

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the 7th of April of every year we celebrate World Health Day, in our region and all over the world. This occasion gives us an opportunity to select and highlight an important public health challenge, and to foster dialogue and debate for appropriate health care, and health protection and promotion. The theme selected for World Health Day 2003 is “Shape the future of life—Healthy environments for children”.

Children, in which category we include everyone under 19 years of age, are our future. Their health, however, is threatened, by a variety of causes, among which environmental agents play a major role. Such agents include contaminated food and water, polluted indoor and outdoor air, traffic and domestic accidents, unsafe housing, vector diseases and exposure to thousands of synthetic chemicals, to environmental tobacco smoke and to contaminants in toys. Environmental risk factors often act in concert, and their effects are exacerbated by adverse social and economic conditions, particularly poverty. Natural and man-made disasters, including war, occupation and civil unrest, bring additional hazards. Children affected by war and conflict suffer physically and mentally and this has tremendous consequences for their psychosocial development, and subsequently for national health and economic development.

Moreover, young children have no choice when it comes to exposure to environmental risk factors. They are especially susceptible to environmental conditions for the following reasons.

Children have higher rates of respiration and calorie consumption per kilogram of body weight than adults.

Their immune, reproductive, digestive and nervous systems are still developing. The nervous system is particularly vulnerable in early life to damage from exposure to particular contaminants, such as lead and methyl mercury, which have been associated with developmental disabilities, including learning disabilities and mental retardation.

Children’s hand-to-mouth behaviour and shorter stature, and the fact that they live and play close to the ground when they are toddlers, increase their exposure via inhalation and ingestion to toxicants in dust, soil and carpets, including pesticide vapours and lead. Their natural curiosity and lack of knowledge are aggravating factors.

Finally, as adolescents whose natural behaviour involves higher risk-taking, children are more vulnerable to the impacts of rapid urbanization and of negative behavioural models, often promoted heavily by media.

Over Five million children ages 0 to 14 die each year because of unhealthy environments. Up to 40% of the global burden of disease attributable to environmental factors is

estimated to fall on children under the age of 5 years, who account for only about 12% of the world's population. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that lifestyle changes and lack of physical activity combined with unhealthy dietary habits and tobacco use are increasing dramatically among children and adolescents, and these are strong contributory factors to problems such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, as well as cancers in later stages of life. Both prevention and the appropriate care of illness are essential. Appropriate management and care for illnesses in infants and neonates is also very important, as young children can die very quickly if an illness is not recognized.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Children constitute about 50% of the population in our region, a region where there is increasing concern about the effects on children's health of the deterioration and contamination of the environment in the places where children live, learn, play and sometimes work. In fact, respiratory infections, diarrhoeal diseases, injuries and malaria, all of which are directly attributable to environmental conditions, account for more than 43% of mortality among children under the age of 5 in our region.

The Regional Office has already "put children first" by giving children's health high priority and adopting an integrated strategy to achieve healthy life for our children—the Integrated Management of Child Health.

In addition, the Initiative on Healthy Environments for Children is under development in the Region, as part of the Global Healthy Environments for Children Alliance, highlighted during the World Summit on Sustainable Development. This initiative should build upon the active and committed involvement of various stakeholders, such as decision-makers, community leaders, teachers, health professionals, nongovernmental organizations, the private sector and indeed families themselves. A task force has been established in the Regional Office to map out the priorities and guide the development of policy to protect the children of the Region from the hazards in their environments.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our children are the cornerstone in sustainable development; investment in their survival, protection, growth and development, good health and proper nutrition is the essential foundation for human development, and this should be done within the context of the religious teachings, traditions, values and cultures that characterize this Region. Providing a supportive environment is essential in protecting and promoting children's health.

Experience to date has made it clear that the full participation of the community in finding and implementing appropriate solutions for health and environment is always an important prerequisite for success. Children themselves are dynamic and powerful forces in environmental protection; they show a natural interest in nature and are often passionate about the preservation of their planet. With proper support, children can acquire useful knowledge for participating in environmental activities and can contribute in a unique manner, with energy and vision, to finding solutions.

May God bless your endeavours in shaping the future of life for our children, and may He bless our children, who give us so much.

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