



# **United Nations Environment Programme**

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PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT • PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE

ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

**ELEVENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON**

## **HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT: GLOBAL PARTNERS FOR GLOBAL SOLUTIONS**

**CHILDHOOD ANTECEDENTS TO ADULT ILLNESS**

**STATEMENT**

### **UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME**

**Mr. Adnan Z. Amin  
Director, New York Office**

Mr. Chairman, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is once again a pleasure for me to address the annual International Conference on Health and the Environment, continuing a long-standing tradition of UNEP's support for World Information Transfer's efforts in focusing the attention of the international community on pertinent issues - this year, on childhood antecedents to adult disease. This topic is particularly relevant in light of the forthcoming General Assembly Special Session on Children, as well as the fact that the linkages between poverty, environment and health are becoming a major issue in the preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which will be held in August of this year in Johannesburg.

Mr. Chairman,

Just as we know that the emotional support and encouragement that we provide our children from their earliest days is an essential element in the formation of their characters, so too is it clear that the quality of the environment in which a child is born and raised can have a profound impact on his or her physical and mental development. We are slowly but surely improving our understanding of how childhood exposure to the effects of environmental degradation and pollution can have long-lasting impacts, including contributing to the onset of certain diseases in adult life.

In minimizing the negative environmental impacts on children's health, UNEP firmly believes that prevention is the only sustainable solution - a healthier future for our children will be ensured only through safeguarding the environment. This message is central to a new publication entitled, *Children in the New Millennium: Environmental Impact on Health*, that UNEP, UNICEF and WHO will be launching in two weeks time, during the General Assembly Special Session on Children. We hope that the publication will help raise awareness and deepen our understanding of children's environmental health issues, serving as a call to action, stimulating discussion and intensifying action to support the mutually reinforcing goals of managing environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and improving child health.

Mr. Chairman,

Among the specific environmental issues addressed in the book are the potential effects of exposure to chemicals, such as lead, certain pesticides, mercury and arsenic. Such chemicals can potentially have a devastating effect on the development of the foetus and child, contributing to the onset on certain diseases including cancers. In the United States, cancer is the second biggest killer of children after accidents, with the median age of child victims of cancer being 6 years old. Acute leukaemia is the most common type of cancer found in children, and its incidence appears to be rising in some developed countries. While the causes remain unclear, certain toxic substances and radiation in the environment are believed to be factors in the cell changes that lead to cancer. Among the environmental factors that may play a role are tobacco smoke, radon, asbestos, ultraviolet light radiation, hazardous waste, and some pesticides.

When children are exposed from infancy onward, their bodies can accumulate more chemicals and have more time to develop various diseases with long latency periods that have been connected to certain chemical pollutants. For example, a growing body of epidemiological research and studies of laboratory animals suggest the possible link of long-term exposure to certain pesticides and certain cancers, including leukaemia, sarcoma, lymphoma, and brain cancer in children. Studies have indicated that the risk of developing cancer might be higher if exposure to carcinogens begins in childhood.

Recognising such risks, UNEP's Governing Council at its recent special session held in February in Cartagena, Columbia, adopted a forward-looking decision to move towards a new global strategy for reducing the environmental and health risks from toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes. Under the decision, nations requested a stocktaking exercise to pin point crucial gaps in mankind's knowledge on chemicals and wastes.

We have chemicals that we use in our day-to-day lives, some of which are safe, some of which are not safe and most of which we know little or nothing about. The project mandated by UNEP's Governing Council will take stock of progress made, identify gaps in our knowledge and look towards an approach that solves these problems. It was agreed that developing a strategic approach to international chemicals management should build upon the Bahia Declaration and Priorities for Action Beyond 2000 drawn up two years ago in Brazil by the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety.

UNEP's Governing Council also decided that the time had come to begin linking chemical safety and health issues with development ones. It is hoped that this will encourage the lending or donating programmes of multilateral banks, Governments and development organizations, to take into account issues of chemicals and hazardous wastes in their activities. For example, a hospital incinerator constructed in a developing country should use the best available technology to ensure that the minimum amount of carcinogenic substances known as dioxins and furans are emitted when it operates.

Another significant development in the field of chemicals was the formal adoption and signing of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) on 22 May 2001. Governments have recognized that POPs endanger human health globally, as well as the environment from one generation to the next. They agreed on a series of policies to minimize and eliminate some of the most toxic chemicals ever created in order to secure the health of future generations and the integrity of the chain of life. The Stockholm POPs Convention will enter into force after 50 Governments have signed and ratified it, but voluntary implementation of the Stockholm Convention has already begun prior to its entry into force.

Mr. Chairman,

Both indoor and outdoor air pollution have been linked to a series of health problems which are particularly damaging to children, leading to diseases that can continue to plague them in adult life. Outdoor air pollution can cause pulmonary irritation, interfere with foetal growth and infant development, impair lung functions, exacerbate viral

infections, bronchitis and pneumonia, and worsen heart problems, asthma, and emphysema. Studies in developing countries have also linked exposure to indoor air pollution with chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, as well as stillbirths and low-birth weight. In China, lung cancer has also been found to result from long-term exposure to cooking with coal.

Another environmental problem that has been cited as a causal factor in the development of cancers is ozone layer depletion. Skin cancer is the most worrisome health impact of ozone depletion. Overexposure to the sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV-B) light may damage children's skin. Recent studies indicate that excessive sunburns experienced by children 10 to 15 years of age increase by threefold the chance of developing malignant melanoma, the most deadly kind of skin cancer, later in life. In Europe, evaluations of ultraviolet-related skin cancers suggest that, despite the decline in the concentrations of ozone depleting substances, skin cancer incidences will not begin to fall until about 2060.

The international response to this issue is embodied in the Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, which was concluded in Vienna in 1985, under UNEP's auspices. The Convention's 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, which gave teeth to the treaty, has been remarkably successful. Production of the most damaging ozone-depleting substances was eliminated, except for a few critical uses, by 1996 in developed countries and should be phased out by 2010 in developing countries. Thanks to these measures, it is currently estimated the CFC concentration in the ozone layer is expected to recover to pre-1980 levels by the year 2050, with the resultant healing of the 'ozone hole'.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me conclude by reiterating what I stressed at the beginning of my presentation, prevention is essential - a healthy future for our children will be ensured only through safeguarding the environment. I have outlined some examples of measures that are being undertaken at the international level, but sustained progress can only be made if individuals strive together for concerted action. Governments, the United Nations system, civil society, and the private sector need to work together to foster intersectoral cooperation at all levels to promote safe environments for children, so that we can give them both a healthy childhood and the prospect of a healthy adult life.

Thank you.