

National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment

Assessing readiness for improving environmental
health protection systems for children

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Acknowledgement

The idea of developing National Profiles of Children's Health and the Environment came about as the Sustainable Development and Environment Area of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) prepared for World Health Day 2003. We strove toward lasting impact to improve children's environmental health by offering member countries a tool to assess their readiness to improve systems that supported the health and safety of children in settings where children live, learn, work and play.

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Foreword

A number of diseases and developmental effects in children and adolescents are linked to environmental threats present in the places where children live, learn, play and work. There is growing concern about these paediatric environmentally-related diseases, such as asthma, acute respiratory infections, diarrhea, perinatal illness, vector-borne diseases, toxic exposures and physical injuries. Emerging issues related to potential developmental effects and endocrine disruption linked to some persistent pollutants and the health impact of global change add complexities to the protection of children from environmental threats, both now and in the future.

Indeed, environmentally related diseases represent an enormous global public health challenge, particularly in developing countries and impoverished communities. Even if a country acknowledges the necessity to address these challenges and take action, direction is needed on when, how and where to start and how to gauge progress. The *National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment* is a tool to provide this direction. The profiles are intended to enable countries and communities to identify, characterize and assess environmental influences and effects on children's health, development and well-being, and to measure results and progress over time. The profiles require a two-to-three month exercise for doing the assessment, using a multi-stakeholder approach led by the national government, potentially in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), and partnering with other international, national and especially local organizations.

National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment: Assessing Readiness for Improving Environmental Health Protection Systems for Children provides guidance and offers a format for preparing National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment. Experience has lent itself to the development of this document. Eighteen countries in the Americas and six countries in the WHO Africa Region have been the pioneers in preparing National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment. These were developed following a draft format designed to facilitate national assessment teams in describing and analyzing various aspects of environmental threats to children. Key findings were presented in regional workshops in Lima, Peru (2003) and Cape Town, South Africa (2004), gaining valuable inputs for revising the profile format proposed (see Annex A). Regional summaries of the first national profiles were prepared by the respective WHO regional offices and are available at www.who.int/ceh. The regional summaries serve as bases for preparing strategies and action plans. Snapshots of the regional summaries are found in Annexes D and E.

Other important international environmental programs have embraced children's environmental health profile development as a means to assess and direct programmatic goals. The Inter-governmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) has called on parties to support children's environmental health initial national assessment development with a

special focus on children's chemical safety within the profiles.^[1] The Forum IV Meeting held in Bangkok, Thailand, in November 2003, recommended that:

Governments should prepare through multi-stakeholder consultation, initial national assessments of children's environmental health and chemical safety. These assessments should identify the priority concerns and provide a basis for developing action plans to address those concerns. Governments should prepare a progress report to Forum V. WHO is requested to develop, through multi-stakeholder consultation, guidance tools, and to assist at least three countries in different stages of economic development in each region and to prepare the assessment and action plans by 2006.^[2]

The Global Initiative on Children's Environmental Health Indicators, led by several international organizations, including WHO, also supports the profiles as a step that may help to establish a baseline status of children's environmental health, monitor progress and success of interventions, and facilitate the initiation of the indicators work.^[3] The profiles will also contribute to the Health and Environments Initiative (HELI), launched at WSSD, as they will provide baseline information for policy development and implementation.

As children's environmental health grows in the mainstream international environmental arena, countries around the world are interested in developing a baseline profile that states the national readiness to strengthen environmental health protection systems to benefit children's health and well-being. These national profiles also help governments assess whether targets set forward by the Millennium Development Goals are achieved, such as goal number four (MDG 4), to "reduce child mortality" and goal number seven (MDG 7), to "ensure environmental sustainability."

As Secretary General Kofi Annan stated at the 2002 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children: "*There is no task more important than building a world in which all of our children can grow up to realize their full potential in health, peace, and dignity.*" National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment offer countries around the world a tool to assess, change and track progress toward this important task.

Justification

The *National Profiles on Children's Health and Environment* are intended to be used as the basis for identifying country priorities, assessing needs, developing strategies, planning actions and securing resources to improve the protection of children from environmental hazards in countries around the world. The methodology proposed is suited for obtaining knowledge on key environmental threats present in the settings where

^[1] Additional information on IFCS is available at <http://www.ifcs.ch>

^[2] Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety, Fourth SESSION, Forum IV, *Executive Summary, Children and Chemical Safety*, Bangkok: November 2003, p. ES-2.(IFCS/FORUM-IV/16W)

^[3] Additional information on the CEH initiative (CEHi) is available at www.who.int/ceh/indicators.

children live, learn, play and work. It also enables countries to identify existing resources and potential partners to promote children's environmental health.

The preparation of an initial baseline profile offers a first step for setting priorities for action and planning interventions. This assessment methodology enables countries to collect and provide pertinent information in a relatively fast and cost-efficient manner, and also to measure progress made through the elaboration of annual or bi-annual profiles. The exercise is expected to take up to three months and requires funds necessary to ensure the consistent work of one or more dedicated professionals and convening regular multi-stakeholder meetings. In practice it will also serve as a tool for awareness-raising and programme planning.

Description

The children's environmental health and chemical safety profiles are narrative assessments of the situation of children's environments and their health and development in a given country. They are primarily based upon input from governmental, international, and non-governmental organizations, including professional organizations, academia and the private sector. These groups are convened through a series of multi-stakeholder meetings to discuss responses to a set of questions on a variety of topics related to children's health and the environment. Important input may also come from the review of publications and reports, input from experts in areas related to children's health, and observation of the settings where children spend most of their time.

The *National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment* are qualitative and descriptive. They complement quantitative efforts to assess children's environmental health through the use of information collection and indicators reporting. A profile is owned by the country that develops it and is often a country's first written document on the status of children's environmental health. It assesses government and national capabilities and interest to explicitly target improved policies and protection of children from environmental hazards.

An initial national profile is intended to be the first of a series of periodic assessments that will allow a country to evaluate progress made and lessons learned, successes and challenges, and overall, to identify key concerns and design actions and interventions so that children are protected and supported as they strive to reach their full potential.

Box 1. Who Contributes to National Profiles of Children's Environmental Health?

Coordination, collaboration and balance are the crucial elements of a National Profile on Children's Health and the Environment. Representatives of an array of sectors, from all levels of government to a variety of organizations must contribute to the profile development so that it reflects all parts of society. Primary sectors to include are listed below. Countries may need to modify this list, depending on specific situations.

Governmental organizations: Governmental ministries and agencies are in a privileged position to initiate the process of developing the profiles. Usually they are in a position to compile responses to the set of questions on a variety of topics found in the children's environmental health profiles format and they are able to involve other potential contributors. Governments organize the effort, seek contributors and convene the key players. The primary ministries or agencies involved in developing the profiles are those dealing with health, environment and education. Others involved are ministries or government entities that address women's health and children/youth welfare. Many other governmental sectors may also participate in preparation of the profiles, such as Ministries of Labor (child labor concerns) and Agriculture (exposure to agro-chemicals).

Community Groups: Local governments tend to be tasked with implementation and enforcement of laws and, thus, are key players in the development of national profiles, action planning and project design and implementation. Communities often know about communications successes and ways to reach the general population. They oversee school boards and have direct communications with local schools and community members. They can both provide information from the local level and launch information campaigns to target the local areas. Religious and cultural institutions are often anchors of communities and may play important roles in this effort.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs): Organizations that promote health, environment and children's issues are welcome partners in the preparation and tracking of national profiles. In some countries, the roles of NGOs are extensive and include participation in the development of regulations and policies, as well as implementation of programs. The **professional associations**, such as pediatric or medical groups, scientists or doctors for the environment, toxicology societies, and other groups that advocate for health, environment and children are essential partners in the profiles preparation. NGOs serve the public by spreading information and building awareness. They highlight sources of exposure, inform and educate the general population, balance against the interests of industry and academia, and advocate on behalf of children and the environment.

International organizations: International organizations provide technical assistance and other resources beneficial to the development of profiles. WHO, specifically, has led the creation of the National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment. UNICEF, UNEP, and UN Habitat are called to be helpful sources of information, technical expertise and other resources. The IFCS (especially the national focal points) may contribute to the process providing input, advice and guidance on specific chemical safety matters.

Academia: Universities and institutions of higher learning are centers for research and education, often the most up-to-date on national and international studies. They provide pools of expertise that can expand and deepen the field of children's environmental health. They are also responsible for teaching future professionals and incorporating new knowledge and findings into their curricula. Academia offers important inputs such as promoting research, assessing risks, convening expert conferences and publishing findings.

Private Sector: Domestic, small scale, large scale and international businesses can assist with development of the national profiles. Private industry can provide data, contribute to environmental health awareness campaigns, and offer technical, management and financial resources.

Methodology

The methodology proposed is based upon the use of the format for National Profiles on Children's Health and the Environment (see Annex A). This section recommends steps that may be taken to develop a national profile.

1. **Who initiates and organizes the profile?** To initiate the development of a National Profile on Children's Health and the Environment, good organization will ease the process. The development of a profile should take two to three months and is considered a rapid assessment rather than a long-term study. The following are key steps in organizing such an effort:
 - a. **Organizational leads** -- Determine what ministry or agency will lead this effort and identify the leader for this initiative. Give authority to this leader so that he/she is successful in gaining the input and participation needed. Consider hiring a consultant to compile information, draft, and finalize the document. Consultant tasks that may be included in Terms of Reference are provided in Annex B.
 - b. **Participating organizations** -- Ensure that all relevant ministries and agencies, offices, and staff are informed about the initiative and understand their roles. Consider the various ministries and agencies, local governments, non-governmental organizations, universities, professional organizations, private entities and others (see Box 1) to determine potential partners in this process. Inform them of the effort, preferably by letter or memorandum, duly signed by a senior level government official.
 - c. **Technical assistance and advice** -- WHO and its regional and country offices may help countries develop National Profiles on Children's Health and Environment. Contact the local office to request assistance. Also helpful may be local United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) offices. These and other groups can provide assistance in identifying stakeholders, offering examples of country profiles from other nations, and giving advice based on experience of other countries.

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