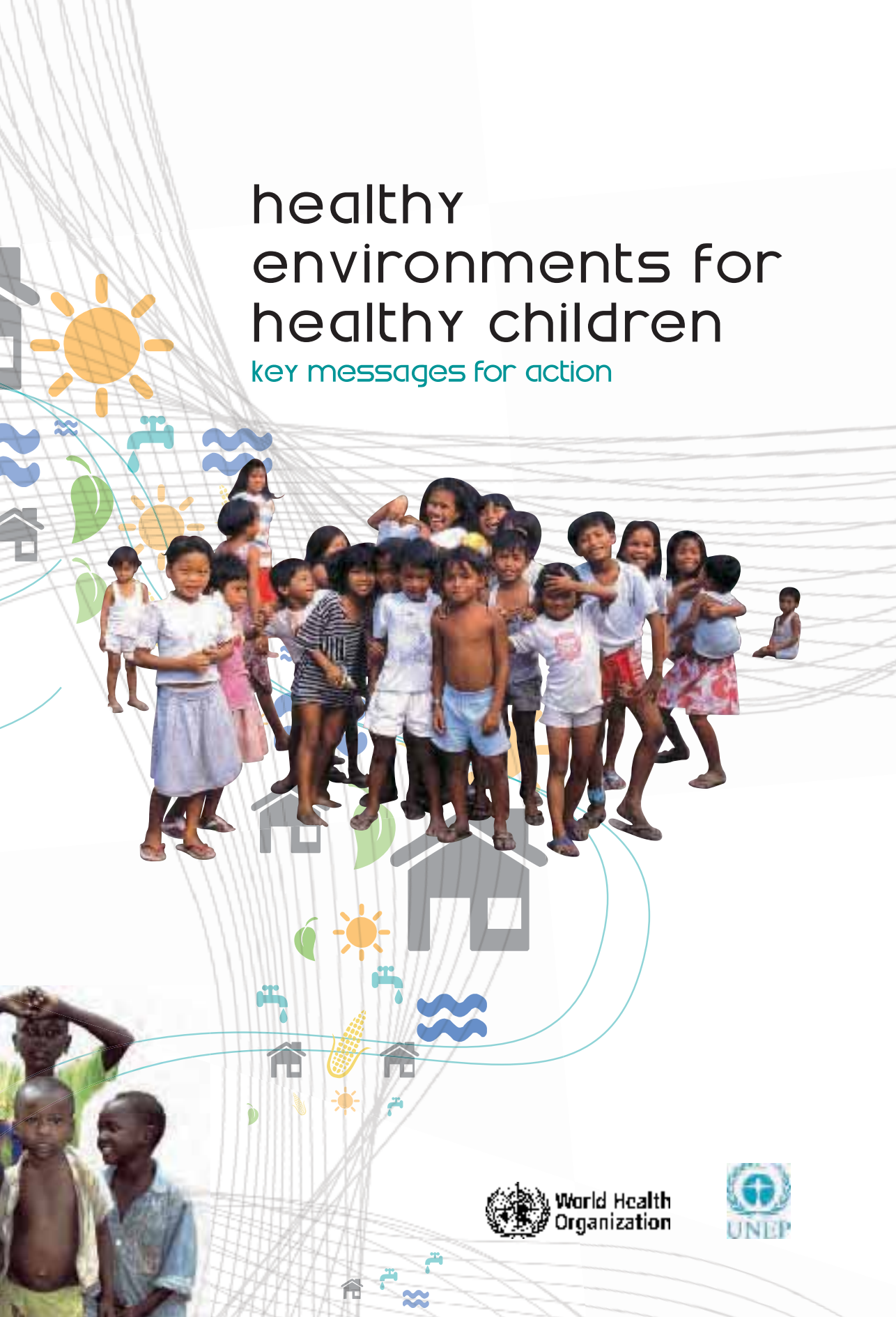


healthy environments for healthy children

key messages for action



WHO Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Healthy environments for healthy children: key messages for action.

1.Environmental health. 2.Environmental exposure. 3.Potable water. 4.Sanitation. 5.Child welfare. 6.Infant welfare. I.World Health Organization. II.United Nations Environment Programme.

ISBN 978 92 4 159988 7 (WHO)

(NLM classification: WA 30)

ISBN 978-92-807-2977-1 (UNEP)

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Printed in France

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Design & layout: L'IV Com Sàrl, Le Mont-sur-Lausanne, Switzerland

Chlorine-free paper
Recycled paper 100%
Ink from renewable resources (vegetable)
FSC and PEFC certified.

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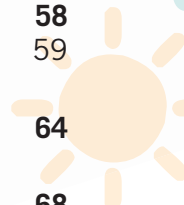
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Healthy Environments for Healthy Children — key messages for action

This booklet presents key messages for action, summarized from a set of chapters on different environmental health issues, available at www.who.int/ceh/publications/healthyenvironmentsforhealthychildren. The work is a result of an on-going partnership between WHO, UNEP and UNICEF in the area of children's environmental health, and seeks to update the 2002 joint publication "Children in the New Millennium: Environmental Impact on Health."¹

Over the last 20 years there have been acknowledgements at the highest level of the need to protect the environment in order to underpin efforts to safeguard child health. As far back as 1989, States pledged in the Convention on the Rights of the Child² to "combat disease and malnutrition... taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution." Recently, the call for action to address children's environmental health (CEH) has been gaining momentum, as more is known about how adverse environments can put children's growth, development, well-being and very survival, at risk. Notably, the G8 Siracusa Environment Ministerial Meeting,³ (April, 2009) recently expressed "We can do more to ensure that children are born, grow, develop and thrive in environments with clean air, clean water, safe food, and minimal exposure to harmful chemicals."

We have committed to this work faced with the knowledge that around three million children under five years die each year due to a number of largely preventable environment-related causes,⁴ and conscious of the fact that environmental challenges, including climatic change and increased urbanisation, have the potential to make every one of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, including those on eradicating poverty and improving the health and well-being of children and their caregivers, less achievable. The poorest and most marginalized children in developing countries suffer most. Although many commitments and international agreements have been made in relation to protecting children's health from environmental threats, progress towards stemming these risks has been slow.

Significant action is now required to achieve healthier, safer and cleaner environments – as this is not only imperative for child health, but also possible. Tools and mechanisms are available. Partnerships for acting together on many fronts, building

on existing programmes and adapting concrete actions to local needs, can make a difference.

WHO, UNEP and UNICEF are jointly taking a step forward in this booklet, proposing key messages for concrete action to confront the environmental health issues faced by children, their parents and communities all over the world. The aim is to provide decision makers at all levels (from the local to the international), including community leaders, teachers, health-care providers, parents, and other caregivers, with the information they need to promote healthier environments for children, using practical examples. The challenge is to ensure that everyone knows and understands the threats to child health and well-being from environmental risk factors and is motivated to take practical action to minimize these risks.

The future of our children and their lives as adults depend on a full enjoyment of good health in a safe, protective environment, from conception to adolescence and beyond.

Introduction

Globally, children are disproportionately exposed to a myriad of environmental threats. Evidence is mounting that worsening trends of global environmental degradation, including the erosion of ecosystems, increased pollution, and the effects of climatic changes, contribute to the burden of disease confronting children, in both developed and developing countries. These circumstances are affecting the world's ability to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the other internationally agreed upon development goals.

The health implications of environmental degradation for children are profound. Every year, around three million children under five die from preventable environment-related causes and conditions. This makes the environment one of the most critical contributors to the global toll of 8.8 million child deaths annually,⁵ with the noteworthy killers – if a child survives the neonatal period – being respiratory and diarrhoeal diseases, and malaria. Air pollution, unsafe water, lead in soil, pesticide residues in food, and ultra-violet radiation are a few of the multitude of environmental threats that may alter the delicate organism of a growing child, causing disease, developmental problems or adverse effects later in life.

Children are especially vulnerable, as they respond differently than adults when exposed to environmental factors. Their immune defences are not fully mature and their developing organs are more easily harmed; thus environmental contaminants may affect children disproportionately. In addition, their airways are smaller than those of adults, and irritating particles may act very fast, causing respiratory difficulties. They generally spend more time active and outdoors than adults, increasing their risk of exposure considerably. Also proportionate to their size, children ingest more food, drink more water and breathe more air than adults, and children's normal activities – such as putting their hands in their mouths or playing outdoors – can result in higher exposures to certain contaminants. Even while in the womb, the child-to-be can also be exposed to adverse environmental risk factors that may give rise to diseases later in life – imposing a heavy burden on public health systems.

We still have an “unfinished agenda” to control those diseases linked to unsafe water and food, lack of sanitation and indoor air pollution. In addition, children may be exposed to new or recently recognized risk factors: climate change, ozone depletion, manufactured nano-particles and endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) are among the relatively new concerns. Harmful chemicals in soil and effluent, originating from waste, traffic or other activities may be present in places where children spend time.

Some especially long-lasting contaminants (mercury and persistent organic pollutants – POPs) are widely recognized as a threat to health and the environment and are the focus of major international agreements.

Environmental threats and exposure are in many cases preventable. Pro-active coordinated actions are required to raise awareness and reduce risk and vulnerability. Preventive interventions on the environmental management and health sector sides have proven to be effective in protecting children from adverse exposures in many countries and provide a wealth of knowledge and experience from which we can build a strong foundation for informed and effective action.

Drawing on these experiences, as well as advances in the research and data available, we present in this booklet key messages for action in relation to the main environmental threats to children.

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