Report shows how hazardous environmental conditions affect poor children's health

Vienna, Tuesday, 12 June 2007 – Europe’s most deprived children are more likely to be exposed to environments that are seriously damaging their health, according to a new report entitled “Making the Case for Environmental Justice in Central and Eastern Europe”. Discrimination and prejudice is literally killing children or putting their health at serious risk. (1)

“While poor and minority populations suffer disproportionate exposure to environmental harms, women and children within these groups suffer most,” editor Dr Tamara Steger, Central European University, Center for Environmental Policy and Law (CEPL), told a scientific conference in Vienna today. (2)

The report is a joint production of CEPL and the Health & Environment Alliance (HEAL). It is launched in Vienna as part of the World Health Organization-sponsored review of the Children’s Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE). (3)

“Making the Case for Environmental Justice in Central and Eastern Europe” provides sound support for the assertion that poor and ethnically marginalised people in Central and Eastern Europe, especially women and children, are more exposed to environmental hazards than majority populations. They are also more likely to lack access to water, sewerage and other environmental benefits. This situation is further exacerbated by inadequate access to health care. Case studies describe the death of a two year-old from lead poisoning, high rates of birth abnormalities, and an ominously quick succession of child deaths from cancer attributed to the environmental conditions in which they live. (4)

A few years ago, two year-old Dzenita Mehmeti died from exposure to lead from a mining and smelter complex close to the Kosovo displacement camp where she lived. In 2005, a World Health Organization study visit to the camp showed that 88% of children under six years old had such severe lead poisoning that it required immediate medical intervention.

Some families who fled Kosovo during the Yugoslav war settled on an abandoned industrial site on the outskirts of Durres in Albania. In 2000, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identified the site as one of the “Environmental Security Hot Spots” resulting from the conflict. They use groundwater that contains levels of pesticides 4,000 times EU recommended levels. Those living there are worried about the consequences, especially the observed number of birth defects among their children.

In Veles, Macedonia, two recent child deaths from cancer are being blamed on breathing air laden with lead and zinc. They died within five months of each other in a community of 700 families. The mainly Roma (formerly known as gypsy) inhabitants of Veles breathe emissions from a smelting plant just 300 meters from where they live and work, and from where their children play. In 2001, the World Health Organization (WHO) listed Veles as “a critically dangerous place.”

Cases of serious violations of environmental justice like these are not only threatening children’s health in former war-torn areas. In Sofia, Bulgaria’s capital, 200 Roma families live in an enclave of the city, known as Fakulteta, that has repeatedly been ignored when it comes to municipal infrastructure development. A girl with a high fever paid for this with her life as distraught parents called for an ambulance that never came. The crews blamed the poor
quality of the roads but the community considered it part of the discrimination that they face daily.

But the report is not without hope. It says that investing in the poorest and minority groups provides huge opportunities for improving child health in Europe. “This would mean clean-ups of contaminated areas; greater support for local groups; and stronger engagement with the women in marginalized communities because women take most of the responsibility for family health,” says Génon Jensen, Executive Director of Health & Environment Alliance. “Policies and laws that simultaneously improve the environment and combat discrimination can significantly improve children’s health,” she added.

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Notes for journalists
1. Full report and flyer available at www.env-health.org
4. An annex to this press release contains all the country case studies contained in the report (Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia). It is available at www.env-health.org

The Health and Environment Alliance aims to raise awareness of how environmental protection improves health. It achieves this by creating opportunities for better representation of citizens’ and health experts’ perspectives in the environment and health-related European policy-making. Our membership includes a diverse network of more than 50 citizens’, patients’, women’s, health professionals’ and environmental organisations across Europe and has a strong track record in increasing public and expert engagement in both EU debates and the decision-making process.