



## **Strengthening implementation of children's environmental health programmes – 53 countries of the European, Caucasus and Central Asian region adopt ministerial declaration with clear targets and commitments**

*Report of the 5<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, Parma, 10-12 March 2010*

Till the last moment there was suspense in this ministerial conference, if all member states would adopt the declaration '**Parma declaration on Environment and Health**' ([http://www.euro.who.int/document/CEH/parma\\_eh\\_conf\\_edoc05-1rev2.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/document/CEH/parma_eh_conf_edoc05-1rev2.pdf)). In the very last session on the conference, - where the member states were supposed to give their support for the ministerial declaration -, the Russian Federation suddenly said that they could not accept certain formulations in the document on the future of the process. Nevertheless, half an hour later, - after all countries had welcomed the declaration, - the newly elected Regional Director of Europe, Mrs. Zsuzsanna Jakab asked for acclamation by those member states which supported the declaration. There was no objection registered, and thus, by acclamation, the Parma Declaration has been adopted on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2010.

WECF believes that the Parma Declaration is a very valuable tool to **move policy makers from talk to action**. The Declaration spells out **5 concrete time-bound targets**, by which the countries commit to achieve concrete improvements for children's environmental health.

First of all, **the most important issue at this conference was that also EECCA region countries recognised in the declaration that asbestos is carcinogenic**. In more than 15 countries from the Eastern European, Caucasus, Central Asian and South-Eastern European region, asbestos is the most common building material. Citizens and building workers are not informed that **chrysotile asbestos is a potent carcinogen**, and that there is no safe threshold level. More than 45 of the most industrialized nations have entirely banned all forms of asbestos. It is therefore an important step forward that governments of the EECCA countries agreed to develop national plans to eliminate asbestos related diseases in cooperation with WHO and ILO by 2015.

The Parma Declaration also sets the date of 2015 by which a **healthy indoor air environment in children settings** needs to be achieved. Governments could take measures to reduce traffic near schools - as outdoor air pollution is the main source of indoor air pollution. That could be achieved by a law which obliges trucks to use the train on transition routes, such as through the mountains. This is an important target, as it means that guidelines for purchases of school furniture and electronics need to be developed, to assure that these products no longer emit carcinogenic substances such as formaldehyde or phthalates (plastic softeners). Also, WECF believes that the frequent use of pesticides in and around schools and playgrounds would need to be halted. Also, governments could apply mandatory substitution of hazardous substances in paints, carpets and furniture (as these often emit into the air).

Also, the governments aim at eliminating **children's and pregnant women's exposure to harmful substances by 2015**. Government's commit to act on identified risks of exposure to carcinogens, mutagens and reproductive toxicants, such as **endocrine disrupting chemicals**.



And, the Parma Declaration states that by 2020 children should have healthy and safe environments in which to **walk and bike to school** and more green spaces to play and exercise.

Many thousands of schools in rural areas of the EECCA region do not have indoor, hygienic toilets, and often lack safe drinking water. In the EU countries, vandalism and unhygienic situations in school toilets are also a real problem. **By 2015, all countries commit to achieving safe water and sanitation in schools** and other children settings. WECF strongly welcomes this commitment, as so far, water and sanitation has not been a political priority, and schools have not received sufficient support to address this problem.

The environmental NGOs of the European Eco-Forum, – represented by their coordinator **Sascha Gabizon**, Executive Director of Women in Europe for a Common Future, and by the alternate **Olga Speranskaya** of Eco-Accord Moscow, – had actively participated in the lead-up to the conference, and contributed to drafting groups work on the ministerial declaration.

Together with the health NGOs represented by HEAL, WECF organised the **CEHAPE Award plenary session**, with 8 ministers and deputies presenting an award to 8 local initiatives on children's environmental health. This plenary session highlighted how much is already being done – from increasing the number of children bicycling to school, to cleaning lead-contaminated soil around kindergartens, to producing hot-water through solar collectors for kindergartens, to monitoring drinking water well quality with school pupils – and asked the ministers on the panel to come with ideas how to scale up these best practices. The award session included a dialogue between NGOs, youth and the ministers on this question. The winning projects were published, and can be found on the website of HEAL and WECF: <http://www.wecf.eu/english/articles/2010/03/awardwinners-parma.php>

In the session Children's Environmental Health Action Plan, the partner organisation Confederation of Family Organisations in Europe (Coface) gave an intervention in name of European Eco-Forum, in which they urge policy-makers to introduce the "child norm". **This standard should give policymakers a signal to establish the right of children for a good physical and mental health and thus adapt our living environment according to their needs and well being.** It is a call to the different administrative levels to improve the quality of life for children starting from their needs and not those of adults. In the end, we will all benefit from a healthier environment: 'fit for children = design for all'. Any norm should be established for the protection of the most vulnerable groups of the population, e.g. children (see COFACE letter to policy makers).

WECF organised a side event on "**the right to safe water and sanitation in schools**", which is an issue seemingly forgotten by policy makers. Participants from NGOs, ministries of environment of Moldova, Germany, France, Switzerland, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Development Programme, shared experience and proposed policy improvement for the national and international level. WHO recommended to review the accessibility criteria for drinking water as defined by the Joint Monitoring Programme, based on the experience presented from fetching water in mid-winter conditions.

WECF in name of the environmental NGOs of Eco Forum, gave 2 interventions during the plenary sessions. The first intervention addressed **the role of citizens and NGOs in research**. Sascha Gabizon, Executive Director of WECF, said:  
*We see that in many countries decisions are taken in favour of economic interests, against public health interests. Often supported by industry-funded research.*



*This is for example the case for chrysotile asbestos, which continues to be used as a common building material – for schools, houses, offices – in many of the eastern European, Caucasus and Central Asian countries.*

*The international scientific community has shown that there exists no safe use of chrysotile asbestos, nevertheless, national industry-influenced studies in these countries show the contrary,*

*And thus, the population and local authorities remain entirely uninformed about the potent cancer risk of chrysotile asbestos, and cannot protect their and their children's health.*

*We therefore see that it is essential that we have transparency, on the relationships between research institutes and research studies and industry,*

*Secondly, citizens should have the full possibility to call for research on their concerns, by independent researchers, funded by public means*

*Thirdly, citizens should be able to represent themselves in technical and scientific committees.*

*It should not be the scientists or industry which decide on the risks society is willing to take with their children's health!*

*And finally, NGOs have an important role to bridge between science and society, and policy makers*

*Let me give one example,*

*My organisation, together with the national French consumer institute, have carried out a study "Test your Nest", where parents in 4 EU countries could volunteer to test their newly renovated baby rooms on levels of various VOCs and Formaldehyde – a WHO classified carcinogen.*

*The results by an independent laboratory – published and read by 350.000 French consumers - showed that 40% of the baby rooms had too high levels (above the guidelines) coming from furniture, carpets, paints, cleaning products and deodorizers.*

*It also showed that parents could make a difference by better ventilation.*

*This test was indicative of a problem, but of course we need measures to be taken by member states.*

*And ahead of these measures, we really need producers to phase out hazardous substances, applying the precautionary principle, -*

*So we were glad that we have already received calls from companies who produce non-formaldehyde emitting baby products*

*As NGOs we are committed to working with scientists, policy makers, progressive companies and consumer organisation to move towards a toxic free, healthy children environment.*

*In the closing session, where all member states were present, unlike in the plenary session on research, WECF spoke again for the European Eco-Forum environmental NGOs, and again addressed the great problem of asbestos use in Eastern Europe:*



*We, the environmental NGOs, first of all want to thank the organisers in particular WHO, for this conference and for the opportunity that the NGOs could fully participate. Secondly, we welcome the ministerial declaration. Especially because the declaration sets 5 clear targets, on eliminating indoor air pollution, hazardous chemicals, water pollution, and improve hygiene and sanitation in children's settings, such as schools in the coming 5 to 10 years. This will allow member states to take concrete measures, which will make a real difference for children's environmental health.*

*We also welcome that the declaration states that asbestos is carcinogenic and the member states commit to national plans for the elimination of asbestos-related diseases by 2015. This is the first step which these countries that have not yet banned asbestos need to take.*

*However, we would have liked to see an even stronger commitment. Thousands of people will die a painful death whilst countries wait with phasing-out of chrysotile asbestos.*

*And there are other serious problems which need to be addressed, uranium mining tailings which are polluting water sources, obsolete POPs pesticide stocks, and as NGOs we are willing to help implement practical solutions, but also call on the international community to provide support and funding to make real progress.*

*Finally, we environmental NGOs commit to support and contribute to this process, as members of the new taskforce, whilst the Environment and Health process moves higher onto the political agenda of member states.*

Negotiations on a **new structure of the governing and facilitating bodies of the process** ("future of the process") went all the way till the final evening. All the delegates agree to bring the process to a higher level, and followed the initiative of WHO to create a Board consisting of 8 ministers. Member States did have different views on the practicalities of nominations and decision-making processes, and the Russian Federation **objected a.o. to the involvement of non-governmental organisations**. Finally, all member states agreed to the Ministerial Declaration, including to paragraph eleven in which the future of the project document is welcomed.

In the Future of the Process document, **the environment and health NGOs will continue to be full members in the new task force**, as they were already in the past in the EEHC. The new ministerial board will consist of 8 ministers with regional and thematic balance, as well as the European Commission and the regional directors of UNECE, UNEP. The board will meet annually to give the process greater political priority.

The conditions for a successful conference were not ideal, Parma being difficult to get to, and with a snowstorm and a strike closing down most of the transportation routes, many delegates, and in particular the ministers and state secretaries, never made it to conference. Also, the building was not well suited for a lively conference as it lacked small rooms for side events and informal meetings. Nevertheless, WECF feels that the outcomes of the Parma conference are a **step towards assuring better children's environmental health**.

*By: Sascha Gabizon, issue group coordinator Health and Environment, European Eco Forum and Executive Director Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF)*