HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

Many of the past approaches to dealing with environmental health problems are still indispensable. At the same time, however, new needs have arisen which call for new approaches. In particular, some of the most serious environmental health problems of today stem from the processes of urbanization and economic development. In many cases, they can be solved or greatly reduced if there is strong support for environmental health at the highest levels of government and industry. Programmes for promoting such support and organizing activities which involve the many different sectors concerned with environmental health are needed.
1. INTRODUCTION

"In 1854, Dr John Snow, having satisfied himself that an outbreak of cholera in London was due to faecal contamination of a water supply, suggested removal of the handle from a pump in Broad Street, Soho. This was done, and the outbreak came to an end (sceptics said that the epidemic was already declining at the time)."1 In 1991, we still have outbreaks of cholera, but the equivalent of removing a pump handle is no longer a simple matter. The complexities of environmental health have moved well beyond the traditional beginnings in the World Health Organization which emphasized environmental sanitation and the problems of water supply.

The contemporary concept of environmental health has grown to include an almost limitless variety of concerns: air pollution, water pollution, waste management (solid, liquid, municipal, industrial, hazardous or toxic), food safety, chemical safety, and even the potential disappearance of South Pacific islands because of global warming. The dangers of the greenhouse effect and stratospheric ozone depletion conflict with the need for economic growth and development. The public health official is pitted against forces that go far beyond the health sector's resources and political influence.

As we enter the 1990s, environmental health issues are becoming even more complex as unanticipated global changes occur in the political, social and economic sectors. In the face of this growing complexity and these competing demands for limited resources, what can be done to focus our attention constructively on the important issues?

2. EVOLVING APPROACHES

Previous efforts to deal with environmental health issues have been organized, for the most part, in four programmes: community water supply and sanitation, rural and urban development and housing, control of environmental health hazards, and food safety. More recently, a fifth programme has been added in the area of chemical safety. In implementing these programmes WHO has traditionally provided technical advisory services, supported human resources development through fellowship and group training activities, and purchased small amounts of supplies and equipment to support the development of institutions and infrastructure. This has been done with varying degrees of efficiency and effectiveness, but on balance it has made a significant contribution to coping with increasingly severe environmental problems.

Thus, despite significant population growth in the Region, overall coverage with water supply and sanitation facilities has increased by about 12% over the last ten years. Even where industrialization is rapid, environmental impact assessment has come to be accepted in a number of developing countries as an essential part of the development decision-making process. In many industrial areas where a smoking chimney was once seen only as a sign of prosperity, it is now also recognized as a health hazard. There is a growing awareness in government, industry and the public of the importance of sound environmental health decision-making for sustainable development.

Much of the traditional work must continue. Water wells still have to be drilled; latrines and sewage treatment facilities still have to be constructed; pollution control equipment still has to be installed and maintained. Likewise we must continue to train and educate food handlers, environmental health technicians, engineers, programme managers, and policy-level decision-makers. As we attempt to deal with the ever-increasing environmental health problems of rapidly growing urban areas, we must not neglect the concerns that continue to weigh heavily on rural populations. At the same time, however, we have to supplement these efforts with more effective and practicable implementation and coordination methods and mechanisms.

To focus WHO's attention on the main issues, the Director-General formed a commission on health and environment to do the following:

- Describe the main environmental determinants affecting human health in the process of socioeconomic development.
- Assess the health impact of exposure to these environmental determinants.
- Indicate the likely trends over the next two decades.
- Identify research needs.
- Suggest general strategies to prevent or mitigate the most serious adverse environmental health trends.

The WHO Commission on Health and Environment was established early in 1990. It is chaired by Mrs Simone Veil (France) and consists of 23 members. It is assisted by four technical panels, on energy, food and agriculture, industry, and urbanization. The Commission's report will be available in late 1991 and will make a major contribution to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 1 to 12 June 1992.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development will outline international strategies and measures to halt or reverse the process of environmental degradation in the context of national and international efforts to promote sustainable and environmentally sound development. In particular, the Conference will be requested to adopt a programme of action for the international community for the period from 1992 to the year 2000. It is of paramount importance that the health dimension of the environmental and developmental crisis should be fully reflected in this programme.

In the Western Pacific Region, the global perspective provided by the WHO Commission and the United Nations Conference will be vitally important in shaping the environmental health programme. However, a more specific response to regional needs will be delineated in collaboration with national and international experts. The regional programme framework developed as a result of this process will give particular attention to setting priorities and providing guidelines for interorganizational cooperation and coordination. Such a framework could serve as a blueprint for the future programme planning and development activities of all organizations dealing with environmental health.

Among other things, the programme reflected in this framework will focus on healthy urban environments, chemical safety in expanding industrial economies, and environmentally healthy coastal areas as an integral part of growth and development. These issues are of special importance to the Western Pacific Region now, as economic growth is placing an overload on existing environmental health infrastructures and resources.
3. CURRENT INITIATIVES

In the past, attention to environmental health issues has tended to be locally focused, but in recent years it has become abundantly clear that we must also look beyond the border of our own villages, cities and countries. Climatic change, stratospheric ozone depletion, acid rain, and the transboundary movement of toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes are only a few of the issues that have both local and global significance. Solving environmental health problems can involve marketing decisions made in industrial board rooms, economic development decisions made in government offices, and consumer decisions made by the end user about, for instance, what to do with an empty container. In the face of such a broad range of concerns, how do we decide what is most important? Where are WHO's key entry points?

One promising step towards answering such questions is the preparation of a healthy urban environments project.

The rapid growth of urban areas in Member States has caused severe overloading of urban infrastructures and services providing housing, transportation, water, energy, domestic and industrial waste disposal, parks and recreational areas. As a result, the quality of the living environment in many urban areas has deteriorated, threatening the health of the people living there. In particular, disadvantaged groups such as squatters and slum dwellers in underserved areas suffer greatly from the lack of a healthy environment and access to life-supporting services.

As observed earlier this year by the World Health Assembly resolution on urban health development (WHA44.27), achieving desirable levels of health in an urban environment involves dealing with a wide range of issues affecting the physical environment, lifestyles, health care services and public policy. For this, environment and health considerations must become part of the urban planning and development processes. This requires strong leadership, a significant commitment of organizational resources, and well defined mechanisms for integrating related efforts. In this regard, a new WHO initiative focused on the development of healthy urban environments is called for in the Western Pacific Region.

Three WHO meetings have been organized which will significantly contribute to the delineation of this new initiative:

1. the Working Group on Integration of Environmental Health into Planning for Urban Development (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 25 February - 1 March 1991);
2. the Working Group on Urban Health Development (Osaka, Japan, 18-21 September 1991); and
3. the Meeting of the Sub-Committee on Health Promotion of the Western Pacific Advisory Committee on Health Research (Manila, Philippines, 7-9 October 1991).

The recommendations of the Working Group on the Integration of Environmental Health into Planning for Urban Development cover the institutional requirements for intersectoral cooperation, the supportive mechanisms for advocacy and participation, and the monitoring, training and research required for programme implementation. The recommendations also recognize the need to develop a clear vision of what is to be accomplished, and a programme to achieve it. They stress the importance of marketing such a programme to key decision-makers and target populations so as to secure the necessary support.
The Working Group to be convened in Osaka will build on the output of the Working Group on Integration of Environmental Health into Planning for Urban Development. It will focus on the physical environment, health care services, changing lifestyles and public policy, delineating strategies and approaches for a healthy urban environment initiative in the Region, and recommending specific activities.

The Sub-Committee on Health Promotion will examine ways to improve and protect health, prevent ill-health and promote well-being through behavioural, biochemical, socioeconomic and environmental change. Particular attention will be given to effecting such change in the context of the Region's healthy urban environment initiative.

4. FUTURE PROSPECTS

Historically, technical advisory services and human resources development have formed the basis for WHO's collaboration with Member States. For the most part, activities have been focused on specific problems, places and populations. In many respects they have been successful, but now more inclusive and effective approaches are needed.

A broader base of support is needed, so that a more realistic share of the resources available can be devoted to the health sector. In particular this calls for stronger influence on the government and the private sector.

Support at the highest levels of Government is needed so that environmental health considerations are included in decision-making on development. Governments have expressed their concern, but this still needs to be translated into far-reaching measures and realistic budget allocations. It must also be recognized that the causes and solutions for many environmental health problems lie outside the traditional health sector. Therefore, the health sector must become increasingly involved in the work of other sectors in order to fulfil its responsibilities in this area.

The private sector, especially industry, must be influenced to take into account environmental health issues in their production and marketing strategies. In rapidly changing economies, private sector development initiatives do not usually include adequate environmental health impact assessment as an integral part of the decision-making process. This is an area in which preventive care can be very effective for protecting the longer-term interests of both health and the economy.

The new healthy urban environment initiative, together with a comprehensive programme framework will help to define these needs in terms of programmes. In the 1990s and beyond, a "business as usual" approach to environmental health problems will not suffice. The challenge is to learn from past mistakes, build on successes and explore new ways of making the environmental health programme effective.