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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

14th WIT International Conference on Health and Environment: Global Partners for Global Solutions

Bridging Policies for Action on MDGs:

The Environmental Underpinnings of the Health MDGs

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Chair, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

Hippocrates, the Greek physician known as the "Father of Medicine", once noted, "If you want to learn about the health of a population, look at the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the places where they live." Quite progressive thinking for the time, which was the fifth century B.C., yet today, as we consider the timely theme of this conference, 'Bridging Policies for Action on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)', it rings true more than ever. For as the Millennium Task Force on Environmental Sustainability, commissioned by the UN Secretary-General under the able leadership of Professor Jeffrey Sachs, concluded, "Quite simply, Environmental Sustainability is the foundation upon which achieving all the other MDGs must be built". I would like to devote my remarks today to the environmental underpinnings of the health MDGs, and UNEP's perspective in this regard and a few examples of its relevant activities.

As the international community approaches the five-year review of the Millennium Declaration and its associated MDGs at a Summit-level meeting of the General Assembly in September, it is increasingly evident that we depend on healthy ecosystems such as watersheds and aquifers, forests, soils and atmosphere as the basis for our health, as well as for many economic goods and services. Concrete measures are urgently required to sustainably manage this resource base if the international agreed development goals are to be met and the vicious circle of poverty, disease, environmental degradation and insecurity is to be broken. This rationale is the basis for UNEP's motto, 'Environment for Development'.

Yet as warned in the recently released Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), in which UNEP played a key role, the earth's natural resources are being strained to capacity, and the harmful consequences of this degradation to human health are already being felt and could grow significantly worse over the next 50 years. The MA synthesis report warns that the erosion of ecosystems could lead to an increase in existing diseases such as malaria and cholera, as well as a rising risk of emerging new diseases. It also specifically underscores that worsening ecosystems will affect the world's ability to meet the MDGs, as ecosystems and human health are very much intertwined.

Allow me to illustrate some of the interlinkages between environmental conditions and the two specific health MDGs. When it comes to MDG 4, reducing child mortality, it is clear that diseases (such as diarrhea) are tied to unclean water and inadequate sanitation and respiratory infections are related to indoor and outdoor air pollution, and that these diseases are among the leading killers of children under five. Lack of fuel for boiling water also contributes to

preventable waterborne diseases. With regard to MDG 5, improving maternal health, inhaling polluted indoor air and carrying heavy loads of water and fuel wood hurt women's health and can make them less fit to bear children, with greater risks of complications during pregnancy. Furthermore, a lack of energy for illumination and refrigeration, as well as inadequate sanitation, undermines health care, especially in rural areas.

The need for prioritized actions to ensure that environmental sustainability is a central component for the successful implementation of the MDG's – including fundamentally the health MDGs - was a unanimous conviction put forward by ministers of environment that met during UNEP's Global Ministerial Environment Forum earlier this year in Nairobi. Ministers and senior government officials from 133 member states of the UN considered the environmental underpinnings of the MDGs that relate to the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (goal 1), ensuring environmental sustainability (goal 7), and the promotion of gender equality and empowering women (goal 3). In this context they specifically considered policy issues related to water, sanitation and human settlements with a view to providing concrete recommendations for the accelerated and sustainable implementation of these MDGs both to the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), which met here in New York last week, and as an important input to the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly in September 2005. A summary

of these recommendations can be found on UNEP's web-site:

<http://www.unep.org/gc/gc23/documents/PresidentSummary.pdf>.

Much of UNEP's work addresses the nexus between health and environment, for example by promoting environmentally sound technologies for freshwater and sanitation provision, clean energy solutions to combat indoor and outdoor air pollution, or through its wide-ranging programmes to mitigate chemical and hazardous waste pollution. UNEP is also working closely with the World Health Organizations (WHO) and a host of other actors to implement a number of specific initiatives in the field of environmental health and children's environmental health that were initiated as partnerships in the context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD).

The Health and Environment Linkages Initiative (HELI) is a global effort by WHO and UNEP to promote and facilitate action in developing countries to reduce environmental threats to human health, in support of sustainable development objectives. HELI supports a more coherent approach to valuing the services that ecosystems provide to human health as part of decision-making processes. Activities include: pilot projects in Jordan, Nigeria and Thailand that bring together diverse government and civil society sectors to assess and recommend integrated policies on environment and health issues; guidance on better use of impact assessment and economic valuation to enhance environment and health decision-making; improving access to policy-relevant knowledge, resources, and tools, via electronic media and printed materials, in priority areas (such as water

quality, availability and sanitation; water-related vector-borne diseases; ambient and indoor air quality; toxic substances; and global environmental change); and capacity building for policy action at local, national and regional levels through technical workshops and interactive events including policy-makers, scientists and the public.

Building on the excellent collaboration built up in the context development of the UNEP-WHO-UNICEF publication *Children in the New Millennium: Environmental Impact on Health* in 2002 and the subsequent establishment of the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance (HECA) as a WSSD partnership, UNEP has continued to accord importance to children's environmental health (CEH) activities, through contributions within the HECA framework, specific CEH collaborative activities, as well as a range of activities that are directly relevant to CEH. UNEP, through its New York Office, is an active member of HECA, and produces HECANET on a monthly basis. HECANET provides updates on the activities of HECA and its members, as well as an extensive overview of media coverage of children's environmental health issues and relevant meetings, research findings and information and advocacy resources, and is sent to an international list of over 900 organizations and individuals active in this field.

UNEP is also working with WHO various collaborative capacity-building activities related to children's environmental health, for example, how to support the training of health care providers and environmental health officers, and promote better collection of information related to environmental risk factors affecting children's health. This year UNEP is collaborating with WHO on training events planned for pediatricians and other professionals in both Africa (in Nairobi) and Latin America.

Chairperson, distinguished participants,

Let me end with what UNEP's Executive Director noted in his opening statement to UNEP Governing Council/GMEF, "environment is the golden thread, the red ribbon, running through and around all the Goals". Addressing the link between environment and poverty takes on a particular urgency when framed in terms of making strides in meeting the health MDGs of reducing child mortality and improving maternal health. As the Ministers concluded at the UNEP GMEF, at this stage the focus must be on accelerating implementation of agreed actions - it is not about what needs to be done, but getting it done that is most relevant. I thank WIT for devoting its conference this year to the vitally important topic of 'Bridging Policies for Action on MDGs', and for giving UNEP the opportunity to address this session.