



**Network of
Women Ministers
for the Environment**

Protecting Our Future: A Special Ministerial Event on Children, Chemicals and the Environment

Report from the special ministerial event at ICCM,
Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 6 February 2006

Executive summary

The aim of the Special Event was to enhance the commitments of governments and international governmental organisations in support of national and multilateral policies to improve the management of chemicals, with specific attention to the situation of children.

The invitation had been extended to all ministers – male and female – of environment and health, as well as the heads of delegation at ICCM. The event attracted some 120 participants at a high level.

The vulnerability of chemical exposure to children and the need for policies built on preventive and precautionary measures was stressed. The links between environment and health in chemicals management were emphasised and advanced collaboration between the fields strongly sought for. Further, the special needs and vulnerability for developing countries must be made visible in national poverty reduction strategies. Actions on international and regional level are necessary including multilateral cooperation and the involvement of industry and civil society. The importance of increased knowledge and the role of education in creating awareness of chemicals' risks were highlighted.

Introduction

The Network of Women Ministers for the Environment organised a Special Event to discuss among ministers the links between chemicals management, health, and the environment. The event took place in conjunction with the International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM), on February 6th 2006 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Lena Sommestad, Minister for the Environment of Sweden, and co-chair of the Network of Women Ministers for the Environment, welcomed all participants and panellists to the Special Event on behalf of the Network. On behalf the Network's minister Sommestad thanked the Executive Director of UNEP, Dr Klaus Töpfer, for assisting in the preparations of the event, and to the United Arab Emirates for generously hosting the ICCM and the UNEP Governing Council Special Session.

Minister Sommestad gave a brief background to the Network of Women Ministers for the Environment. Formed in 2002 the Network works to promote dialogue and highlight gender equality perspectives on the international environment agenda and involves female ministers from all over the world. By arranging this Special Event the Network aims to enhance the interest in chemicals management in relation to children and to emphasize the links between chemicals management, health and poverty reduction.

Minister Sommestad pointed out that children are too often forgotten in the design of policies and projects. Children cannot be treated as small adults, since they have specific life-styles, needs and interests. Minister Sommestad also underlined the crucial importance of improved health as key to successful poverty eradication and sustainable economic development.

Children, Chemicals and the Environment – the Issues

Ethel Forsberg, Director-General of the Swedish Chemicals Inspectorate, was moderator of the event and gave a brief introduction to the issues to be discussed.

She drew the participants' attention to the fact that children are more exposed than adults to chemicals as they breathe, eat and drink more per kilogram bodyweight. Children are also more sensitive as they have a different body composition.

Ms Forsberg gave examples of how exposure to different chemicals has different but equally serious consequences. Mercury is well known to have chronic effects on reproduction and the growing embryo, as well as damaging the nervous system. Lead is another toxic substance to which children are particularly sensitive as lead affects the nervous system, inhibits the foetus and lowers the IQ. Pesticides are another very important issue. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has estimated the number of poisonings from pesticides are as many as three million per year and the number of deaths to two hundred thousand annually. Almost all of these deaths and/or poisonings – 99 percent – are in developing countries. Pesticide poisoning of children is particularly prevalent in poor countries as women and children often manage agriculture in these countries.

Ms Forsberg emphasised the link between exposure to dangerous chemicals and poverty. The poor are often forced to live in the least attractive or most polluted areas, take up the most dangerous jobs and cannot afford adequate protective equipment. Contamination of clothes and food is therefore common. Studies have shown that poor children, also in developed countries, have up to four times more lead in their body than middle class children. To conclude Ms Forsberg underlined the crucial importance of increased knowledge and awareness of chemicals in everyday life.

Why Gender Matters - Women as Agents of Change

Rejoice Mabudafhasi, Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism of the Republic of South Africa, and co-chair of the Network of Women Ministers for the Environment, talked on the subject of *Women as Agents of Change*. She reaffirmed the commitments from Johannesburg on chemicals management, and reiterated conditions, such as the reproductive stage, usage of household chemicals and unsafe water as well as illiteracy, that make women most vulnerable to hazardous chemicals.

Deputy Minister Mabudafhasi emphasised the need to recognise the international role of women as agents of change. She said that if you empower a man you empower an individual, but to empower women is to empower a nation.

Deputy Minister Mabudafhasi also shared the experience on the national programmes for chemicals management and the national legislation in South Africa. She said that men run the chemical industry but that women, given their particular knowledge, experiences and roles, need to be included in the decision-making. Deputy Minister Mabudafhasi urged the ICCM to take further action to improve the involvement for women in chemicals management. Women can be even further agents of change if given the access to and ownership of natural resources and their management.

Regional Action for Chemical Safety and Children's Environmental Health

Atilio Savino, Secretary of State for the Environment and Sustainable Development, Argentina shared the discussions and outcomes from the international conference on Children's Environmental Health held in Buenos Aires in November 2005.

Secretary of State Savino told the seminar that the conference took its departure from the fact that WHO has estimated that more than 25 percent of the global burden of disease can be attributed to environmental risk factors. Over 40 percent of the environmental disease burden falls on children under the age of five. In developing countries the environmental health problems affecting children are exacerbated by poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition.

The conference discussed research and capacity-building need, as well as concrete actions at local, national, regional and international level. The main conclusion was that children should live, grow, learn, and play in environments that are supportive of good health and well-being. This requires that researchers and policy experts interact to weave research and science into policy discussions. The conference participants committed increase partnership among governmental and international institutions, and civil society organisations. Furthermore the conference agreed to promote the development of environmental paediatrics, and risk assessment methods that take account of children as a special risk group.

Secretary of State Savino concluded with an appeal to transform knowledge into action as today's children are tomorrow's adults. Children are the most precious resource of countries and they require a safer, cleaner and healthier world.

Environment as a prerequisite for development

Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), took as point of departure for his intervention from the decision of the UNEP Governing Council in February 2005 on gender equality in the field of environment. Dr Töpfer said it was a complex decision that he had at first been sceptical about. However, the Network of Women Ministers for the Environment had worked hard to explain the importance of the matter, and succeeded in getting the Governing Council to take its first decision on gender equality and environment.

Dr Töpfer said that not enough was currently being done in the implementation of the decision, and that the most important aspect was mainstreaming of gender equality in the complete work of UNEP. Gender equality is the responsibility of many in an organisation.

The link between health and environment is most evident through the vulnerability of children. Dr Töpfer stated that it is easier getting money for health care and hospitals than for the reasons causing the illnesses. The poverty reduction strategies at national level have to put emphasis on the need of investments in ecosystem services. To quantify the ecosystem services is high on the agenda. The Ecosystem Millennium Assessment showed result in this regard.

Linking the work of UNEP and WHO is important and need to be developed further, Dr Töpfer said. UNEP cannot work effectively with this matter in isolation. Co-operation between international governmental organisations and within the UN system is crucial.

Health as an element of the environmental agenda

Dr Maria Neira, Director for Protection of Human Health and the Environment at the WHO spoke on the links between health and environment. Dr Neira stated that environmental degradation is to blame for one forth of the global burden of diseases. All of the five major killers for children are extremely linked to environmental problems. Children are more exposed to environmental risks, due to that they are exposed during a long period of time, as well as at a critical period in life. Being exposed as a child to hazardous chemicals can lead to diseases later in life. Dr Neira underlined the need to focus environmental health problems on public health. The concept of prevention must be revitalised in this regard. Dr Neira also highlighted the need for investments in prevention strategies and underlined that prevention is a cost effective method. She said that international cooperation is needed to make the link between health and environment more visible in the global conversations. Health can be a driving force in the international environmental work. In conclusion, Dr Neira hoped for continued cooperation between the environmental and health field.

Living up to our children's expectations to protect them

Dr Lilian Corra, President of ISDE (International Society of Doctors for the Environment) contributed the NGO's and in particular health-care professionals' perspective on the issues at hand. She emphasised the effects of multiple exposures to hazardous chemicals, which creates a complex situation that rarely is taken into full account. The situation of children and young women is a particular priority from a medical point of view as exposure in early years may cause diseases years ahead. Raising the voices of women, as mothers and as they are the majority of teachers and health care professionals, is especially important to spread awareness and knowledge of chemicals management.

Furthermore Dr Corra emphasised the health care professionals' commitment to turning intentions into actions and stressed the urgent need for action.

Questions and comments

In the following questions and comments, the importance of preventions was highlighted, as well as the need for further cooperation at all levels between UNEP, UNFPA, ILO, WHO, UNICEF and others. Ministers drew the attention to the linkages between health and environment must be made visible in the poverty reduction strategies. Ministers also underlined the crucial role of increased knowledge and the role of education in creating awareness of chemicals' risks. The importance of other environmental policies was also highlighted, for instance waste management, as important building block in reducing exposure to chemicals. A representative from an NGO emphasised the need of capacity building in both fields to be able to link health and environment.

Concluding remarks – we must act now!

Minister Sommestad expressed her gratitude to the moderator and to the panellists for their contributions as well as to the audience for their questions and interventions. The seminar had made several important conclusions and there were three main messages that Minister Sommestad said she would take away from the afternoon's discussions.

Firstly, that women and children are particularly vulnerable to exposure to toxic chemicals. This sensitivity is closely related to women's reproductive functions and securing the safety of children means supporting mothers and involving families and communities. Policies must be designed to children's needs and policies that do not protect children's health are simply not ambitious enough. There is clear need for stronger emphasis on precautionary principle and precautionary measures to create healthy environments. Minister Sommestad stated that inaction is not just irresponsible it is also very costly.

The second conclusion that minister Sommestad drew from the seminar was on the need for regional and international action. Multi-lateral co-operation is a prerequisite for managing the spread of toxic substances worldwide. The decision on the SAICM is a first step, to be further developed. However, international action must be combined with work at the local level, involving civil society.

The third issue that minister Sommestad concluded from the seminar was the need for increased collaboration between the fields of environment, health and indeed other policy areas such as education. Increased knowledge and awareness among those who are at risk is crucial. The seminar had brought together ministers and experts of both environment and health and this interaction should be developed at all levels, incorporating civil society, business and local governments. Many speakers had also underlined that collaboration between the field of environment and the field of health as particularly important as regards poverty eradication.

In conclusion minister Sommestad emphasised that since children have no political voices the responsibility to be their voices rested upon all the participants of the seminar. Though we have yet to fully understand the potential of linking health and environment when we work with poverty eradication, a stronger focus on poverty and health will act as a strong driving force for the environmental agenda.