strategic consultation to support the establishment of a community of practice among signatory countries to facilitate networking and collaboration, share experiences and identify opportunities to further accelerate policy attention and action under the COP26 Health Programme. The consultation helped mobilize the health sector to engage and lead by example to mitigate climate change and increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of health systems in the Region. At the same time, the discussions formulated possible policy requests and actions that could feed into the commitments of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health.

26. The ECEH supported Member States in their efforts to achieve sound management of chemicals and to reduce risks to health. Capacity-building activities in chemical risk assessment and the development of tools and educational materials, including on mercury and health, contributed to the implementation of the WHO Chemicals Road Map and of international environmental agreements, like the Minamata Convention on Mercury.

27. The ECEH was also involved in several efforts to strengthen partnerships and cooperation with relevant organizations:

- cooperation with the European Union's Green Deal initiative and its pillar strategies in the achievement of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda through participation in the Zero Pollution subgroup of the United Nations Green Deal Task Force;
- engagement in several task teams within the Issue-based Coalition on Environment and Climate Change (co-led by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme), which provides a regional platform for United Nations agencies to promote coordinated support to Member States in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to support United Nations Country Teams on environmental and climate change issues;
- cooperation with the European Environment Agency, particularly in the context of the European Climate and Health Observatory, in which the ECEH is a partner, and with the Bonn Environment and Health School, to which the European Environment Agency has contributed, supporting Member States in building capacity in the collection and validation of environmental data; and
- collaboration with the Union for the Mediterranean in disseminating knowledge on topics related to environment and urban health, such as seaport cities and green and blue spaces.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

28. In the coming months, the work of the ECEH will focus on advancing preparations for the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health and negotiating its political outcomes.

29. The ECEH will continue supporting Member States in building technical and leadership capacities in environment and health by (i) developing a course for executives under the Bonn School to support the implementation of the outcomes of the Conference, (ii) offering training courses in multiple environment and health domains, (iii) developing professional profiles in public health to better respond to the complexity of environmental and climate challenges, and (iv) strengthening climate competence among health and care professionals.

30. The ECEH will continue to support the response to the environment and health dimension of emergencies, working in close partnership with the WHO Health Emergency Programme, WHO Country Offices, as applicable, and WHO headquarters. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, it will continue to support capacities to identify and manage short- and long-term health risks of environmental risk factors, including in relation to water, sanitation and hygiene and related infrastructure in Ukraine and in countries hosting refugees, chemical safety, waste management and rehabilitation of damaged and contaminated sites.

31. The ECEH will support the operationalization of the One Health approach by collecting related case studies, including on the economic impact of inaction, and by participating in the work of the WHO working group on One Health.

32. The ECEH will continue to work with the European Climate and Health Observatory to support implementation of the COP26 Health Programme commitments and their uptake by a growing number of countries in the Region and to advance the development of updated guidance for heat-health action plans.

33. The ECEH will continue disseminating and facilitating the uptake of the WHO Air Quality Guidelines and the Environmental Noise Guidelines for the European Region. It will continue supporting Member States by providing evidence and knowledge on good practices addressing environment and health threats, including related inequalities, as well as tools to assess the health impacts of air pollution, climate commitments, green and blue spaces and transport policies.