

The Third Session
of the Regional Stakeholders and Coordination Meeting
on Malé Declaration on Control and Prevention of Air Pollution and its Likely Transboundary
Effects for South Asia; 12-13 September 2006

CONCEPT NOTE

Regional Initiative on Environment and Health in South Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

1-I South Asia

1. South Asia is home to more than a fifth of the world population- 1.4 billion out of 6.4 billion. It includes more than half a billion poor. The region has the fastest growing economies and a burgeoning middle class. The South Asian economy has grown at an average of 5.2% between 1991-2000 and is projected to achieve higher economic growth by 2015. The region is experiencing a high rate of urbanization. Almost 30% of the population now lives in cities. By 2030 urban areas will be home to more than 40% of the South Asian's population. Economic growth, urbanization and the changing consumption patterns are straining the urban infrastructure and the environment.

1-II Issue

2. For a healthy life, food, water, clean air, shelter and relative climatic constancy is essential. A healthy ecosystem ensures these services and acts as a buffer in times of risks. Human activity is increasingly disturbing this balance. Traditional and emerging environmental issues are the root cause for a significant portion of the burden of death, disease and disability. They range from urban issues such as waste generation to global issues like Climate Change. Globally, around 25% of the burden of disease is due to environmental factors.

3. In South Asia, water pollution, air pollution, and unmanaged waste pose significant threat to human health. Thousands of people are affected by lack of clean drinking water. In Bangladesh, for example, groundwater in 44 out of 64 districts is arsenic-affected and 40 of the 50 common diseases prevalent are due to the consumption of unsafe drinking water.

4. A large proportion of the population in South Asia still use firewood for cooking. Consequently, women are habitually exposed to high levels of indoor air pollutants. Urban air quality has also deteriorated in many cities in South Asia and affects human health. As an example, estimates of air pollution related health effects in India are 0.1 million excess deaths and 25 million excess illnesses per year.

5. Waste generation is drastically increasing in most of the South Asian cities. Karachi in Pakistan, generates more than 7000 tons of waste every day. It is estimated that 20-50% of the solid waste generated in South Asian cities are uncollected. Insects and rodent vectors are

attracted to the waste and can spread diseases such as cholera and dengue. Using water polluted from solid wastes for bathing, cooking, irrigation or for drinking can expose individuals to diseases.

1-III Needs

6. In most countries, the environment ministries have grown out off the health ministries. Over time, the linkage between the two weakened. At present environment and health responsibilities are often shared by both health and environmental agencies. Better coordination is required between them to develop and implement effective programmes. Sharing of knowledge and experience helps to manage trans-boundary and common issues. Despite the significant magnitude of environmental risks to health, the capacity to assess and reduce these health risks is limited in many of the countries in South Asia. A regular program for knowledge sharing, development of long term strategies, and sharing of good practices will be of significant assistance.

2. GLOBAL CONCERNS AND GOALS ON ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

Environment and health issues have occupied the centre stage of many environment related declarations and fora: United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; United Nations Millennium Summit; and UNEP Governing Council Decisions.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992, adopted the Rio Declaration with the goal of establishing a new and equitable global partnership through the creation of new levels of cooperation among States, key sectors of societies and people. Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration states: "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature".

At the United Nations Millennium Summit held in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators) were endorsed by the governments and civil society in order to improve economic, social and environmental conditions in a specific timeframe. Goal 7 targets environmental sustainability. Goal 7 sets specific targets on environment and health:

- (i) halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation; and
- (ii) achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

Environment health concerns are echoed in the GC decision 23/6, taken in the twenty-third session of the UNEP Governing Council (UNEP GC 23), held in Nairobi during February 2005. It highlighted the importance of environmental management in controlling emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. For this they called upon Governments to promote cooperation between health and environmental authorities and to keep the human health aspects of environmental change under review in cooperation with the scientific community and relevant international organizations, in particular the World Health Organization (WHO). UNEP GC 23 also adopted the Bali Strategic Plan (BSP) for Technology Support and

Capacity Building through GC decision 23/1. The BSP identifies environment and health as one of the thematic areas for technology support and capacity-building to developing countries as well as to countries with economies in transition.

3. STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENT HEALTH LINKAGES IN SOUTH ASIA

3-I Approach

7. Environment and health issues are multidimensional, requiring well-integrated and cross-sectoral approaches and methods. In order to achieve the global and regional goals, there is an expressed need to promote coordinated intervention at national and regional levels in South Asia. This should aim at formulating strategies and undertaking projects at regional and national levels. To this end, the following approach is suggested:

- (i) Assess emerging environment and health issues, and establish a regional framework for common understanding and action in South Asia;
- (ii) Provide policy guidance on legislations and national strategies;
- (iii) Promote capacity building in integrated environment and health management; and
- (iv) Enhance the quantitative base on environment and health.

8. *Assess emerging environment and health issues, and establish a regional framework for common understanding and action at the sub-regional level*

- Conduct integrated assessments on emerging environment and health issues at sub-regional level in cooperation with relevant organizations.
- Convene a senior level meeting on environment and health. This high level meeting is expected to be followed by a Ministerial level Regional Forum on environment and health. At this forum, a Regional Charter for Environment and Health will be discussed for possible adoption. The Charter will provide the overall framework for common understanding and action on issues related to environment and health.

9. *Policy guidance on legislations and strategies at national level*

- Devise a National Environment Health Action Plan (NEHAP) for each of the countries: NEHAP will provide a joint roadmap for the environment and health agencies to implement at the national level.
- Assist the Governments in the implementation of the adopted NEHAP.

10. *Promote capacity building in integrated environment and health management*

- Establish a cluster of experts on key issues related to health in South Asia due to the following environmental risk categories: (i) air pollution; (ii) water & sanitation; (iii)

wastes including toxic and hazardous wastes; iv) toxic chemicals and hazardous substances ; v) environmental disasters and contingencies ; vi) ecosystem changes

- Encourage capacity building activities and studies to upgrade the existing knowledge base on these key environment and health issues.

11. *Enhance the quantitative base on environment and health*

- Conduct research on the knowledge gained from experiences in other regions of the world, best practices and traditional knowledge in the region.
- Dissemination of information packages to a wide range of stakeholders including national governments, media, businesses, NGO's, youths and educational institutions. UNEP would develop and maintain a web-based knowledge base on environment and health, at UNEP's web-based knowledge base, the Environment Knowledge Hub (e-KH).

3-II Process

12. UNEP together with WHO will play a catalytic role in the implementation process. The network for the implementation of the strategy will be built upon existing regional projects and programmes.

- Governments: Government institutions will serve as the national focal points in each of the countries. In addition, governments will nominate technical institutions to form clusters of experts.
- Expert institutions from the region: Expert institutions in the region will be invited to join the expert groups.
- Expert institutions from other regions: Experts and institutions outside the region will participate in technology transfer activities.
- Civil society: Civil society networks will participate in the dissemination of environment and health related information.