



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

‘Children in the New Millennium: Environmental Impact on Health’

Launch

9 MAY 2002

STATEMENT

**UNITED NATIONS
ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME**

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

Distinguished participants,

It is a privilege and pleasure for me to address you at this event at which we are launching the new UNEP, UNICEF and WHO publication *Children in the New Millennium: Environmental Impact on Health*.

The publication was conceived as an updated version of the well-received 1990 report *Children and the Environment*, which was produced by UNEP and UNICEF for the World Summit on Children and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio "Earth Summit") in 1992.

That original publication starts with the alarming phrase, "Environmental degradation is killing children". Twelve years on, this remains the case. We know that up to one-third of the global burden of disease can be attributed to negative environmental factors, such as polluted air, dirty water, poor sanitation, and insect-transmitted diseases such as malaria. The health of the most vulnerable in society, those living in desperate poverty, the elderly and our children is particularly affected. Approximately two-thirds of the global burden of environment-related disease is borne by children.

Environmental quality is one of the key factors in determining whether a child survives the first years of life, and strongly influences the child's subsequent physical and mental development. They are at greater risk from environmental hazards because of their physical size, immature organs, metabolic rate, behaviour, natural curiosity, and lack of knowledge.

Faced with these facts, UNEP, UNICEF and WHO were compelled to produce a report that aims to inject new urgency in our efforts to address the interlinkages between environmental factors and the survival, protection and development of children. By providing information on specific environmental health threats facing children in their immediate surroundings, as well as on the impact of global environmental problems, we hope that it will serve as a clear call to action. It should stimulate discussion and lead to intensified action in the field of children's environmental health, and help to elevate the issue on the international agenda.

To this end, we developed the publication as a means of developing a linkage between two intergovernmental reviews dealing with related aspects of the sustainable development agenda – the current UN General Assembly Special Session on Children and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which will be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the end of August. One of the key issues being addressed by WSSD is the nexus between health, environment and poverty. Within this theme there have been acknowledgements of the special vulnerabilities of children to environmental health threats.

We also need to think beyond the Special Session on Children and WSSD, in terms of working to implement the decisions that are taken. In that way we can ensure that a

decade from now we can look back knowing that we have acted early and decisively in the name of children and future generations.

In order to stimulate the action required in the field of children's environmental health in the coming decade, *Children and the Environment* provides a series of recommendations for the local, national, regional and international levels. It stresses that community participation and actions at the local and household level are critical because this is where children's health and well-being are first and directly influenced by environmental problems. At the national level, the report contends that the key is to recognise and exploit the interlinkages and synergies between environmental issues and child-focused interventions. There is also a need to fill the substantial gaps that exist in the information and thus the understanding of children's environmental health issues. The report then points to the need to develop coordinated regional approaches to children's environmental health issues. While at the international level, the report underscores the need to bring children's environmental health, growth, and development issues to the forefront of the international agenda and translate declarations into concrete action.

To achieve this, Governments, the United Nations system, civil society and the private sector need to work together to promote safe and healthy environments for children. UNEP, UNICEF and WHO are fully committed to fostering collaboration to place children's environmental health interests at the forefront of our respective agendas. For, as stressed in our new report - prevention is the only sustainable solution: a healthy future for our children depends in large part on our efforts to safeguard the environment.

I hope that the publication will be useful to you in your own work and in our collective efforts to protect children's health and the health of our planet.

Thank you.