

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. New evidence shows a high and largely preventable burden of disease relating to environmental hazards, as well as large inequalities in exposures to such hazards, between and within countries. These adverse health outcomes result from the triple environmental crisis posed by the interlinked issues of climate change, environmental pollution, and land degradation and biodiversity loss. To accelerate progress in addressing these challenges, Member States convened in Budapest, Hungary, on 5–7 July 2023, at the invitation of the Government of Hungary, and adopted a declaration with commitments to accelerate action on addressing the health dimensions of climate change, environmental pollution, land degradation and biodiversity loss, at the same time as recovering from COVID-19 by promoting a green, healthy and just transition.

This report is submitted to the WHO Regional Committee for Europe at its 73rd session in October 2023, in accordance with resolution EUR/RC67/R4.

Contents

Background.....	3
Progress and implementation at regional level	3
New evidence of the environmental burden of disease in the European Region	3
Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.....	3
Implementation of the commitments taken under the Ostrava Declaration.....	4
Outcomes of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health	5
Main activities of the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health.....	6
Conclusions and future plans	8

BACKGROUND

1. This report provides an overview of the progress made under the European Environment and Health Process (EHP) since the 72nd session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC72). 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.
2. Through 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 other Health Assembly resolutions addressing air quality (WHA68.8); climate change and health (WHA61.19); water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (WHA64.24 and WHA72.7); and chemical safety (WHA69.4).
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. It is also supporting the implementation of the relevant recommendations of the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development, endorsed at RC71 in 2021, promoting a fair and green recovery based on social, environmental and health standards, and the operationalization of the One Health approach.
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 Communicable Diseases, Environment and Health, in a whole-of-office collaborative approach.

PROGRESS AND IMPLEMENTATION AT REGIONAL LEVEL

New evidence of the environmental burden of disease in the European Region

6. New evidence of the environmental burden of disease¹ shows that air pollution, WASH, climate change, and chemical pollution continue to pose major threats to health in the Region, with a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable population groups.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

7. Air pollution is the biggest environmental risk to health: nearly 570 000 premature deaths per year in the Region are attributable to ambient air pollution, and nearly 155 000 are attributable to household air pollution. 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, 97% of the population were exposed to PM_{2.5} concentrations above the new 2021 WHO Air Quality Guidelines in 2019. Exposure to air pollution disproportionately affects the most vulnerable and susceptible populations.

¹ Data are based on A healthy environment in the WHO European Region: why it matters and what steps we can take to improve health. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/368160>, accessed 31 July 2023).

In 2019, unsafe WASH services in the Region were estimated to have resulted in 33 500 annual deaths, of which 13% were due to diarrhoeal diseases and 87% were due to acute respiratory infections. In 2020, seven out of 10 people used safely managed sanitation services, but 31 million people still had no access to even basic sanitation. Approximately 77 million people lacked access to safely managed drinking-water. Achieving universal access to safely managed and climate-resilient sanitation and drinking-water services for all in all settings, including health care facilities, by 2030 requires accelerated action at the regional, national and local levels. In 2019, it was estimated that 266 000 deaths per year in the Region can be attributed to certain chemicals for which information is available. Yet out of 100 000 chemicals on the global market, 70 000 are poorly characterized in terms of their hazards, and of how individuals and population groups are exposed to them.

8. According to the World Meteorological Organization, the average temperature in the European Region has risen almost twice as much as the global mean surface temperature. The 2022 Europe report of the *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: towards a climate-resilient future estimated that the population exposure to heatwaves in the Region had increased by 57% on average in 2010–2019 compared with 2000–2009, and by more than 250% in some parts of the Region. The summer of 2022 was the Region's hottest on record. Many countries in northern and western Europe were hit with prolonged, intense heatwaves, and more than 61 000 excess heat deaths were estimated to have occurred in 35 European countries between May and September 2022.²

Implementation of the commitments taken under the Ostrava Declaration

Work of the European Environment and Health Task Force and its working groups

9. The European Environment and Health Task Force (EHTF) held its 12th and 13th meetings in Bonn on 23–24 November 2022 and in Brussels, Belgium, on 20–21 April 2023, respectively, to discuss the preparation and negotiation of the Declaration of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, held in Budapest, Hungary, on 5–7 July 2023.

10. The EHTF was actively engaged in evaluating the progress, achievements, challenges and lessons learned from the development and implementation of national portfolios for action on environment and health.³ In addition, progress made by Member States concerning the seven priority areas listed in the Ostrava Declaration was monitored and reported through 31 SDG indicators, which illustrated the need to greatly accelerate progress ahead of the 2030 deadline.⁴

11. The Working Group on Health in Climate Change convened for its 10th annual meeting in October 2022, with a focus on identifying possible climate change-related outcomes for the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health and facilitating the commitments of the European Member States under the WHO Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health, which aims to transform health systems to become low carbon and climate resilient. The Working Group produced an updated version of the strategic paper *Zero regrets: scaling up action on climate change mitigation and adaptation for health in the WHO European Region*, and the update was launched at the Seventh Ministerial Conference.⁵

² Ballester J, Quijal-Zamorano M, Méndez Turrubiates RF, Pegenaute F, Herrmann FR, Robine JM et al. Heat-related mortality in Europe during the summer of 2022. *Nat Med*. 2023;29:1857–66. doi:10.1038/s41591-023-02419-z.

³ Driving transformative action: from Ostrava to Budapest and beyond with National Portfolios of Actions on Environment and Health: policy brief. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/368159>, accessed 31 July 2023).

⁴ Progress in the WHO European Region towards the SDGs in the context of the Ostrava Declaration on Environment and Health: mid-way to 2030. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/368166>, accessed 31 July 2023).

⁵ Zero regrets: scaling up action on climate change mitigation and adaptation for health in the WHO European Region, second edition. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/368161>, accessed 31 July 2023).

12. 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 coordination of policies on environment and health across different levels of government, identifying challenges for coherent actions and mapping inspiring good practices from the Region. Working Group members suggested transforming the Working Group into an EHP Partnership to concentrate on implementing actions.

13. Under multilateral environmental agreements and policy platforms of direct relevance to the EHP, the sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol on Water and Health took place in Geneva, Switzerland, on 16–18 November 2022, gathering over 300 delegates from 45 countries and partner organizations. The meeting's high-level segment focused on the impacts of COVID-19 and climate change on the water and health agenda and was attended by ministers, vice ministers and state secretaries from 12 countries. The meeting adopted a programme of work for the period 2023–2025.

14. The Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme organized a side event during the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, launching a new module on electric bicycles along with a new manual for the Health Economic Assessment Tool.

Outcomes of the Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference

15. The Ninth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference, held in Nicosia, Cyprus, 5–7 October 2022, adopted a ministerial declaration affirming countries' commitment to transition to a green economy with sustainable infrastructure at its core. The declaration also calls on countries to apply the principles of circular economy to sustainable tourism as well as to join and commit to action under the Global Tourism Plastics Initiative. Ministers recognized that it is critical to ensure that environmental, social and health concerns are fully considered and addressed within the sustainable infrastructure and tourism sectors. They also noted that air pollution, both outdoor and indoor, remains a major concern in the Region and globally, causing significant threats to human health and the environment. They remained committed to accelerating the reduction of air pollution, thereby safeguarding human health. They commended the tangible results achieved with the implementation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) multilateral environmental agreements. Lastly, they acknowledged the health and environment nexus and remain committed to cooperating with WHO and the health sector. The Conference also underlined the need for more and stronger education for sustainable development.

16. As part of the Conference themes, WHO and UNECE co-organized a Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme side event on sustainable mobility for sustainable tourism.

17. The Conference provided an opportunity for the Hungarian Government to announce the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health.

Outcomes of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health

18. The Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health took place in Budapest on 5–7 July 2023 at the invitation of the Government of Hungary, under the patronage of the President of Hungary, Ms Katalin Novák. It was organized by the WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe), in partnership with UNECE and the United Nations Environment Programme.

19. The Conference was attended by more than 600 participants, including delegates of 43 WHO European Member States, representatives of stakeholders (including youth representatives and representatives of subnational and local levels of government), observers and guests. The Member States' delegations included nearly 40 senior political officials: ambassadors, ministers, deputy ministers, state secretaries, and chief medical or environmental officers.

20. The Conference adopted the Declaration of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health⁶ through a wide, transparent and inclusive negotiation process that included online consultations with all WHO European Member States and the UNECE Committee on Environmental Policy. This process was steered by the EHTF and its Bureau.

21. The Declaration prioritizes urgent, wide-ranging action on health challenges related to climate change, environmental pollution, biodiversity loss and land degradation, along with – and in the context of – recovery from COVID-19. Countries have committed to tackling pollution and climate change; ensuring everyone has access to safe WASH facilities; integrating nature and biodiversity considerations into policies; and promoting a clean, safe and healthy built environment. Additional commitments target health systems. To bolster countries' implementation capacities, the Declaration also focuses on strengthening governance, investing in human resources and advancing knowledge and tools for action. It emphasizes the support and empowerment of youth organizations to make their actions more relevant in policy-making and implementation.

22. The Declaration also established the EHP Partnerships as a new mechanism for implementation of commitments. The Partnerships bring together countries and partners with a shared interest in a specific thematic area to work together on joint projects and activities. At the Conference, four Partnerships were launched, addressing human biomonitoring (led by Georgia and Germany), health sector climate action (led by Ireland), healthy active mobility (led by Austria, France and Netherlands (Kingdom of the)) and youth, environment and health (led by Slovenia).

Main activities of the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health

23. Following their launch in September 2021, the WHO Air Quality Guidelines have been picked up in policy processes. In particular, the European Commission has proposed to align the European Union air quality standards more closely with the WHO guidelines, as reflected in the proposal for the revision submitted by the European Commission in October 2022.

24. The ECEH continues to support WHO European Member States, including by organizing science policy dialogues (already held in Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan and Poland), and has developed a compendium of tools and instruments for air quality management to protect health.

25. To provide evidence-informed guidance, the ECEH worked on developing practical advice on actions that citizens can take to reduce personal exposure to ambient air pollution. The ECEH also produced an overview of air quality indexes used in the European Region to provide Member States with suggestions for future developments. In addition, through a rapid expert consultation, the ECEH provided an update of the evidence on six additional air pollutants not included in the global guidelines.

26. The Climate Change Mitigation, Air Quality and Health (CLIMAQ-H) tool for assessing the health benefits and economic effects of carbon reductions was launched, as was a new module of the Health Economic Assessment Tool for walking and cycling, in this case addressing electric bicycles.

27. The ECEH organized the third online edition of the Bonn School on Environment and Health in November 2022 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 57 participants from 23 countries and was supported by a faculty of approximately 20 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.

28. The ECEH continued its work to address environment and health aspects in the operationalization of the One Health approach. A scoping review on economic aspects of One Health was developed.⁷

⁶ The Russian Federation dissociated itself from the Declaration.

⁷ Economic aspects of the One Health approach: a scoping review. WHO Regional Office for Europe; in press.

29. In the area of health impact assessment, an extensive survey of health in impact assessments across WHO European Member States and a comprehensive literature review and assessment of health impacts of waste management in the context of circular economy were undertaken.^{8,9} Further investigation into the health impact of waste management in urban settings in the context of circular economy, as well as urban green and blue spaces, was done through economic approaches.^{10,11}

30. The ECEH steers the development of the second edition of WHO's heat–health action planning guidance, in cooperation with the European Commission. The updated guidance will support enhanced implementation of heat–health action plans (HHAPs) across the Region by providing a synthesis of the latest evidence, models for HHAP development, strategies for effective communication and a summary of lessons learned from practical implementation at the local and country levels. The ECEH also continues to support Member States in developing their national HHAPs (for example, Turkmenistan). During the summer of 2023, the ECEH worked closely with the WHO Health Emergencies Programme to strengthen preparedness and respond to the emergency caused by the extensive heatwaves and wildfires that affected several Member States, particularly in southern Europe.

31. ECEH support to Member States led to concrete policy impacts. These included the adoption of risk-based management and surveillance approaches, as recommended in the WHO Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality, into national standards and regulations (for example, Azerbaijan), and the promotion of policy attention and action towards safe sanitation services. A range of countries have completed national assessments of WASH conditions in health care facilities, and the results have contributed to the integration of WASH requirements into national health strategies and into action plans to combat antimicrobial resistance (for example, Tajikistan). The ECEH also led regional work on promoting wastewater-based public health surveillance in the context of COVID-19 and for other emergency-related and routine use cases. To support Member State action in these technical areas, the ECEH published five guides, practical tools and evidence reviews in the area of WASH and health. The ECEH continues to provide extensive support to Ukraine in terms of WASH interventions in the context of war.

32. The ECEH supported Member States in their efforts to achieve sound management of chemicals and to reduce risks to health. Activities included building capacities in exposure and risk assessment, promoting legal actions on using fewer and less hazardous chemicals, establishing poison centres, minimizing impacts of chemical emergencies, facilitating projects on phasing out mercury-containing products from health care facilities, developing tools and educational materials, including on mercury and health, and contributing to the implementation of WHO Chemical Road Map and of international agreements, like the Minamata Convention on mercury. A new educational package on human biomonitoring was published.

33. The work on environmental noise and health focused on conducting and publishing key findings from a survey on the implementation of the *WHO Environmental Noise Guidelines for the European Region* in Member States, as well as on methodological advancements in assessing the health impacts of noise, through an overview of available methods and development of novel weighting factors that reflect the relative severity of the health impacts of noise.

⁸ Implementation of health impact assessment and health in environmental assessments across the WHO European Region. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/368238>, accessed on 17 August 2023).

⁹ Assessing the health impacts of waste management in the context of the circular economy. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/366667>, accessed on 17 August 2023).

¹⁰ Economics of the health implications of waste management in the context of a circular economy. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/365579>, accessed on 17 August 2023).

¹¹ Assessing the value of urban green and blue spaces for health and well-being. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/367630>, accessed on 17 August 2023).

34. 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, which provides a regional platform for organizations of the United Nations System 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 the Bonn School on Environment and Health (to which the European Environment Agency has contributed), supporting Member States in building capacity in the collection and validation of environmental data;
- cooperation with the *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change for Europe on the development of regional indicators for climate change and health, which were published in the *Lancet's* European report in October 2022;
- cooperation with the World Meteorological Organization in publishing the health chapter of its first State of the climate in Europe report (2021 data) in October 2022; and
- collaboration with the Union for the Mediterranean in disseminating knowledge on topics related to environment and urban health, such as seaport cities, urban resilience, and green and blue spaces.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

35. In the coming period, the work of the ECEH to support implementation of the EHP will focus on following up on the commitments taken at the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, offering policy advice and undertaking one-to-one work with Member States to support (i) progress on policy, regulatory and practical uptake of health-based recommendations and guidelines and (ii) integration of the environmental health dimension across different priority areas, such as One Health, antimicrobial resistance and noncommunicable disease prevention. A special focus will be placed on supporting the new partnerships launched at the Seventh Ministerial Conference.

36. In view of the greatly increased pressure from climate change on health and health systems, WHO/Europe will step up efforts to strategically mobilize resources to strengthen the capacity of the ECEH to enhance its support to Member States in this area. This includes the identification of climate change and health as a new priority area for the regional plan for implementation of Programme budget 2024–2025. A major policy highlight will be provided by the forthcoming 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28), to be held in the United Arab Emirates on 30 November–12 December 2023, with the unprecedented dedication of one day, 3 December, to health and climate change.

37. The ECEH will continue to work with the European Climate and Health Observatory to advocate for the Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health initiative, supporting Member States that have already joined the initiative in implementing their commitments and encouraging others to strengthen health systems resilience to climate change and reduce their contributions to carbon emissions. The ECEH will also continue supporting Member States to develop HHAPs and national health vulnerability assessments.

38. 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 on Environment and Health to support the implementation of the outcomes of the Seventh Ministerial Conference, (ii) offering training courses in multiple environment and health domains, (iii) developing professional profiles that describe the set of skills, knowledge, strengths, and key experiences in public health to better respond to the complexity of environmental and climate challenges, and (iv) strengthening competences to address climate change among health and care professionals.

39. The ECEH will continue to support the response to the environment and health dimension of emergencies, working in close partnership with the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, WHO country offices (as applicable) and WHO headquarters. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, it will continue to support the building of capacities to identify and manage the short- and long-term health risks of environmental risk factors, including in relation to WASH and related infrastructure (both in Ukraine and in countries hosting refugees), chemical safety, waste management, and rehabilitation of damaged and contaminated sites.

40. The ECEH will support Member States to strengthen the links between nature, biodiversity and health, including the economic dimension, and to operationalize the One Health approach by collecting related case studies, including on the economic impact of inaction and on the integration of the environment in One Health. The ECEH will also continue its participation in the work of the WHO/Europe internal working group on One Health.

41. 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 the related inequalities, as well as tools to assess the health impacts of air pollution, climate commitments, green and blue spaces, and transport policies.

= = =