
Commentary I

Towards assessing effects of National Environmental Health Action Plans

Dr. Krzyzanowski is environmental epidemiologist, responsible for Air Quality and Health programme of WHO-Euro. He is involved in the development of the European Environment and Health Information System

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Following the 2nd Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Helsinki, in 1994, most of the Member States of the WHO European Region prepared NEHAPs. Ministries of health, public health agencies and professionals were the driving force in this work. However, an important feature of all the programmes was active involvement of environmental agencies, and of the other sectors, contributing to the quality of the environment and its potential health impacts. In many countries, the NEHAP preparation provided the first opportunity for the direct collaboration and exchange of information between these sectors. The appreciation of the importance of the strong intersectoral collaboration led to the selection of the “Action in partnership” as the leading theme of the 3rd Ministerial Conference held in London in 1999.

A comprehensive assessment of the extent of implementation of the NEHAPs on the international scale has not been conducted yet. The paper on the Swiss NEHAP is one of few examples of a national evaluation of the NEHAP implementation. The authors point out the usefulness of the definition of the quantified targets in the NEHAP design, allowing assessment of progress in the programme implementation. The focus on “well-being” is an important feature of the programme, underlying the need to work on the environmental improvements not only when the poor environmental quality increases the risk of clinically recognisable illness. While the programmes aimed at strong inter-sectoral collaboration, the authors assess the implementation of this objective as limited. Somewhat discouraging is the observation that only 10 % of projects included in the NEHAP data base have been initiated because of the NEHAP.

The occasion for the evaluation of NEHAP implementation in some other countries provide the Environmental Performance Reviews, completed by UNECE, with WHO contribution (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe s.d.). Observations from several countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia confirm the conclusion of the Swiss paper, stating that the lack of implementation strategy is an important weakness of the NEHAPs in those countries. The general objectives to reduce the risks from hazardous exposures are not translated into operational programmes. Lack of operational targets and instruments to measure extent of their achievement also reduces the ability to evaluate the NEHAPs implementation. There is a risk that the NEHAP documents, even those approved by the legislative bodies in the countries, will remain on paper and will not contribute to the improvement of health of the people.

Public health professionals should recognise the value of the work performed to compile the NEHAP documents and use it as a basis of their actions to promote healthy environment. Finding of measurable improvements in environmental quality and reduction of health risks that may result from the projects implemented in the framework of NEHAPs is the best argument for further actions and for support the NEHAPs. While many of the actions must be implemented outside of the public health sector, the assessment should be the responsibility of public health agencies and professionals. It requires assessment of changes in the exposures affecting health, as well as in the health aspects associated with environment quality. Several of such measures are readily available. However many of the health or environment

characteristics being addressed by the NEHAPs are not measured or measured with poorly standardised or validated methodologies. Development of the Environmental Health Indicator system, coordinated by WHO, aims at harmonisation of efforts to develop the necessary assessment tools and to adjust them to the needs of policy setting and its

evaluation (World Health Organization 2000). Contribution of public health professionals to the development and implementation of the system may be one of their important tasks to the increase of NEHAPs effectiveness and visibility.

Michal Krzyzanowski

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Address for correspondence

Dr. Michal Krzyzanowski
WHO Centre for Environment
and Health Bonn Office
Hermann-Ehlers-Strasse 10
D-53114 Bonn

e-mail: mkr@ecchbonn.euro.who.int