

New Protocol on Water and Health

Europe's Environment and Health Ministers met in London from 16–18 June, 1999 for the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health.

In the run-up to this meeting, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE), together with the World Health Organisation's Regional Office for Europe (WHO/EURO) had drawn up a *Protocol on Water and Health* to its *Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Waters and International Lakes*. Ministers signed the Protocol (see page 200) during an official ceremony on the 17 June, at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre.

The Convention* and its new Protocol were also the subject of several workshops and side events during the three-day meeting. NGOs, academics, representatives from national water and health administrations and from international organisations came together to share their experiences.

The main objective of the new Protocol is to reduce cross-border water pollution and to improve the quality of drinking water in Europe, in order to further diminish diseases which can be caused by polluted water.

Opening Session

Delegates were addressed by *Yves Berthelot* of UN/ECE, who reminded participants that one in seven Europeans had no access to clean drinking water. *Klaus Töpfer*, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), spoke of the danger of insufficient screening of chemicals and the danger these posed when they entered the drinking water cycle. *Jürgen Trittin*, German Minister for the Environment, speaking also on behalf of the European Union, noted the problems posed by pesticides in drinking water and his hope that the Conference would give not only the necessary impulses for action, but would also be accompanied by the necessary political will and strength.

Gro Harlem Brundtland, Executive Director of the World Health Organisation, spoke of the problems concerning transport and health due to noise and toxic emissions. She noted the measures already proposed by WHO to counteract this situation and hoped that they could soon be implemented.

Svend Auken (Denmark) said that in Europe we often asked if we were moving in the right direction to deal with environmental problems. His answer was, that we are moving, but “in the right direction” in only a few places. He pleaded for the implementation of the Aarhus Convention, which could do much to move the situation in the right direction.

Health, Environment and Safety Management

The background document (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/13), presents the general concept, principles, technical content and economic aspects of good practice in health, environmental and safety management (GPHEM) in industrial and other enterprises. It makes recommendations for a national system to support GPHEM, for its implementation in enterprises and for international cooperation. GPHEM relies on the use of existing infrastructures, legislation and quality management procedures, and on the willingness of industry to participate in its development and implementation.

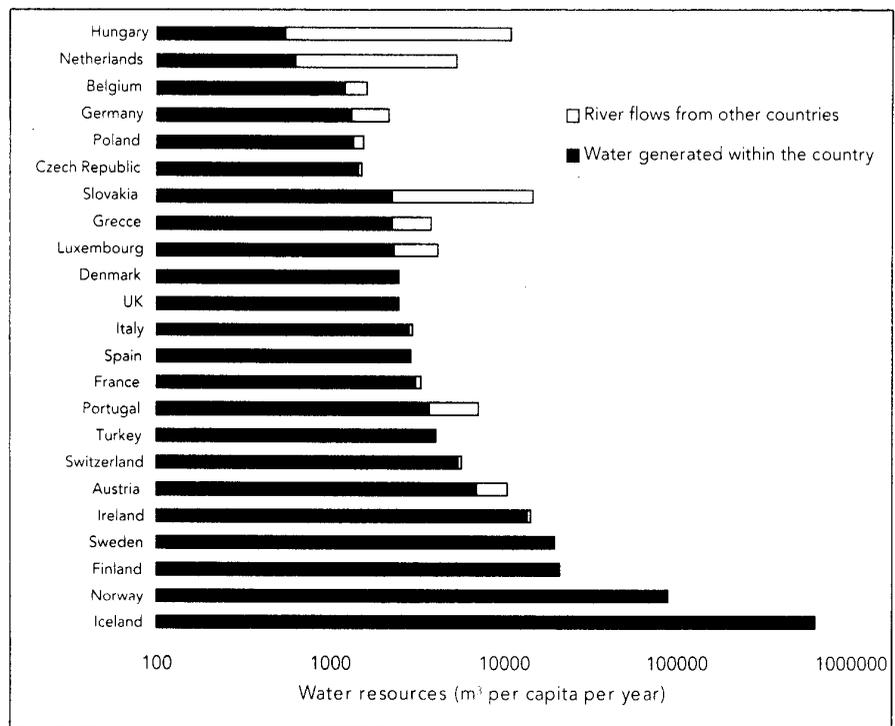
The representative of Latvia, *Viktor Jaksons*, said it was estimated that in his country up to 50 per cent of employees were working in what were considered to be “unhealthy” working places. He stated that the main obstacle for implementation of GPHEM was the difficulty in changing peoples’ attitudes.

Willy Buschak, speaking for the European Trades Union Confederation, stressed that it was important to incorporate environmental management systems into businesses, but to do this a completely new corporate culture was needed.

Jan De Saedeleer, of Proctor and Gamble, representing industry, said that more and more employers recognised that the health and safety of workers was an advantage for the corporation, and in their own interest.

When the discussion was opened to the floor, the representative of CEFIC (European Chemical Industries Association), stressed that his association opposed the idea of regulation by governments as this would hamper trade and commerce. This statement was met by several comments from NGOs, who said that a voluntary system was not working and that there was need for official regulation.

The representative from the Healthy Planet Forum, expressed the “outrage” of the Forum at the text of the Conference Declaration (see page 196), which failed to



Freshwater availability in Europe

Courtesy: European Environment Agency

mention the words “toxic,” “chemical” or “nuclear hazards.” He did not think that these problems could be dealt with by the “arrangements” spoken of in the text.

Children’s Health and the Environment

The background document (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/16) proposed specific actions to address the public health problems of injuries, environmental tobacco smoke, asthma and emerging threats. These actions would be implemented both individually and in partnership by Member States. The proposals are set out in the form of highlighted recommendations. The document also recommends that international organisations, nongovernmental organisations and interested countries should set up an international platform to promote and monitor the implementation of decisions.

An international mechanism is proposed to develop public health policies in areas of emerging concern, coordinate and promote the actions proposed, facilitate the sharing and exchange of information between Member States, and provide a forum for the advocacy of children’s rights.

The Plenary was packed for consideration and discussion of this topic. There were three keynote speakers, followed by a public discussion.

Peter Robinson, Acting Administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), referred to the 1997 Declaration of the G-8 on Children’s Health. He stressed that governments must adopt and implement this. He spoke of the huge increase in asthma cases and the rise in allergies of every sort. ➤

Igor Zelenkevich (Belarus) spoke of the negative development in children's health in his country during the last few years, particularly following the Chernobyl disaster. There were now 35,000 registered cases of childhood cancers.

Speaking for the NGOs, *Marie-Louise Beltrup* of Childwatch International, suggested that much could be done if relevant industries would set aside 0.1 per cent of their profits for work on the effect of chemicals and children's health.

Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environment and Health Matters

The background document (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 05/12), states that public participation and access to information are increasingly recognised as essential elements in making the much needed transition towards environmentally sound, health-enhancing and sustainable forms of development. It notes that significant progress has been made in recent years in establishing the preconditions for effectively involving the public in environmental and health matters, though much work remains to be done. The document attempts to identify areas where further steps are needed.

In the discussion, *Willem Kakabeeke* (Netherlands) said that participants should make their own suggestions to improve the Aarhus Convention so that it could encompass health matters.

Milos Kuzvant of the Czech Republic, in considering the future of EIA (environmental impact assessment) said that it should integrate human health aspects as a regular dimension of the EIA process. Concerning the role of Strategic Environmental Assessment, there was encouragement for a Protocol on Strategic EIA under the Aarhus Convention.

John Hontelez, of the European Environment Bureau, suggested that the Aarhus Convention should be extended to the wider health area. He said that partnership with citizens' organisations needs facilitation and he also supported the plea regarding Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Geof Rapor, of the UK Public Health Association, noted the different definitions of health being used by different fora. He stressed that the principles of public involvement also include principles relating to the public policy process.

The representative from Denmark, said that the London Conference provided a timely opportunity to offer some direction on the application of the Aarhus Convention, especially with respect to health issues, which could also be taken into account at a later stage by the Meeting of the Parties.

Water and Health

A 120-page monograph on water and health, prepared by WHO and the European Environment Agency, was available as a background document. However, due to a printing problem, only one half of the document was available to participants during the Meeting and will be sent to them later.

The Conference was reminded that 120 million people in Europe do not yet have safe drinking water.

The representative from the Russian Federation, Deputy Health Minister *Nicholai Mikheev*, reported on the problems his country has with its water supply. Although probably the country with the second largest water supply in the world, many regions still did not have adequate drinking water supplies or water quality which came up to international standards. Quality had been worsening over the last years, and his ministry was very aware that something had to be done; a water code and payment law had now been adopted. This "Water Fund" and its financial intake would remain independent, despite central budgetary problems. Tasks would now be prioritised, and the Volga Basin was one of these priority programmes, albeit against a background of budgetary deficit.

The representative from Uzbekistan, said that the situation of the Aral Sea was a symbol of what can go wrong with mismanagement of transboundary water. There was still a big gap between resolutions and implementation. This new Protocol under discussion needed proposals for implementation.

Andrew Norman, of Severn Trent Water International, speaking for the water industry, said that 3 billion people in the world have no safe drinking water and 2.6 billion have no adequate sanitation. Every 8 seconds, a child dies from a water-related disease. He noted that the World Bank has estimated that it would cost \$6 billion per year to solve water and sanitation problems worldwide. However, against the background of \$35 billion spent each year on luxury goods (\$18 billion alone on perfume), a cost of \$6 billion should be seen in perspective.

Lea Kauppi, of the Finnish Environment Institute, speaking also on behalf of the Meeting of the Parties of the parent Convention of the Protocol, said that the Transboundary Water Convention did not cover water supply systems themselves, which was why the present Protocol was so important.

Transport and Health

The final version of the draft Charter on Transport, Environment and Health, prepared following the Fourth Preparatory Meeting on "Transport, Environment and Health" in Vienna, from 15–17 March 1999, was before the Conference for its information (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/9 Rev.3). It sets out the principles, strategies and a plan of action to guide policies towards achieving transport sustainable for health and the environment.

Ministers also reported on the follow-up to the Regional Ministerial Conference on Transport and Environment. In November 1997, they had adopted the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Joint Action to reduce the impact of transport on the environment and they took advantage of their meeting in London to take stock.

Other Topics

The Conference also considered the "Early human health effects of climate change and stratospheric ozone

depletion in Europe” (document EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/15); Environment and health research for Europe (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/7); Economic perspectives on environment and health (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/14); Local processes for environment and health action (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/11); and Implementing national environmental health action plans in partnership (EUR/ICP/EHCO 02 02 05/10). (MJ) □

Note

* The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes was drawn up under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and entered into force on 6 October 1996. It aims at strengthening local, national and regional measures to protect and use transboundary waters in an ecologically sound way. Parties are particularly obliged to prevent, control and reduce pollution by hazardous substances, nutrients, bacteria and viruses. The precautionary principle and the polluter-pays principle are the guiding principles to implement pollution control measures. These measures are further elaborated in the Protocol on Water and Health.