Environment and Health Information System

Report on the First Meeting of a Working Group

The Hague, Netherlands
2 October 2003
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ABSTRACT

Experts from ministries of health and/or environment in twenty-seven countries met to agree on a common position for Member States on the need and the general scope of European Environment and Health Information System (EHIS). They drafted a contribution to the Ministerial declaration to be presented at the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in June 2004 in Budapest. The group acknowledged the importance of collaborative international effort in the establishment of a pan-European environment and health information system as a common base for policy-making. The participants reconfirmed the usefulness of such a system in providing a common ‘language’, and opportunities to exchange information on best practices. They discussed Member States’ involvement and expectations from the system, including its key features, and pointed out organizational mechanisms for its operation and challenges in implementation. The group acknowledged the importance of a legal framework for EHIS to operate successfully. It was emphasized that the current work of the European Commission on the Environment and Health Action Plan may be a highly relevant contribution towards the establishment of the EHIS.

Keywords

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
INFORMATION SYSTEMS
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
POLICY MAKING
EUROPE

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  WHO Regional Office for Europe
  Scherfigsvej 8
  DK-2100 Copenhagen Ø, Denmark

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**BACKGROUND**

Following the recommendations of the Second Intergovernmental Meeting in Stockholm, the First Meeting of the Working Group (WG) on an Environment and Health Information System (EHIS) was convened in The Hague, the Netherlands on 2 October 2003. The purpose of the meeting was to agree on a common position of Member States on the need for and general scope of, the EHIS, and to draft the contribution to the Budapest Conference Declaration concerning establishment of the European Environment and Health Information System.

Thirty-three WHO European Region Member States responded to WHO’s invitation and nominated experts from the ministries of health and/or environment for the WG. The meeting gathered 39 participants representing 27 countries and international organizations (Annex 1). The WG meeting was hosted by the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment and by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, and took place in the premises of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, which is acknowledged with appreciation. A short Background Paper was prepared by WHO prior to the meeting and distributed to the WG participants in advance. Julie Ng-A-Tham and Anna Paldy were elected co-chairmen of the meeting.

Mr J.I.M. de Goeij, Director General for Public Health, the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport welcomed the participants, emphasizing the importance of collaborative international effort in establishing an environment and health information system as the common base for policy-making, thus providing a common “language” and opportunity to exchange information on best practice.

After an overview of the status of environmental health information system development and the main elements of the Budapest Declaration, presented by WHO Europe representatives, participants discussed Member States’ involvement and expectations from the system. The usefulness and advantages of a common pan-European EH information system were emphasized, as well as challenges involved in implementing such a system. The discussion revealed the diversity of situations in Member States with respect to environment and health information systems.

Discussion of the draft Declaration (the relevant section) focused on the following points:

- use and usefulness of the system;
- key features;
- spatial/territorial level of implementation;
- legal framework for the system operation;
- organizational mechanisms needed.

Discussion was held in three smaller working groups chaired by Karin Klitgaard, Alexandra M. Cucu, and Manfred H.J. Schmitz.

At the plenary session, conclusions from three groups were summarized and the key elements of the draft text for the Declaration were agreed upon. Participants pointed out the importance of a legal framework for the successful EHIS operation. As suggested by a few countries in the European Union, such as Italy and the Netherlands, an EC directive would be an adequate instrument for such a legal framework.

The draft text of the Declaration was proposed as follows:
Draft text of the section of the Ministerial Declaration on the Environment and Health Information System

We reaffirm the necessity of the Environment and Health Information System (EHIS) as an essential tool to support EH policy making, strengthening evidence-based priority setting and enhancing information access and communication with the public. We recognize that a well-designed EHIS will facilitate comparisons between countries and regions, and will streamline national and international reporting, enabling effective use of the resources.

We commend the work done by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the European Commission and the European Environment Agency, which have provided the methodological background for a core set of environment and health indicators, linked with assessment and reporting mechanisms.

We adopt a Pan European Programme that ensures the development of EHIS, serving common measurable policy goals and targets. The system will be based on a common set of indicators and will provide information about environmental health risks and effects of actions, policy relevant assessment, reporting and communication mechanisms.

The system will:

- Be useful for policy making at national and international level;
- Enable public access to information and contribute to building advocacy, communication, and education strategies;
- Integrate environment and health information, enhancing interoperability of existing information systems;
- Use a clearinghouse to provide the knowledge-base on environment and health linkages;
- Be based on shared information aimed at reducing the reporting burden in Member States and avoiding duplication;
- Apply standardized methodologies for transparent data collection, processing and dissemination, allowing inter-regional and inter-country comparisons, and time trends analysis;
- Be flexible with respect to the policy demands, priority issues of concern, and allowing for adjustments according to new scientific developments.

We invite the relevant organizations and institutions, including WHO, EC, EEA, UNECE, and UNEP, in accordance with their mandates, to assist the Member States in the implementation of a Pan-European programme on EHIS. We call for coordination of the international programmes and strengthened collaboration and networking of the related international initiatives. We encourage identification of appropriate financial mechanisms for pan European system development and implementation. We will stimulate inter-sectorial and inter-agency collaboration, also beyond the health and environment sectors (e.g. transport) in our countries.

We recognize the existing differences across the WHO European Region concerning country expertise, capacities and resources to implement EHIS. We call on the relevant international organizations and institutions to support Member States in capacity building and technology transfer and training.

We ask the Programme to report back on the progress of the system implementation.
Annex 1

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