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A row of orange silhouettes of children holding hands, positioned behind the main title text.

# **International Conference on Environmental Threats to the Health of Children: Hazards and Vulnerability**

**Chulabhorn Research Centre  
Bangkok, Thailand  
3-7 March 2002**

## **Final Conference Report**

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## ***Contents***

Background.....	3
Acknowledgements .....	4
Foreword.....	6
The Bangkok Statement .....	7
Welcoming Remarks .....	10
Opening of Plenary Session .....	10
Summary of Plenary Sessions .....	10
Summary of Focus Sessions .....	16
Summary of Poster Sessions .....	17
Working Group on Indicators .....	18
Field Trip .....	18
Closing Ceremony.....	19
Annex I - Welcoming Remarks .....	23
Annex II - Opening Plenary Statements .....	27
Annex III - Summary of Focus Sessions .....	36
Annex IV - Summary of Children's Environment Health Indicators Meeting .....	52
Annex V - Closing Statements .....	54
Annex VI - Programme of the Conference .....	57
Annex VII - List of Participants .....	62

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## Background

A growing number of diseases in children are linked to the unsafe environments in which they live, learn, play and grow. Children may be exposed, during periods of vulnerability, to high levels of pollutants in air, water, food and soil, and to chemicals present in household products and contaminated consumer goods. These problems are magnified in the developing countries where air pollution, lack of access to safe water and sanitation, misuse of chemicals, and other environmental risks are determinants of a large burden of disease in children.

The environment is a key factor in determining the healthy development of children, and the World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes that efforts should be made to enable countries to assess their environmental risks and establish appropriate prevention and monitoring mechanisms. The health and environment sectors should be able to exchange experience and knowledge, promote research, disseminate information, and inform the community on how to protect children from environmental threats.

A conference on “Environmental Threats to the Health of Children” was organized in Manila, Philippines, in April 2000 with the participation of WHO headquarters and the Western Pacific Regional Office. It recommended, among other actions, the organization of a larger conference in the Asia Pacific Region by the year 2002. The WHO Task Force on the Protection of Children’s Environmental Health (CEH) followed up this recommendation.

On 27 September 2000, Her Royal Highness Professor Dr Princess Chulabhorn Mahidol visited WHO in Geneva, and the opportunity was taken to discuss the possibility of organizing a conference on Children’s Environmental Health in Thailand. Scientific issues concerning children’s environmental health were addressed. Reference was made to special hazards in children’s environments, and to the effects of pesticides, lead exposure, mercury contamination, potential endocrine disruption, food contaminants, and other hazards.

In view of the new information available in the scientific domain, it was considered timely to address the latest knowledge on children’s vulnerability at the international level, and to discuss potential actions to be taken. A science-oriented conference hosted by a well-recognized research institute would allow participants to focus on new research results, study methodologies, and capacity-building issues.

Her Royal Highness Professor Dr Princess Chulabhorn Mahidol kindly offered to host the conference at the Chulabhorn Research Institute in March 2002, the main theme being the specific vulnerability of children to environmental hazards.

The scope of the conference was largely regional and focused on Children’s Environmental Health (CEH) issues which had a very high prevalence and health impact in the WHO South-East Asia and Western Pacific Regions. However, as similar environmental threats to children’s health are present throughout the developing world, interested scientists and professionals from other Regions participated and benefited from attendance.

The participants included: (i) professionals from the health and environment sectors who are involved in the areas of training, research, and medical and social sciences that are related to children’s environmental health; (ii) persons in the educational sector and/or those involved in community activities; (iii) representatives from governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned about children’s health; and (iv) a number of children and adolescents involved in environmentally-oriented school activities.

The expected outcome of the conference included a commitment to national and international activities in the area of CEH, a statement setting priorities for action, and the report of the conference presented here.

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- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC)
- International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC/ILO).

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## Foreword

The ***International Conference on Environmental Threats to the Health of Children: Hazards and Vulnerability*** was a milestone in addressing a wide range of issues specific to health and environment. The five-day conference addressed new scientific data and research results on the special vulnerability of children to environmental hazards. The primary objectives were to:

- Address new scientific data and research results on children's vulnerability.
- Discuss how to improve the current health conditions of children.
- Increase the awareness of the health, education and environment sectors about CEH issues.
- Promote action on the protection of children's environmental health around the world.

*The Bangkok Statement* – a pledge to promote the protection of Children's Environmental Health – represents an accomplishment of the Conference. This will pave the way, and establish a basis for developing a more sustainable future for our children. It is a major contribution in promoting actions, and raising public awareness about the environmental threats affecting the health of children.

Healthy children are crucial to sustainable development. Protecting children from environmental hazards is one of WHO's priorities. Together we must work and find effective strategies to achieve our goal: providing a healthier environment for our children.

We count on everyone to promote and disseminate the Bangkok Statement and to act upon it. The time to translate knowledge into action is now.

*Chulabhorn Research Institute*

*WHO Task Force for the Protection  
of Children's Environmental Health*

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