



## EUROPE

### European Charter on Environment and Health, 1989

#### Preamble

In the light of WHO's strategy for health for all in Europe, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development and the related Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond (resolutions 42/187 and 42/186 of the United Nations General Assembly) and World Health Assembly resolution WHA42.26,

- Recognizing the dependence of human health on a wide range of crucial environmental factors,
- Stressing the vital importance of preventing health hazards by protecting the environment,
- Acknowledging the benefits to health and wellbeing that accrue from a clean and harmonious environment,
- Encouraged by the many examples of positive achievement in the abatement of pollution and the restoration of a healthy environment,
- Mindful that the maintenance and improvement of health and wellbeing require a sustainable system of development,
- Concerned at the ill-considered use of natural resources and man-made products in ways liable to damage the environment and endanger health,
- Considering the international character of many environmental and health issues and the interdependence of nations and individuals in these matters,
- Conscious of the fact that, since developing countries are faced with major environmental problems, there is a need for global cooperation,
- Responding to the specific characteristics of the European Region, and notably its large population, intensive industrialization and dense traffic,
- Taking into account existing international instruments (such as agreements on protection of the ozone layer) and other initiatives relating to the environment and health,

The Ministers of the Environment and of Health of the Member States of the European Region of WHO, meeting together for the first time at Frankfurt-am-Main on 7 and 8 December 1989, have adopted the attached European Charter on Environment and Health and have accordingly agreed upon the principles and strategies laid down therein as a firm commitment to action. In view of its environmental mandate, the Commission of the European Communities was specially invited to participate and, acting on behalf of the Community, also adopted the Charter as a guideline for future action by the Community in areas which lie within Community competence.

## Entitlements and responsibilities

1. Every individual is entitled to:
  - o an environment conducive to the highest attainable level of health and wellbeing;
  - o information and consultation on the state of the environment, and on plans, decisions and activities likely to affect both the environment and health;
  - o participation in the decision-making process.
2. Every individual has a responsibility to contribute to the protection of the environment, in the interests of his or her own health and the health of others.
3. All sections of society are responsible for protecting the environment and health as an intersectoral matter involving many disciplines; their respective duties should be clarified.
4. Every public authority and agency at different levels, in its daily work, should cooperate with other sectors in order to resolve problems of the environment and health.
5. Every government and public authority has the responsibility to protect the environment and to promote human health within the area under its jurisdiction, and to ensure that activities under its jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to human health in other states. Furthermore, each shares the common responsibility for safeguarding the global environment.
6. Every public and private body should assess its activities and carry them out in such a way as to protect people's health from harmful effects related to the physical, chemical, biological, microbiological and social environments. Each of these bodies should be accountable for its actions.
7. The media play a key role in promoting awareness and a positive attitude towards protection of health and the environment. They are entitled to adequate and accurate information and should be encouraged to communicate this information effectively to the public.
8. Nongovernmental organizations also play an important role in disseminating information to the public and promoting public awareness and response.

## Principles for public policy

1. Good health and wellbeing require a clean and harmonious environment in which physical, psychological, social and aesthetic factors are all given their due importance. The environment should be regarded as a resource for improving living conditions and increasing wellbeing.
2. The preferred approach should be to promote the principle of "prevention is better than cure".
3. The health of every individual, especially those in vulnerable and high-risk groups, must be protected. Special attention should be paid to disadvantaged groups.
4. Action on problems of the environment and health should be based on the best available scientific information.
5. New policies, technologies and developments should be introduced with prudence and not before appropriate prior assessment of the potential environmental and health impact. There should be a responsibility to show that they are not harmful to health or the environment.
6. The health of individuals and communities should take clear precedence over considerations of economy and trade.
7. All aspects of socioeconomic development that relate to the impact of the environment on health and wellbeing must be considered.

8. The entire flow of chemicals, materials, products and waste should be managed in such a way as to achieve optimal use of natural resources and to cause minimal contamination.
9. Governments, public authorities and private bodies should aim at both preventing and reducing adverse effects caused by potentially hazardous agents and degraded urban and rural environments.
10. Environmental standards need to be continually reviewed to take account of new knowledge about the environment and health and of the effects of future economic development. Where applicable such standards should be harmonized.
11. The principle should be applied whereby every public and private body that causes or may cause damage to the environment is made financially responsible (the polluter pays principle).
12. Criteria and procedures to quantify, monitor and evaluate environmental and health damage should be further developed and implemented.
13. Trade and economic policies and development assistance programmes affecting the environment and health in foreign countries should comply with all the above principles. Export of environmental and health hazards should be avoided.
14. Development assistance should promote sustainable development and the safeguarding and improvement of human health as one of its integral components.

## Strategic elements

1. The environment should be managed as a positive resource for human health and wellbeing.
2. In order to protect health comprehensive strategies are required, including, *inter alia*, the following elements:
  - The responsibilities of public and private bodies for implementing appropriate measures should be clearly defined at all levels.
  - Control measures and other tools should be applied, as appropriate, to reduce risks to health and wellbeing from environmental factors. Fiscal, administrative and economic instruments and land-use planning have a vital role to play in promoting environmental conditions conducive to health and wellbeing and should be used for that purpose.
  - Better methods of prevention should be introduced as knowledge expands, including the use of the most appropriate and cost-effective technologies and, if necessary, the imposition of bans.
  - Low-impact technology and products and the recycling and reuse of wastes should be encouraged. Changes should be made, as necessary, in raw materials, production processes and waste management techniques.
  - High standards of management and operation should be followed to ensure that appropriate technologies and best practices are applied, that regulations and guidance are adhered to, and that accidents and human failures are avoided.
  - Appropriate regulations should be promulgated; they should be both enforceable and enforced.
  - Standards should be set on the basis of the best available scientific information. The cost and benefit of action or lack of action and feasibility may also have to be assessed but in all cases risks should be minimized.
  - Comprehensive strategies should be developed that take account of the risks to human health and the environment arising from chemicals. These strategies should include, *inter alia*, registration procedures for new chemicals and systematic examination of existing chemicals.

- Contingency planning should be undertaken to deal with all types of serious accident, including those with transfrontier consequences.
  - Information systems should be strengthened to support monitoring of the effectiveness of measures taken, trend analysis, priority-setting and decision-making.
  - Environmental impact assessment should give greater emphasis to health aspects. Individuals and communities directly affected by the quality of a specific environment should be consulted and involved in managing that environment.
3. Medical and other relevant disciplines should be encouraged to pay greater attention to all aspects of environmental health. Environmental toxicology and environmental epidemiology are key tools of environmental health research and should be strengthened and further developed as special disciplines within the Region.
  4. Interdisciplinary research programmes in environmental epidemiology with the aim of clarifying links between the environment and health should be encouraged and strengthened at regional, national and international levels.
  5. The health sector should have responsibility for epidemiological surveillance through data collection, compilation, analysis and risk assessment of the health impact of environmental factors and for informing other sectors of society and the general public of trends and priorities.
  6. National and international programmes of multidisciplinary training, as well as the provision of health education and information for public and private bodies, should be encouraged and strengthened.

## Priorities

1. Governments and other public authorities, without prejudice to the importance of problem areas specific to their respective countries, the European Community and other intergovernmental organizations, as appropriate, should pay particular attention to the following urgent issues of the environment and health at local, regional, national and international levels and to take action on them:
  - global disturbances to the environment such as the destruction of the ozone layer and climatic change;
  - urban development, planning and renewal to protect health and promote wellbeing;
  - safe and adequate drinking-water supplies on the basis of the WHO Guidelines for drinking-water quality together with hygienic waste disposal for all urban and rural communities;
  - water quality in relation to surface, ground, coastal and recreational waters;
  - microbiological and chemical safety of food;
  - the environment and health impact of:
    - various energy options
    - transport, especially road transport
    - agricultural practices, including the use of fertilizers and pesticides, and waste disposal;
    - air quality on the basis of the WHO Air quality guidelines for Europe, especially in relation to oxides of sulfur and nitrogen, the photochemical oxidants ("summer smog") and volatile organic compounds;
    - indoor air quality (residential, recreational and occupational), including the effects of radon, passive smoking and chemicals;
    - persistent chemicals and those causing chronic effects;

- hazardous wastes including management, transport and disposal;
  - biotechnology and in particular genetically modified organisms;
  - contingency planning for and in response to accidents and disasters;
  - cleaner technologies as preventive measures.
2. In addressing all of these priorities, the importance of intersectoral environmental planning and community management to generate optimal health and wellbeing should be borne in mind.
  3. Health promotion should be added to health protection so as to induce the adoption of healthy lifestyles in a clean and harmonious environment.
  4. It should be recognized that some urgent problems require direct and immediate international cooperation and joint efforts.

### The way forward

#### 1. Member States of the European Region should:

- take all necessary steps to reverse negative trends as soon as possible and to maintain and increase the health-related improvements already taking place. In particular, they should make every effort to implement WHO's regional strategy for health for all as it concerns the environment and health;
- strengthen collaboration among themselves and, where appropriate, with the European Community and other intergovernmental bodies on mutual and transfrontier environmental problems that pose a threat to health;
- ensure that the Charter adopted at this meeting is made widely available in the languages of the European Region.

#### 2. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is invited to:

- explore ways of strengthening international mechanisms for assessing potential hazards to health associated with the environment and for developing guidance on their control;
- make a critical study of existing indicators of the effects of the environment on health and, where necessary, develop others that are both specific and effective;
- establish a European Advisory Committee on the Environment and Health in consultation with the governments of the countries of the Region;
- in collaboration with the governments of the European countries, examine the desirability and feasibility of establishing a European Centre for the Environment and Health or other suitable institutional arrangements, with a view to strengthening collaboration on the health aspects of environmental protection with special emphasis on information systems, mechanisms for exchanging experience and coordinated studies. In such arrangements, cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and other organizations is desirable. Account should be taken of the environmental agency to be established within the European Community.

#### 3. Member States of the European Region and WHO should:

- promote the widest possible endorsement of the principles and attainment of the objectives of the Charter.

4. European Ministers of the Environment and of Health should:

- meet again within five years to evaluate national and international progress and to endorse specific action plans drawn up by WHO and other international organizations for eliminating the most significant environmental threats to health as rapidly as possible.

See also the books on environment and health in the WHO/Europe [publications catalogue](#).