



Health and Environment Ministers of the Americas

Ministerial Discussion Paper

A CALL FOR COOPERATION

Human health and the environment are unquestionably interrelated. Poor air quality, contaminated water, exposure to toxic chemicals and some vector-borne diseases affect ecosystem health as well as human health. A healthy environment is a precondition for good public health and health issues are key drivers for concrete action on the environment. This understanding led the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development to declare in 1992, that "human beings are at the centre of sustainable development" and that "they are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature". In 2001, with a matured understanding of the correlation between health and environment, United Nations Economic and Social Council more forcefully accentuated the link in stating that "population health cannot be maintained without ecologically sustainable development"

In many countries of the Americas, as in other regions, environment departments had their origins in health departments. As responsibilities for the environment and natural resource management expanded, the evolution of environmental institutions followed an independent path and, as a result, linkages between health and environment institutions at the local, national and international levels weakened. An increasing awareness of both the direct and indirect environmental roots of health problems, as well as the perceived need for stronger health foundations for setting environmental policies and actions, is requiring a new relationship between the health and environment sectors. This new relationship must extend not only to addressing environmental threats to human health within our own spheres of influence in health or environment departments but also in addressing the root causes of environmental health problems with other departments, institutions and partners in civil society. And finally, since the solutions to many environmental health issues extend beyond our national boundaries, cooperation between both sectors at the international level is also essential to achieve improvements.

In March of 2001, as part of the preparatory process for the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, Environment Ministers gathered to discuss issues of common concern. At the conclusion of their meeting, they called on "PAHO and UNEP to support the convening of a regional meeting between Ministers of Environment and Ministers of Health to take stock of progress achieved, to identify priority areas for renewed emphasis and cooperative initiatives and to explore ways of moving the environmental agenda forward in the Americas and globally, with a view to contribute to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development".

In response to this call, Canada, with the active participation and technical assistance of PAHO and UNEP, have convened this meeting of Health and Environment Ministers of the Americas with the following objectives:

- 1) to build bridges between the Health and Environment Sectors to address common issues;
- 2) to strengthen capacity for countries in the hemisphere to effectively manage health and environment issues;
- 3) to establish follow-up mechanisms for addressing health and environment issues in the Americas;
- 4) to contribute as appropriate to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Representatives of the Canadian Departments of Health and Environment have been working actively with PAHO and UNEP to organize this meeting. There have been several consultation sessions over the last year with Ministers and representatives of Latin American and Caribbean countries to develop an agenda for this meeting that would assist Ministerial deliberations. The meeting has been divided into 3 sessions. It will begin with a discussion of progress achieved and a proposed mechanism to ensure that collaboration is maintained. Next, there will be a discussion of goals and priorities. Finally, there will be consideration of knowledge and capacity building tools in order to foster progress before the next meeting of Health and Environment Ministers, should Ministers decide that this is a useful way to proceed.

DISCUSSION SESSIONS

Session One - Building Bridges between Health and Environment sectors and setting future directions

In 1992, World Leaders met in Rio at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and agreed to Agenda 21 - a global plan of action to achieve sustainable development. In 1995, the Pan American Health Organization, the Organization of American States, the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Environment Program, the Inter-America Development Bank and the World Bank, guided by the principles of Agenda 21, convened the "Pan American Conference on Health and Environment in Sustainable Human Development" in Washington, D.C. This Conference resulted in the *Pan American Charter on Health and Environment in Sustainable Human Development* and the *Regional Plan of Action* which were later ratified at the 1996 Summit on Sustainable Development in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Most countries took initial steps to implement the elements of the *Regional Action Plan* but by 1998 the momentum of the Charter began to lose strength in most countries.

In 2002, on the eve of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, ten years after the United Nations Summit on Environment and Development and, seven years after the development of the Pan American Charter on Health and Environment, much remains to be done to implement the principles set out in the Charter and Agenda 21. It is time now to breathe new life into Agenda 21 and the Pan American Charter on Health and Environment in Sustainable Human Development.

It is proposed that a regional mechanism for hemispheric intersectoral cooperation to address environmental threats to human health be established to support and advance work at the community, national and regional levels. The establishment of this mechanism should take into account existing initiatives and institutional mechanisms (such as the PAHO and UNEP Directing and Governing Councils and sub regional mechanisms) and build on them as appropriate. Complementarity between the new and existing mechanisms will be an important factor in ensuring the success of this proposed mechanism. The proposed follow-up mechanism consists of four components:

- 1) **Meetings of Health and Environment Ministers every four years prior to the Summit of the Americas** - During these meetings Ministers would discuss and agree upon actions and future directions for the advancement of the environmental health agenda in the region, monitor progress and prepare messages for Summit Leaders.
- 2) **Ministerial Steering Committee** - This committee would be composed of Health and Environment co-chairs from one country and 6 or 8 ministers (ideally half Environment, half Health) to represent the 5 major regions in the hemisphere. Observers from other international organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, and Organization of American States, as well as business and civil society stakeholders, would be invited to attend the Ministerial Steering Committee meetings as appropriate. The role of the Ministerial Steering Committee would be to sustain momentum and provide guidance to the Senior Officials Committee on behalf of the Hemispheric Ministers. The Ministerial Steering Committee would meet intersessionally, on an "as needed" basis.
- 3) **Senior Officials Committee** - This would be composed of senior officials of the representatives of the Ministerial Steering Committee. The Senior Officials Committee would meet/correspond regularly to advance the work endorsed by Ministers.
- 4) **Interagency Secretariat** - The Pan American Health Organization and the Regional Offices of UNEP - Latin America and the Caribbean (ROLAC) and North America (RONA) would provide general support and act as the Secretariat for the Ministerial Meetings, Ministerial Steering Committee and the Senior Officials Committee.

Europe has a regional Environment and Health Ministerial Forum which meets every five years to review progress on the 1989 Charter on Environment and Health, implementation of country action plans and set future directions. Key factors in the success of this Forum have been the establishment of a committee to maintain momentum between Ministerial Meetings and a small permanent secretariat staffed by

WHO/Europe. The costs associated with this European follow-up mechanism are modest.

Question for Session 1

1. How can we ensure that the partnership between the health and environment sectors in the Americas is maintained and strengthened?
2. Would the mechanism proposed above meet our needs for follow-up? Are there additional elements to consider? Are countries committed to ensuring the sustainability of this mechanism over the long term?

Session Two - Issues of common concern and shared goals

Within the Americas, we have different levels of development, different cultures and institutions, and a diversity of ecosystems and built environments. Despite these differences we have many common concerns. Shared goals to address common concerns can help us promote our environment and health agendas at the national and community levels. Shared goals can also help us address transboundary, regional and global problems and motivate us to exchange information on successful approaches and technologies.

Shared goals for clean water and sanitation services have enabled concrete progress. Beginning with the goals set by the American Governments' Charter of Punta del Este in 1961, and with more demanding goals set by the Third Special Meeting of Ministers of Health in 1972 and by the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990), steady progress was achieved in the provision of water supply and sanitation services to urban and rural populations. Water supply coverage in Latin America and the Caribbean has expanded from coverage of 33% of the population in 1960 to 85% today and sanitation services expanded from only 14% coverage in 1960 to 76% today. This progress has been accompanied by a steady decline in infant mortality and increased life expectancy. Notwithstanding the success, an enormous effort is still needed to achieve universal coverage.

In 1994 at the First Summit of the Americas in Miami our Heads of State agreed to phase out lead in gasoline. Today, 15 countries in the region are lead-free. We can do great things when we work together toward common goals.

Before we can agree on common goals, we must first discuss and identify our priorities for action in the region. In this context it is important to consider the main diseases in the region attributable to environmental causes: diarrhea and respiratory infections, resulting from water and air pollution. Acute and chronic impacts resulting from exposure to agricultural and industrial chemicals and hazardous waste and, health impacts stemming from natural disasters and climate variability are also of increasing concern.

Therefore as a start, we may wish to consider focusing our cooperative work on some or all of the following issues:

- Clean water and basic environmental sanitation;
- Clean air;
- Chemical safety;
- Anticipating and preventing health implications of climate variability;
- Anticipating and preventing health implications of natural disasters.

With agreement on these priorities we can begin the process of setting non binding common goals for the region. While we will need to take some time to come to agreement on a suite of common goals for the region, there may be some goals we can agree to early on. Initial goals may include:

- adopting the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council Vision21 Goals 2015 and 2025 towards universal coverage and hygiene;
- preventing and abating water pollution from urban, industrial and agricultural sources through integrated water resource management and through efforts to fulfill commitments made in the 2001 Montreal Declaration on the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of Marine Environment from Land-based Activities (GPA)
- adopting the strategies of the Clean Air Initiative and the Regional Plan of Air Quality and Health of PAHO;
- working toward implementing the provisions of the Stockholm Convention, with a focus on the elimination of DDT in the region;
- exploring the development of pollutant release and transfer registries;
- developing prevention plans to reduce vulnerability of populations to natural disasters.

Questions for Session 2

1. Do these priority areas meet your needs and would they provide a suitable framework for identifying shared goals and concrete actions?
2. Within these areas, what common goals could be promoted within the region? What could be good initial goals?

Session Three - Building Our Capacities to Address Environmental Threats to Human Health

Knowledge and sound science are the foundation of effective action in addressing environmental threats to human health. It is essential that we establish mechanisms to ensure that we are well informed about the state of knowledge related to our priorities. Integrated assessments such as the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the assessments undertaken for the Montreal Protocol on substances that deplete the ozone layer and UNEP's GEO reports have proven to be effective tools for transferring policy relevant scientific and technical information to Ministers and other policy makers.

At the outset of this new intersectional approach it is proposed that we ask PAHO and UNEP to work with the Ministerial Steering Committee to undertake an Integrated Assessment of Human Health and Environment Linkages in the Americas. The emphasis will be to build capacity within countries to support sound decision making. The assessment could focus on one or all of the priority areas discussed in session 2. Issues that could be probed in the assessment are:

- the current environmental threats to human health in the region
- environmental threats to human health in the region in 15 years if we maintain the status quo
- policies we have in place to address environmental threats to human health and the adequacy of these policies
- the environment and health indicators we could use to monitor progress in the region
- the most effective actions to address environmental threats to human health in the Americas
- capacities of existing institutions to assist countries in the region in addressing the environmental threats to human health.

Conducting assessments alone will not be sufficient to mobilize action on specific threats to human health. Existing knowledge, science and technical advice must be made accessible so that it can be used by decision-makers in individual communities as well as nationally and internationally. We must build on our existing networks, our existing institutions such as the Pan American Center for Sanitary Engineering and Environmental Sciences (CEPIS) Caribbean Environment and Health Institute (CEHI) and the UNEP and PAHO collaborating centres. We must use well-proven tools such as workshops and conferences and, look at the application of new technologies such as the internet to exchange information between countries, between the health and environment sectors and, amongst scientists, engineers, social scientists, policy makers, industry and civil society. We must also finalize a common set of health and environment indicators based on current initiatives in the Region and continue their implementation. It is proposed that we ask PAHO and UNEP, in partnership with countries and institutions, to determine how we better disseminate information within the region.

Questions for Session 3

1. Do we agree that an integrated assessment of human health and environment linkages should be established for the Americas to build capacity in the region and to support our decision making?
2. How will we translate the knowledge we gather into effective information exchange and best practices in our region? What are the tools and mechanisms that will enable the use of knowledge and science available in the region?