

# **Putting health at the centre of environment thinking: our shared responsibility**

**Genon K. Jensen, EPHA Policy Director**

**Dear Chairperson and distinguished colleagues,**

**Thank you very much for inviting me here this afternoon on behalf of the European Public Health Alliance to talk about an issue which has been at the forefront of our policy work over the last five years – the future of environment and health.**

**I would like to begin by introducing my organisation and then describe what I see as the responsibilities of all of us as citizens, as professionals and as governments working at different levels – EU, national and in the health sector of civil society.**

**EPHA is a European umbrella organisation that brings together about 30 European networks and 50 national and local NGOs to promote and protect health and increase citizen's participation.**

**Our membership includes nurses, pharmacists, doctors and other conventional and non-conventional health professionals, disease prevention groups working on cancer, asthma, cardiovascular diseases,**

**and a growing number of groups working on environmental issues. It also includes patient groups and public health institutes.**

**We first became involved in this new agenda in the run up to the London meeting.**

**In 2003, in response to the increasing interest of our members, primarily from the health sector, and the political importance of the environment and health agenda, we created a new structure and organisation, the EPHA ENVIRONMENT NETWORK, to provide a platform to bring other partners on board from the not-for-profit sector, and ensure continuity in policy development within the broad spectrum of environmental health issues.**

**Increasingly citizens are concerned about the environment. Not only because it has the potential to damage our health, our children's health and the health of future generations, but also because the wider environment is something that we as individuals can do little about on our own.**

**To introduce the responsibilities of the citizen, and give a context for the work done by many NGOs, I will give myself as the example.**

**As a mother of a young daughter, and also extremely aware and active citizen given my current activities (i.e. preparation of this conference), I set out to follow the advice given out by environment and health authorities, and also in the TABLE OF ACTIONS IN**

**CEHAPE, and take extra precaution in protecting her during these vulnerable years.**

- **First of all, avoiding tobacco smoke indoors (not easily done in many public places in Belgium or the rest of Europe I may say) so I have foregone eating out for the most part.**
- **Limiting her outdoor activities on days with high levels of ozone (where can I find out this information in Belgium)??**
- **Keeping her away from “pesticides and other toxic chemicals”. This is easily done in my own home because I simply don’t use them. It becomes slightly more difficult in other people’s homes, but at least I can ask them.**

**However, avoidance is impossible as soon as we venture out to the street, or a playground or park where local authorities may regularly use these types of products but do not put up any warning signs to let passer-by’s know just WHAT AND WHEN products were used.**

**I think the future is clearly illustrated in these examples – the challenges related to implementation and sharing responsibility.**

Well my question to you then is – just whose responsibility is it to protect our children?

To protect our vulnerable groups, older people

To protect those living in economically disadvantaged communities who are more affected by environmentally related health problems.

To protect ourselves...

**We as individuals cannot control the quality of our air and water, nor the chemicals that are used in so many of our modern necessities, local environments and neighbourhoods.**

**We cannot even easily find out how the environment may be affecting us, and it is often beyond OUR RESPONSIBILITY.**

**We need to work together to address these challenges.**

It is critical to define the levels of responsibility, and this is what I would like to leave with you today.

**Each Minister, civil servant, scientist, industry representative, agency representative, we all have a responsibility to take concrete action now. What can you do as governments, and what can we do as civil society?**

**We have seen from the recent research from WHO that the burden of disease is growing....it will not go away**

**The vision unfortunately is not in a 5 year term of office, or the next Ministerial Conference. The vision is in us, all present here today, to show courage, leadership and a little hard work.**

**The words we play with this week will not turn themselves into action without us all working together and taking responsibility for our children's future, and I would like to add other vulnerable groups future. .**

The first level of responsibility is what the **European Union**, now the world's largest trading block, can do to turn these documents that you ministers will adopt tomorrow, into concrete actions which in turn actually reduce the health effects of environmental factors.

The EU Action Plan presented at Budapest is a first step on the part of the European Commission and although we might have liked it to be stronger, we fully support the framework that has been set out and will now continue our work to make sure that it is implemented to the full.

This indeed will be a key way forward to re-connect citizens with EU institutions, and make concrete the provisions for access to information contained in Aarhus in relation to environment and health – geographical mapping of diseases and hot spots, pesticide use in urban and rural areas, outdoor air pollution, to name a few.

The second level of responsibility is at **member state**, that is, those of you sitting before me.

What will you do to create a specific action plan for children?

How will you take it outside of your ministry and implement actions which **REDUCE ILL HEALTH**?

How can we help?

The CEHAPE is a first step but really the easiest one.

We want you to become ambassadors for public health. Whether you are in the health sector dealing mainly with health services or the environment sector, this means putting real energy into putting health at the centre of environment policy. We want you to know the health effects and costs of environmental hazards and argue for the resources to make it possible to carry out the work.

Lastly, what is our responsibility as the non-government health sector?

We can raise awareness of the issues and the costs.

We can highlight Best Practice and Bad Practice – Name and Shame – ask our constituents to hold their leaders responsible for improving our environmental conditions, and our health.

We can help educate Health Care Professionals and policy makers, to create a participatory policy framework.

We can also feed back from our communities the new and emerging environmental health threats and concerns.

But as citizens and NGOs, we cannot be really effective on our own. We need you to legislate, to implement and enforce. To be determined to put human health first.

Monitoring and information dissemination are important if they are complimented by legislation and a precautionary approach to assessing the risks.

The challenge for you as policymakers and our future ambassadors for public health is to put human health first – and especially that of children and other vulnerable groups – in all you do.

Thank you for your attention.