



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL, THE
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND
SOCIAL COMMITTEE
A European Environment and Health Strategy**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.

From its very beginning EU environmental policy has been driven primarily by health considerations. Many environment and health related problems have been solved, but much remains to be done, in particular with respect to the health implications of chronic exposures, such as those reported by the European Environmental Agency, WHO and a number of national organisations. They indicate that the interaction between environment and health is far more intimate and complex than is commonly understood. In particular, little attention has been paid to the interaction of different pollutants in the human body as well as in the environment. Even low level exposure over decades to a complex cocktail of pollutants in air, water, food, consumer products and buildings can have a significant effect on the health status of European citizens.

It has been estimated that some 20% of the burden of disease in industrialised countries would be attributable to environmental factors,ⁱ with the bulk of this affecting children. The magnitude of the problem is also perceived by the public as demonstrated in a recent survey, some 89% of Europeans indicated they are worried about the potential impact of the environment on their healthⁱⁱ.

In order to tackle this complex problem the European Commission launched “A European Environment and Health Strategy”, which announces that an **integrated approach** is needed in order to address environmental health issues. The work undertaken in this strategy is complementary to ongoing work in the environment (i.e. chemicals), research and health sectors and can be considered as an “umbrella” approach, including different policy actions. In addition, activities covered under this strategy are highly correlated and inter-linked with the different thematic strategies: marine environment, sustainable use of pesticides, air quality (CAFE), urban environment, soil protection, waste prevention and recycling.

This strategy is based on the fact that we need to **scale** up our efforts so that we, in line with the objectives of sustainable development, protect human health with special emphasis in the most vulnerable groups in society. It is based on 5 key elements and has been called “**SCALE**”; where: S stands for **Science**, and indicates that the strategy will draw together the knowledge from a wide range of networks and stakeholders in the fields of environment and health. It will focus on **Children**, a particularly vulnerable population to environmental hazard. It aims at raising **Awareness** on urgent health needs. In addition, the strategy will make use of the **Legislation** and will include a constant **Evaluation** to verify the efficacy and cost effectiveness of the actions in terms of the reduction of the environment-related health problems.

The ultimate objectives of this strategy are:

- To reduce the disease burden caused by environmental factors in the EU, with special emphasis on vulnerable groups in society like children.
- To identify and to prevent new health threats caused by environmental factors, such as endocrine disrupting effects.
- To strengthen EU capacity for policymaking in this area.

The strategy is incremental in its scope and will be implemented in cycles. The first cycle (2004-2010) aims to establish a good understanding of the link between:

- Childhood respiratory diseases, asthma, allergies
- Neurodevelopment disorders
- Childhood cancer
- Endocrine disrupting effects

and their related environmental factors including: indoor & outdoor air, dioxins, heavy metals, endocrine disrupters, electromagnetic fields and the urban environment.

This strategy presents a **vision** on how to address environmental and health issues in an integrated way and announces the preparation of an “**Action Plan 2004-2010**”. This Action Plan will be developed on the basis of full stakeholder participation and presented as the Community contribution to the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Budapest in June 2004.

ⁱ How Much Global Ill Health Is Attributable to Environmental Factors?, K.R. Smith *et al.*, Epidemiology 1999

ⁱⁱ Flash Eurobarometer EB123 "Perception du développement durable et préoccupations environnementales des européens" (*Europeans' perception of sustainable development and environmental concerns*) April 2002.