

Charter of the Regional Forum on Environment and Health Southeast and East Asian Countries - Framework for Cooperation

PREAMBLE

Considering the global framework for action provided by Agenda 21 of 1992, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of 2002 and the Development Goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration,

Recognizing that the environment in which we live greatly affects our health¹,

Acknowledging the importance of ensuring the protection of human health and the environment,

Understanding that children, the elderly and the poor are among the most vulnerable to and suffer most from environmental deterioration,

Conscious that improving environmental health and ensuring sustainable economic growth are key components of poverty reduction,

Realizing that the maintenance of health and well-being depend on environmental quality and sustainable development;

Underlining the importance and cost-effectiveness of giving priority to preventive action,

Conscious of the urgency to take immediate coordinated action involving all relevant government agencies, organizations from the private sector, civil society, academia and media,

Aware that solutions require inter-disciplinary and cross-sectoral interventions with experts from physical and natural sciences, health and social sciences, development, finance and other fields,

Realizing the specific characteristics, cultural diversity and needs of the region, notably its unprecedented economic development, rapid urbanization and population growth and widespread poverty,

Admitting that nations in the region are physically interconnected by shared bodies of water and air,

Mindful that many environmental and health issues are transboundary in nature and that globalization has highlighted the interdependence of nations, communities and individuals,

Keeping in mind existing international agreements on the protection of the ozone layer, climate change, biodiversity conservation, the management of chemicals and wastes and other initiatives related to environment and health,

Mindful of the precautionary approach and guided by the polluter pays principle and the norms of good governance including civic engagement and participation, efficiency, equity, transparency and accountability,

Taking note of the various efforts being undertaken by various countries at the national and regional levels,

¹ The World Health Report 2002, Reducing Risks, Promoting Healthy Life, WHO

The Ministers responsible for the Environment and Health of the Southeast Asian countries of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam and the East Asian countries of China, Japan, Mongolia and the Republic of Korea, meeting together for the first time at Bangkok ___ on 9 August 2007, have adopted the attached Charter of the Regional Forum on Environment and Health; have agreed upon the principles, vision, goals and objectives, strategies and structures set forth therein as the basis for their joint commitment to collective and individual country actions and call upon their international partners to support the implementation of this Charter.

I. VISION

Sustainable development encompasses nurturing of the environment, enhancing economic growth and social equity to reduce poverty, promoting the health and well-being of people and encouraging partnerships and cooperation among various stakeholders and countries in the region.

We recognize that without environmental and health protection development will be undermined. Without economic growth, which is essential to poverty reduction and improving the quality of life, protection of the environment and the promotion of health will also fail.

Thus, our vision is to safeguard and enhance health and the environment, thereby promoting the development that reduces poverty.

For that to be possible, the interplay of health and environment and their role in poverty reduction needs to be understood and addressed.

We believe this will be achieved by a national approach that integrates the efforts of various stakeholders in preserving the environment with the protection of human health and well-being.

We also believe that national efforts for environmental preservation and health protection may be affected by development activities and the environmental and health conditions in neighbouring countries. Thus, greater regional partnership and cooperation are needed to address common interests and threats to the region.

II. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this regional initiative is to effectively deal with the environmental health problems within countries and among themselves by increasing the capacity of Southeast and East Asian countries.

It aims to strengthen the cooperation of the ministries responsible for environment and health within the countries and across the region by providing a mechanism for sharing knowledge and experiences, improving policy and regulatory frameworks at the national and regional level, and promoting the implementation of integrated environmental health strategies and regulations.

Specifically, this initiative aims to assist countries to:

- (1) effectively and efficiently achieve their targets on Health, Environmental Sustainability, Poverty, and Global Partnership for Development under the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDG);
- (2) institutionalize the integrated management of environmental health at all levels within each participating country and among the Southeast and East Asian countries through the setting up of a coordinative institutional mechanism; and
- (3) enable countries to assess priority environmental health risks, develop and implement cost-effective National Environmental Health Action Plans (NEHAP) and disseminate the same to the various stakeholders.

III. PRIORITIES FOR 2007-2010

Governments should address the health impacts and implications of the following priority areas of environmental concern at the local, national, regional and global levels:

- Air quality
- Water supply, hygiene and sanitation
- Solid and hazardous waste
- Toxic chemicals and hazardous substances
- Climate change, ozone depletion and ecosystem changes
- Contingency planning, preparedness and response in environmental health emergencies

In addressing these priorities, countries can be guided by the following criteria:

- areas where environmental conditions create or tend to create the greatest burden on disease and mortality;
- emerging significant risks where impact information may not yet be fully available;
- vulnerable population groups; and
- environmental management systems under the threat of deterioration due to aging and environmental degradation.

The importance of multisectoral planning and community mobilization should be kept in mind. The adoption of healthy lifestyles and other preventive measures should be underscored. The need for joint efforts and regional and international cooperation should be acknowledged.

Capacity building, information dissemination, education, training and further studies should be promoted.

IV. STRUCTURE

The implementation of this Charter will require the formation of an organizational structure to achieve the intent and objectives laid out in this document.

(1) Regional Forum -

The Ministers of the Environment and Health agencies of the member countries will meet in a Regional Forum which is held within every three years. The Forum shall:

- (a) provide overall guidance to strategic directions and supervision of the initiative;
- (b) ensure the continued quality and relevance of the thematic focus of the initiative;
- (c) formulate recommendations on the implementation of the consensus established by the Forum;
- (d) oversee the implementation of agreements reached during the Regional Forum;
- (e) review activities in terms of consistency with the principles, goals and objectives and priorities defined in this Charter;
- (f) ensure better coordination among member countries and partner agencies in addressing the priorities identified during the Regional Forum; and

- (g) work with existing recognized regional centres as regional collaborating centres for excellence to provide technical support to the Forum.

International partners will be invited to serve as resource persons to the Regional Forum.

(2) Thematic Working Groups –

Thematic Working Groups (TWG) on specific priority issues will be created. The topics to be tackled will be discussed and approved as regional priorities during the Regional Forum.

Members of each TWG will come from member countries concerned with a specific issue or have expertise which can be shared to benefit other members. A Chair of each TWG will be selected from government agencies of member countries. Representatives from the private sector, academe, civil society, regional centres, institutions, other regional and global initiatives tackling a particular priority issue may also be invited to become part of the TWG. Attached as Annex A are the terms of reference of the TWG.

(3) Advisory Board –

An Advisory Board, composed of the Chairs of TWGs and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Regional Forum, will be established. The Advisory Board will meet regularly to review independently scientific information and ensure better coordination among the TWGs in addressing the priorities identified by the Regional Forum and to cooperate with the secretariat in fulfilling its responsibilities in preparing for the next Regional Forum.

(4) Secretariat –

The WHO and UNEP will serve as the joint Secretariat to support the operations of the Regional Forum and the TWGs. The Secretariat will provide day-to-day management of this regional initiative and will be responsible for:

- (a) collecting information from member countries on significant and/or innovative initiatives related to environmental health management within Asia or where relevant outside the Region, which will include documenting the information in an easily retrievable manner and disseminating it to members through electronic updates;
- (b) maintaining an overview and monitoring the implementation of NEHAPs or equivalent plans developed by member countries to facilitate exchange of experiences among its members during the formulation and implementation of such Action Plans;
- (c) providing technical and administrative support to members who are organizing events that take place under the umbrella of the initiative; and
- (d) assisting the Regional Forum in resource mobilization for implementing and expanding activities of its member countries.

V. ENTITLEMENTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Every individual is entitled to an environment that permits the achievement of the highest possible quality of life and access to information and participation in the entire decision-making process.

All parties, be they government, nongovernmental organizations (NGO), media, individuals, the private sector or partner agencies, are accountable for their actions and should evaluate their activities and implement them in a manner that protects people's health and the health of ecosystems. They should actively share information and contribute their resources to the protection of the environment and health at the local, national, regional and global level.

All government agencies, both national and local, should provide a policy that proactively engages others on more effectively addressing environmental health issues. The ministries responsible for health and environment should share information and expertise, make collaborative decisions and work together towards the development and implementation of their NEHAPs or equivalent plans.

It is the duty of government agencies and authorities to protect people in their area and enable them to protect themselves. Authorities are responsible for assessing environmental health risks and environmental management systems within their area and should choose the most cost-effective and affordable interventions to manage those risks and provide the necessary resources to do so. They should also ensure that activities undertaken within their jurisdiction do not damage the environment and be accountable for environment and health of their constituents, other areas, the nation, the region and the world.

The private sector is responsible for assessing the risks commercial ventures impose on the environment and people's health and for adopting measures to minimize them by prioritizing sound preventive strategies, implementing pollution control and investing in research to develop cleaner technologies. They are accountable and liable for any adverse consequences of their operations and products and should integrate corporate social responsibility into their operations.

The media plays a key role in creating awareness about environmental health problems and their solutions, developing values and a constructive outlook that fosters public vigilance towards environmental preservation and health protection. If the media are given access to newsworthy, detailed and accurate information, they can communicate such issues to the general public in a timely and responsible manner.

Nongovernmental organizations play a critical role in disseminating information, raising public awareness, implementing projects and brokering partnerships which encourage communities, governments and the private sector to work together towards environment and health protection.

Countries and partner agencies of this regional initiative are entitled to access available information on environmental health and are, in turn, encouraged to share information and expertise with the other members.

VI. STRATEGIES

To protect health and the environment a comprehensive range of strategies need to be adopted.

Policies which protect and enhance the environment to improve the living conditions and quality of life of the people need to be put in place through enforceable legislation and other legal instruments. Standards should be based on the best available scientific information and be regularly reviewed to account for new knowledge and emerging technologies.

To address the transboundary nature of some environmental and health issues and to minimize the dumping and transferring of environmentally damaging technologies and products from one country to another, the harmonization of standards and policies should be explored.

Priority should be given to preventive rather than curative approaches through the promotion of healthy behavior and cleaner, appropriate and cost-effective technologies, the adoption of environmental management systems and the promotion of sustainable production and consumption. In this regard, the importance of proper operation and maintenance of existing facilities, plants, equipment and devices should be recognized.

Public-private sector partnerships, such as investment in the provision of essential infrastructure, should be promoted to build on the strengths of each sector to more effectively deal with environmental health issues.

Environment-friendly technologies and products should be promoted while reduction, reuse and recycling of waste materials should be encouraged.

The importance of a healthy lifestyle and personal hygiene should be promoted through effective risk communication, education and other interventions.

Risks and impacts on health should be made an integral part of the environmental impact assessment system.

More studies showing the links between the environment and health should be undertaken at both the national and regional levels as basis for policy and action.

Regulatory tools should be complemented with the use of economic instruments and social networks. User fees, pollution charges and other market-based instruments should be adopted to provide an economic incentive for reducing pollution and risks to public health. The community's social capital and corporate social responsibility should be used where appropriate to enhance their voluntary contributions to the improvement of health and the environment.

More work should be done on the economic valuation of the adverse impacts of environmental degradation on health as well as the benefits of the preventative and corrective actions undertaken to give decision-makers and the public a better understanding of the real costs of damaging the environment.

Public disclosure of environmental performance pressures polluters to comply and governments to enforce existing laws and regulations while recognizing good performers and encouraging them to do better is a strategy which should be more widely explored.

Existing information systems should be strengthened and output made more accessible and shared among countries. For this, an effective monitoring and evaluation system should be set up that provides information on such matters as environmental quality, health impacts, standards and the effectiveness of policies and measures adopted. The evaluation of strategies should be based on relevant indices and if necessary, revised based on the evaluation.

Recognizing that successful and effective environmental health management requires the involvement of a large number of government departments, organizations from the private sector, civil society, academia, labour and media, all stakeholders should be actively engaged in identifying problems and finding solutions, and in the process, building ownership and commitment.

Capacity building of countries, including the use of lessons learned and best available knowledge, should be pursued.

Special attention should be paid to contingency planning and disaster preparedness and response, with priority given to setting up early warning systems.

Technical cooperation should be promoted at every level to support the implementation of national and international environmental health guidelines, to cope with national and global issues and local concerns.

VII. THE WAY FORWARD

(1) Member countries of the Southeast and East Asian Region should:

- undertake the best possible actions available to address and eventually reverse the trend of environmental degradation and its negative impact on health to ensure the implementation of global and regional agreements such as the MDGs;
- establish and/or strengthen existing interagency and multisectoral technical working groups and national coordination mechanisms/processes and link them with other countries in the region to facilitate capacity building, the exchange of information, technology, resources and learning;
- prepare and regularly update a NEHAP or equivalent plans and ensure its implementation so that priority environmental health issues in the country are effectively addressed;
- build the capacity of various stakeholders to enable their mobilization in support of the implementation of the NEHAP;
- strengthen collaboration among themselves and other regional and global intergovernmental bodies on transboundary, regional and global environmental health issues, including attendance at the Regional Forum;
- strongly advocate for adequate budgets and resources for the environment and health sectors within their countries;
- ensure that this Charter adopted at this meeting is widely disseminated within each country and across the Region in the languages of the Region.

(2) International partner organizations are encouraged to:

- support this regional initiative by providing appropriate technical and financial assistance, information sharing and expertise;
- support the development and implementation of NEHAP and equivalent plans;
- intensify coordination and cooperation among themselves to build synergies, prevent duplication and optimize the use of resources.
- ensure proper coordination with existing intergovernmental processes.

(3) Countries and partner organizations should work for the widest possible endorsement of this Charter to ensure the attainment of its objectives.

(4) Ministers responsible for the Environment and Health of Southeast and East Asian countries should meet again within three years to assess both national and regional progress and to agree on specific actions to reduce significant environmental threats to health as swiftly as possible.

ANNEX A

Terms of Reference for the Thematic Working Groups (TWG)

To support the achievement of the objectives of the Regional Forum, the Thematic Working Groups (TWG) shall be responsible for:

1. Knowledge management and technical support
 - facilitate the exchange of information, lessons learned and best practices across countries;
 - provide technical support to members through access to specific experts and facilities.
2. Progress reporting to the Regional Forum
 - agreeing on core environmental health indicators specific to the theme covered by the TWG
 - documenting current status as baseline to benchmark progress
 - consolidating/synthesizing environmental health progress and impact at the regional level.
3. Coordination and advocacy
 - advocate actions based on the recommendations of the Regional Forum
 - promote the integration of priority thematic actions into the national environmental health action plans or equivalent plans
 - provide guidance on how existing activities can contribute to the general goals of national environmental health action plan or equivalent plans and the Regional Forum
 - promote the coordination of various (issue-specific) national and donor-supported activities within the country and the region
 - disseminate information on activities being undertaken and their impacts
4. Resource Mobilization
 - Prioritize activities for which funding and other additional support is required; and,
 - In coordination with the secretariat, identify possible sources including partner organizations that could support the implementation of said priority activities.