

John Dalli

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health and Consumer Policy

Commissioner Dalli delivers speech at the WHO Fifth Ministerial Conference on environment and health

John DALLI, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy attends the WHO 5th Ministerial Conference on Environment & Health

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Ms Jakab, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today to underline the European Commission's strong support for the WHO European Environment and Health Process.

This is also an ideal opportunity for me to share with you – at the beginning of my mandate as European Commissioner for Health and Consumer policy – how I see the synergies between health and environment in Europe.

Health and environmental matters often take a back seat when obscured by headline-grabbing issues of the day – in particular the economic crisis, growing public debts and rises in unemployment.

But in reality, health and environment are key factors which underpin, in addition to the well-being of our citizens, economic performance, recovery and success.

Indeed, there can be no sustained economic recovery without a healthy population, and without high environmental and health standards.

It is therefore crucial to understand how environmental factors affect the health of our citizens and of society as a whole.

This is why the European Commission welcomes the commitments that this conference is poised to agree; and has formally adopted a statement of support, to which I will return later.

This conference has provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the progress we have made to date, and how best to address, in future, any gaps and shortcomings identified in our approach.

Environmental factors can have a significant effect on citizen's health and the development and progression of diseases.

And vulnerable groups within society, such as children, pregnant women and socially disadvantaged people, can be particularly affected by such factors.

Let me give just a few examples:

The incidence of asthma and allergy is on the rise in Europe. One in every five children suffers from a chronic respiratory condition or allergy. This means a lower quality of life for those children and more need for healthcare.

There is a pressing need to address air quality and in particular in indoor environments. We need to do more to tackle the effect on people's health of, for example, building materials, household products, lack of ventilation, or dampness.

A quarter of all European schoolchildren are overweight or obese – and this trend is expected to continue.

To reverse this trend, we need to promote physical activity, for example by creating environments that encourage people to walk or cycle.

In Europe, injuries kill more children, adolescents and young adults than any other cause of death. "Accidents will happen" as the saying goes. But in most cases, we can reduce risks significantly by, for example, improving road and product safety.

Climate change is, of course, another significant factor with massive implications for us all. We are seeing more and more extreme weather events – such as floods, windstorms, heat waves and cold snaps.

Changing climate patterns trigger changes in the transmission and spread of certain diseases. Air quality presents problems in the event of heat waves as there is little or no dispersion of pollutants. And excessive heat, and excessive cold, leads to additional deaths.

Poverty is another key factor to consider. Across Europe many people still live in deteriorating living conditions which contribute to poor sanitary and health status – a situation only exacerbated by the economic crisis.

For example, clean water and sanitation – which most of us take for granted – remains a serious issue in many European regions. In some of the EU Member States, for example, more than 20% of households with children have no shower or bath. Furthermore, an increasing number of households face reduced access to clean water due to financial difficulties.

Similar pressures lie behind the increasing number of cold-related illness and even deaths in Europe, as more and more people cannot afford adequate heating. Some refer to a stark choice between "heating and eating".

The European Commission and the EU Member States have made reducing the social impact of the financial crisis – and thereby reducing its health impact – a key priority.

The Commission already put forward a Communication on "solidarity in health" last year, to help Member States tackle inequalities in health between and within EU countries. This is also a key priority of the current Spanish EU Presidency.

In addition, addressing health inequalities is also part of the new European Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (known as EU 2020) which the Commission put forward last week, and which will guide all EU policies.

Allow me to focus now on the environment and health process that has drawn us here in Parma.

At the last Ministerial conference in Budapest (in June 2004), the European Commission presented its (then) newly adopted Action Plan on Environment and Health.

This Action Plan was designed and implemented in close collaboration with the WHO and in line with the pan-European process.

Today, many of its actions have been implemented – some with funding from the EU Public Health Programme and the Framework Programmes for Research.

Progress has been achieved in gathering comparable information on health and Environment across Europe; the training of professionals; indoor air quality including environmental tobacco smoke; and electromagnetic fields. Plus, we have started to explore a harmonised approach to bio-monitoring to improve assessment of human exposure to environmental agents.

The main achievement of the Action Plan has been the integration of the key policy areas of environment, health and research at European level. The time has now come to build on progress made and do better and do more.

To do so I believe we need to focus on two things:

First – the integration of health and environment policies and also the integration of health concerns in all policies". This is indispensable to ensure the protection of health at all levels and across all sectors.

Second – we have to work on solutions to ensure that the environment does not damage the health of our citizens. These need to be modern, flexible, evidence-based, results-focussed; and effectively implemented at European, regional and local levels.

And finally we need cooperation at international, European and national levels, together with the involvement of key NGOs and the business community.

I take this opportunity to emphasise that the Commission strongly supports further implementation of the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe initiative launched in Budapest.

I am confident that we can find a way to further strengthen our cooperation for the years ahead. We can give greater political impetus to this process and keep the momentum between the high level conferences (every five years).

Naturally, it is important that international cooperation is translated to national level, and focussed on helping Member States effectively implement actions.

As we progress however, we must keep an eye on new and emerging challenges, (for example to substances having endocrine disrupting effect or accumulating in the body).

Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe the Parma Declaration will constitute a solid response to the challenges we face and will ensure significant progress on environment and health in Europe for the years to come.

European citizens legitimately expect to benefit from the best possible level of health protection.

The European Commission is fully committed to working with the WHO and its partners towards this end. I am confident that, together, we can meet those expectations.

Thank you.

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