Environmental Health

Strategic issues

In the Western Pacific Region, it is estimated that annually 2.9 million deaths, or 24% of the total deaths, are attributable to environmental risks. Environmental risk factors include unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene, indoor and outdoor air pollution, toxic and hazardous chemicals and wastes, radiation, climate change and occupational conditions.

In line with Regional Committee mandates, WHO support is extended to Member States to strengthen human resources and institutional capacity in environmental health risk assessment and management, to establish and strengthen multisectoral coordination mechanisms, to develop national and local action plans on environmental health, to increase health sector input to the implementation of international agreements related to environmental health, and to participate actively in intercountry initiatives such as the Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asian Countries and the Pacific Framework for Action on Drinking Water Quality and Health.

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in 2008 endorsed the Regional Framework for Action to Protect Human Health from the Effects of Climate Change in the Asia Pacific Region. WHO support is provided to Member States to develop national strategies and plans to protect health from the effects of climate change, strengthen existing health infrastructure and human resources for responding to potential health risks resulting from climate change, establish programmes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by the health sector, and advocate the decisions made by other sectors on climate change that protect and promote health.

Action and results

WHO, through the Regional Offices for South-East Asia and the Western Pacific, and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, convened the Second Ministerial Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asian Countries in July 2010 in Jeju, Republic of Korea. The forum reviewed progress in developing and implementing national environmental health action plans and policy briefs on regional environmental health priorities prepared by thematic working groups. The Regional Forum adopted “health impact assessments” as a new regional priority, and approved the workplans of the working groups. It also established a task force to recommend ways to improve the governance, partnerships and impact of the Regional Forum. With WHO support, the working group on health impact assessments met to discuss the implementation of its workplan in November 2010 in Dunedin, New Zealand, in conjunction with the Third Asia Pacific Regional Health Impact Assessment Conference. National environmental health action plans were approved by governments in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and the Philippines, and were in the process of approval in Cambodia, Malaysia and Viet Nam.

WHO continued to support countries in assessing health vulnerability to climate change and in developing national strategies and action plans for the health sector response to climate change. With financial support from the Republic of Korea and Japan, WHO collaborated with 11 Pacific island countries to conduct health vulnerability assessments and develop their national strategies and action plans for health sector response. A similar activity was initiated in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. With funds from the Government of the Republic of Korea, WHO initiated two projects to support
the implementation of national strategies and action plans, involving Cambodia, Mongolia and Papua New Guinea: one focusing on vectorborne diseases and the other on waterborne diseases. China, Fiji, the Philippines and Viet Nam continued to implement capacity-building projects for health sector adaptation to climate change. WHO continued to advocate for urban transport systems that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions while protecting and promoting people’s health.

Environmentally Sustainable and Healthy Urban Transport (ESHUT), an initiative that started in 2009 to promote non-motorized transport (e.g. bicycling and walking) and efficient public transport systems, was promoted at regional forums.

Under the Water Quality Partnership with the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), WHO led the advocacy and implementation of water safety plans in six countries. WHO support in partnership with the Secretariat for the Pacific Community’s Pacific Applied Geoscience Division has advanced water safety plans in countries in the Pacific, including Fiji, the Marshall Islands and Samoa. The WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific hosted a stakeholders’ meeting in October 2010 to discuss project progress and water safety plans. WHO also co-sponsored a session on water safety plans at the Third Southeast Asian Water Utilities Network Convention in December 2010, during which the WHO-led Asia-Pacific Water Safety Plan Network was presented. Phase 2 of the WHO/AusAID Water Quality Partnership ended in June 2011, before which a proposal for Phase 3 was developed.

WHO continued to provide technical support for water and sanitation sector assessments in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Philippines and Viet Nam. WHO continued its advocacy and capacity-building efforts on household water treatment and storage. Training modules were developed and training courses were conducted in Cambodia and Viet Nam, in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Enterprise Development (WaterSHED) project.

Asbestos has become an emerging concern in many developing countries in the Region. WHO has continued to support the Asian Asbestos Initiative and participated in its third international seminar organized by the WHO Collaborating Centre for Occupational Health at the University of Occupational and Environmental Health in Fukuoka, Japan, in November 2010. At the seminar, WHO held a consultation to sound out a regional strategy for occupational health, and subsequently developed the Regional Framework for Action for Occupational Health 2011–2015. With funds from the Japanese Government, WHO continued to support a project on workers’ health protection in Viet Nam with the objectives to expand occupational health services, to reduce asbestos-related diseases and to protect health care workers from occupational hazards.

WHO continued to support the development of national plans and policies for health care waste management in Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Mongolia and Viet Nam, and expert guidance was provided to Fiji to ensure specific health care waste disposal practices were implemented. Technical support was provided for the elimination of mercury in health care in China, Mongolia, the Philippines and Viet Nam. WHO continued to support the development of national policies on health impact assessment in Cambodia and Viet Nam. With WHO support, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga embarked on a two-year project to establish a poison information network in the Pacific.
For nearly three decades, WHO has prioritized work in healthy settings—physical and social settings such as schools, workplaces, marketplaces, hospitals, villages and communities that serve as supportive environments for health protection and health promotion.

By creating environments that make it easier for people to make healthy choices, for example in choosing healthier foods or working in smoke-free offices, people can lessen the impact of many of the risk factors that contribute to ill health.

Healthy settings generally require interdisciplinary approaches that crossover into a variety of fields. Noncommunicable disease is a case point.

Public health officials have long understood that doctors, nurses, clinics and hospitals alone can’t solve the burgeoning problem of noncommunicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory ailments and diabetes. These chronic diseases, which claim more than 30 000 lives every day in the Western Pacific Region, are driven in large part by four common risk factors—tobacco use, alcohol abuse, poor diets and physical inactivity.

But these risk factors can’t be solved by the health sector alone. A coordinated effort among various sectors, including educators, food processors, traders and importers, government and community-based organizations, is needed.

In an effort to address these concerns, Member States in the Western Pacific Region have embraced the healthy settings approach not only in combating noncommunicable diseases, but also in promoting healthier urban environments, better food safety and healthier ageing.

In the Western Pacific, Healthy Cities and Healthy Islands initiatives have been actively pursued since the mid-1990s. Today, various national health promotion programmes of our Member States emphasize supportive environments, including Health-promoting Schools, Healthy Marketplaces, Healthy Workplaces, Health-promoting Hospitals and Healthy Restaurants.

WHO assists Member States in setting up models and demonstration sites, in deriving and disseminating best practices, and in evaluating healthy settings. WHO has also developed regional guidance for the different settings, taking into account local culture and traditions.

In an effort to recognize exemplary work, the Alliance for Healthy Cities in conjunction with WHO, announced awards for a variety of best practices and proposals in 2010.

Eleven different cities in the Region received awards for areas ranging from best practices for environmentally sustainable, healthy urban transport and safe cities to best proposals for smoke-free workplaces and health-promoting schools.

The Regional Director’s Outstanding Healthy City Award for 2010 was presented to Ichikawa City, Japan, which initiated its Healthy Cities programme in 1998 and has participated in the Alliance for Healthy Cities as a founding member since 2003.

For the 22 Pacific island countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region, the vision of Healthy Islands was first envisioned as an ideal by the Ministers of Health for the Pacific Island Countries meeting on Yanuca Island, Fiji, 1995.

In 2011, Best Practice Recognitions were given to the Tafea Local Government Council in Vanuatu for Community-based Efforts in Noncommunicable Diseases Elimination and to the Bureau of Public Health in Palau for government support for a Healthy Workplace Programme.

Best Proposal Recognitions were given to the Pacific Foundation for the Advancement of Women in Fiji for hygiene and to the Community College of Micronesia, Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia, for the Adopt-a-Community Approach for a Healthy and Clean Chuuk.
Future directions

In preparation for the Third Ministerial Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asian Countries to be held in Malaysia in 2013, WHO, in collaboration with UNEP, will complete the work of the task force and support the various thematic working groups in the implementation of their respective workplans. WHO support will be extended to countries to implement their national environmental health action plans.

Following the completion of national strategies and action plans for the health sector response to climate change, WHO will collaborate with Member States to implement the national strategies and action plans and where necessary explore possible financial resources to support activities. WHO will continue to promote the development and implementation of ESHUT activities in countries and at regional forums.

The WHO-led Asia-Pacific Water Safety Plan Network is expected to be officially launched in July 2011 during the Singapore International Water Week. WHO will continue to provide technical support to Member States for water and sanitation sector assessments and health care waste management, and will work with Member States to build their capacity in household water treatment and storage through the development of training materials and conduct of training courses. WHO will support the participation of Member States in the Third East Asia Conference on Sanitation and Hygiene to be held in Indonesia in 2012.

WHO will continue to work with Member States and international partners to develop national policies and programmes to reduce asbestos-related diseases, improve the coverage of occupational health services, and promote healthy workplaces.