



Environmentally sustainable health systems: a strategic document



ABSTRACT

This strategic document builds on the evidence that health systems have a considerable environmental impact but that they can also have positive effects on the environment. A vision for an environmentally sustainable health system is put forth, as being a health system that improves, maintains or restores health, while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and leveraging opportunities to restore and improve it, to the benefit of the health and well-being of current and future generations. Ten avenues for action are proposed that can form the core of a strategy for fostering environmental sustainability in health systems, namely adopting a national environmental sustainability policy for health systems; minimizing and adequately managing waste and hazardous chemicals; promoting an efficient management of resources; promoting sustainable procurement; reducing health systems' emissions of greenhouse gases and air pollution; prioritizing disease prevention, health promotion and public health services; engaging the health workforce as an agent of sustainability; increasing community resilience and promoting local assets; creating incentives for change; and promoting innovative models of care. The WHO Regional Office for Europe encourages Member States to take an active role in environmental stewardship efforts.

KEYWORDS

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CONTENTS

Foreword	iv
Acknowledgements	iv
Abbreviations.....	iv
Executive Summary	v
Introduction	1
Vision	3
The knowledge base on environmental sustainability in health systems	4
Environmental impacts and pressures.....	5
Opportunities and benefits.....	6
Enablers and barriers.....	7
Knowledge gaps.....	8
Key types of environmental sustainability actions.....	9
Overarching action: adopting a national environmental sustainability policy for health systems	9
Minimizing and adequately managing waste and hazardous chemicals.....	10
Promoting an efficient management of resources.....	10
Promoting sustainable procurement	11
Reducing health systems' emissions of greenhouse gases and air pollution	12
Prioritizing disease prevention, health promotion and public health services	12
Engaging the health workforce as an agent of sustainability.....	13
Increasing community resilience and promoting local assets.....	13
Creating incentives for change	14
Promoting innovative models of care	14
Managing change.....	15
Next steps.....	16
References	17

FOREWORD

Health systems are fundamental to achieving and maintaining societal health and welfare, and are key factors for development and economic growth. They also represent a large share of the economy, globally and in most Member States of the WHO European Region, and employ large workforces, notably in health care. Taken as a whole, the health sector consumes considerable amounts of energy and resources and produces major streams of emissions and waste, either directly or through the goods and services it procures, uses and disposes of.

Ideally, an environmentally sustainable health system improves, maintains or restores health, while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and leveraging opportunities to restore and improve it, to the benefit of the health and well-being of current and future generations. Actions in stewardship, service delivery, resource generation and financing can contribute to these goals.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe has a clear policy mandate in this area. Health 2020, the Tallinn Charter: Health Systems for Health and Wealth, and the Parma Commitment to Act on Environment and Health provide a solid basis upon which to engage in technical work, advocacy and support to Member States in policy development, adoption and implementation.

This document proposes a range of practical actions that can help Member States to further strengthen environmentally sustainable health systems.

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ABBREVIATIONS

EDC	Endocrine-disrupting chemical
ESHS	Environmentally sustainable health systems
EU	European Union
NHS	National Health Service, England, United Kingdom
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WHA	World Health Assembly
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Health systems are fundamental to achieving and maintaining societal health and welfare, and are key factors for development and economic growth. They also represent a large share of the economy in most Member States of the WHO European Region, and employ large workforces, notably in health care. Due to its size and processes, the health sector as a whole consumes considerable amounts of energy and resources and produces major streams of emissions and waste, either directly or through the goods and services it procures, uses and disposes of.

This entails direct and indirect environmental impacts, which have traditionally been addressed through compliance with increasing regulatory demands. However, more and more frequently, the health sector in many Member States is taking an active role in environmental stewardship efforts. This proactive stance is supported by various facts: 1) several environmental sustainability interventions can support the tackling of upstream determinants of health; 2) environmental sustainability action can provide benefits for patients, providers, the health workforce and health systems' core functions, and can also decrease environmental health risks; and 3) environmental sustainability can help reduce costs and increase the resilience of health systems.

The global context in the private and public sectors clearly tends to mainstream environmental sustainability into core organizational functions. The question is, therefore, how health systems can do so within their existing institutional frameworks, core mandates and resource constraints.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe has a clear policy mandate for action in this area. Health 2020, the Tallinn Charter: Health Systems for Health and Wealth and the Parma Commitment to Act on Environment and Health provide a solid basis upon which to engage in technical work, advocacy and support to Member States in policy development, adoption and implementation.

An environmentally sustainable health system would improve, maintain or restore health, while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and leveraging opportunities to restore and improve it, to the benefit of the health and well-being of current and future generations. Sustainability-oriented actions in stewardship, service delivery, resource generation and financing (the core health systems functions) can all contribute to attaining this goal. A first step in this process is a clear mandate in Member States. This could take the form of a national environmental sustainability policy for health systems, developed through inclusive and transparent procedures. A route map could then establish mechanisms for progress that are measurable through locally and nationally relevant indicators.

Based on experiences in Member States and the scientific literature, the plan may include the following actions:

- overarching action: adopting a national environmental sustainability policy for health systems;
- minimizing and adequately managing waste and hazardous chemicals;
- promoting an efficient management of resources;
- promoting sustainable procurement;
- reducing health systems' emissions of greenhouse gases and air pollutants;
- prioritizing disease prevention, health promotion and public health services;
- engaging the health workforce as an agent of sustainability;
- increasing community resilience and promoting local assets;
- creating incentives for change; and
- promoting innovative models of care.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe can support Member States throughout the process by acting as a convener; collecting and assessing the evidence on the topic; promoting research and development in this area; providing methods and tools for country support and communication; and developing framework strategic documents to be discussed by Member States at appropriate policy meetings.



INTRODUCTION

Health systems are “the ensemble of all public and private institutions and resources, mandated to improve, maintain or restore health”. They encompass “personal and population services, as well as activities to influence the policies and actions in other sectors to address the social, environmental and economic determinants of health” (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2008). They are fundamental to achieving and maintaining societal health and welfare, and are key factors for development and economic growth (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2008, 2015a).

Owing to their broad mandate and scope, health systems represent a large sector of the economy in most countries of the WHO European Region. Government spending on health in 2012 was around 10.2% of gross domestic product in European Union (EU) countries and 6.4% in the rest of the Region (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2014). Health care is a highly labour-intensive activity: in 2010 there were around 17.1 million jobs in the health care sector, which accounted for 8% of all jobs in the 27 countries of the EU as of 2010 (European Commission, 2012).

Partly due to its size, but also to its specific processes and operations, the health sector as a whole – encompassing great internal variability – is a sizeable consumer of energy and resources and a major producer of emissions and waste, with associated direct and indirect environmental impacts. In today’s world, health systems cannot separate themselves from their responsibility towards environmental sustainability.

Thinking on the environmental sustainability of private and public organizations has evolved significantly over the past 50 years. It has been driven forward by changes in the way society perceives the relationship between activities in the private sector and the environment. For many years, the central concern was minimizing the negative impacts of human activities on the environment, or doing less harm. Innovation was mainly driven by the need to comply with environmental regulations. This changed in the 1990s with the emerging consensus that, in addition to being accountable to shareholders for profits, responsible companies also needed to be accountable to society for the social and environmental impacts of their activities. Thinking evolved further as it became clear that environmental sustainability could also provide a competitive advantage: efforts to foster sustainability often generate added value for organizations’ core activities.

The case of environmental sustainability in health systems, however, differs from that in other organizations in at least one crucial aspect – namely, the trade-offs that are not acceptable in the name of environmental sustainability. In most public and private large organizations, short-term trade-offs between certain core goals (for example, profits or return on investment) and environmental sustainability are possible in the context of long-term planning and operational management. However, no trade-offs can be accepted between environmental sustainability and core health systems functions performance. Here, the emphasis should be placed on win-win solutions whereby environmental sustainability actions reinforce health system functions.

Health systems in the Region have been taking important measures to reduce these environmental impacts for decades, mainly motivated by the need to comply with environmental regulations. Furthermore, in recent years, health systems in many countries (including within the Region) have taken an active role in environmental stewardship efforts (WHO, Health Care Without Harm, 2009). Increasingly, the driving force for pursuing environmental sustainability in health systems stems from a recognition of the synergies that exist between health and environmental sustainability. For example, while the intent of measures to promote active modes of transportation may be to increase levels of physical activity, these efforts will also yield clear benefits to the

environment. In summary, health systems can benefit from integrating environmental sustainability action into their core functions.

The mandate for environmentally sustainable health systems (ESHS) in the Region is solidly supported by the following policy documents and declarations.

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights the responsibility of every sector to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For health systems, this entails not only working towards health-related SDGs, but also making a sectorial contribution to the achievement of other SDGs (United Nations, 2015).
- Health 2020, the comprehensive policy framework agreed upon in 2013 by all 53 Member States of the Region, calls for the local promotion of services for environment and health and the encouragement of the health sector to act in a more environmentally responsible manner (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2013a).
- In the Tallinn Charter: Health Systems for Health and Wealth, Member States of the Region recognized the contribution of improved health to social well-being and emphasized the importance of both improving and being accountable for the performance of their health systems (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2008).
- In the Parma Commitment to Act on Environment and Health, ministers of health and of the environment called for Member States to “collaborate to increase the health sector’s contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and strengthen its leadership on energy- and resource-efficient management and stimulate other sectors, such as the food sector, to do the same” (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2010).

Moreover, the importance of environmental sustainability is explicitly highlighted in the document outlining the strategic priorities of the WHO Regional Office for Europe for strengthening health systems (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2015b). Based on this mandate and its ongoing background technical work in this area, WHO is committed to supporting Member States in their efforts towards greater environmental sustainability in their health systems.

This strategic discussion document addresses the environmental sustainability of health systems and how it can support their social and economic sustainability. However, this document does not aim to address health systems’ social and economic sustainability issues *per se*. It is based on the notion that health systems can benefit from implementing and mainstreaming environmental sustainability action across their core functions, as well as by playing a key role in promoting opportunities for health. The following sections are organized into a vision; a concise summary of the existing evidence; key categories of actions to implement and mainstream environmental sustainability in health systems; strategies for change management; and next steps.

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