



Comité consultatif d'experts sur la santé des enfants et l'environnement en Amérique du Nord
Consejo Consultivo de Expertos sobre Salud Infantil y Medio Ambiente en América del Norte
Expert Advisory Board on Children's Health and the Environment in North America

27 March 2002

ADVICE TO COUNCIL: 02-01

Development of the Cooperative Agenda for Children's Health and the Environment in North America

The Expert Advisory Board on Children's Health and the Environment in North America (hereinafter referred to as the 'Expert Advisory Board' or the 'Board') of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC)

IN ACCORDANCE with its mandate to advise Council on matters pertaining to children's environmental health,

COGNIZANT of the importance of advancing the protection of children from environmental threats to their health, and the benefits of collaboration among the three countries,

HAVING held a joint public meeting with the CEC's Joint Public Advisory Committee on 7 March 2002 in Mexico City, in which members of the public and representatives of various sectors of civil society actively participated,

RECALLING the discussions during the Trilateral Workshop held in Montreal in November 2001, in which environment and health officials from the three governments, the Expert Advisory Board and representatives of the Canadian and US National Advisory Committees participated,

HAVING reviewed in detail the draft Cooperative Agenda for Children's Health and the Environment in North America, which has been prepared by the trilateral Children's Environmental Health (CEH) Team based on the ideas and proposed actions generated during the Trilateral Workshop, and having benefited from the public's comments, ideas and discussions during the 7 March meeting,

HEREBY makes the following observations and recommendations for consideration by the Council:

A high priority must be placed on the development of policies and measures that will prevent exposures and risks to children's health in the environments in which they live, learn and play, and via food, water and products.

Research is vital for gaining a better understanding of how environmental factors, e.g. substances found in our air, water, food and products, are affecting or could potentially affect the health of children and fetuses.

However, additional research is not always warranted. Immediate action is needed to promulgate or strengthen regulations to prevent children's exposures to pollutants and toxic substances for which adequate scientific knowledge already exists.

The application of the precautionary principle in policy and regulatory decision-making is vital to the protection of our children and future generations from environmental threats to health. In cases where there exists a potential for harm, protective action must be taken even in the absence of full scientific understanding.

A high priority must be placed on capacity building and training at all levels. This includes building up a cadre of professionals, particularly in Mexico, who have the expertise needed for conducting exposure and risk assessment including, *inter alia*, toxicologists and epidemiologists. Training and capacity building is also needed for medical professionals, community organizations, educators and other relevant actors, and should build on existing successful models such as the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) training program. Efforts should also be directed to increasing interactions among the various disciplines and among the three countries.

Education and advocacy are critical for prevention and informed action to reduce exposures and risks. A high priority should be placed on educating and empowering people at the grassroots level, including parents and community groups, and providing the resources (e.g. small grants) for grassroots groups. However, such efforts are not a substitute for the development and improvement of regulations to protect children from environmental threats. Among the areas in which improved regulation is needed include air pollution, elimination of lead in housing and consumer products, and the banning of smoking in public places.

Having reviewed and discussed the draft Cooperative Agenda, the Expert Advisory Board also offers the following specific advice and recommendations with respect to the items outlined therein:

- In the area of **public information, education and outreach**, the Board supports the proposed work with health professionals, and encourages similar partnerships with community-based organizations. There is a need to build core competencies on children's environmental health among community health workers. The Board urges the CEC to pursue opportunities to work with the trilateral network of Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Units (PEHSUs) and the U.S. network of Pediatric Environmental Health Research Centers. Education and involvement of children themselves is also of high importance. In addition, there is a need for training programs and the development of relevant curricula and continuing education programs in order to ensure a future supply of clinical specialists in pediatric environmental health. This is an area in which the Board stands ready to play a leadership role. With respect to specific topics, there should be increased education and awareness raising aimed at limiting the cosmetic use of pesticides.

- With respect to **asthma and respiratory disease**, the Board supports the ongoing research project on the health effects of diesel on children and other vulnerable groups, which is a substance for which improved scientific understanding would be beneficial. However, the Board recommends that the CEC also address other air pollutants that are affecting children's health, such as fine particulates, and to broaden the focus beyond the borders to address regions of high exposure.
- With respect to **lead**, there is a need for improved data on blood lead levels and monitoring of the effects of lead. The Board encourages the SMOC to include biomonitoring for lead in its work within the NARAP on Environmental Monitoring and Assessment. The project to reduce children's exposure to lead by targeting lead in ceramics and in other micro-industries is a good example of practical work to identify and target a specific problem, which can then serve as a model for tackling other similar issues.
- With regard to **toxic substances, including pesticides**, there is need for improved data on exposures and biomonitoring, better health surveillance, and a commitment to trilateral cooperation to enhance data comparability. As a starting point for these efforts, the priority focus should be on mercury and other metals, DDT and other pesticides, PCBs and other persistent organic pollutants (POPs), and high production volume chemicals for which more research is needed, in particular those thought to have neuro-developmental effects. Opportunities to build on ongoing work, including national surveys such as National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), should be pursued. This will not only aid in avoiding duplication and unnecessary effort, but will also strengthen linkages among researchers in the three countries and foster common approaches.
- With respect to **risk assessment and economic valuation**, it is vital that the use of these tools be done in a transparent way. It is also important to ensure that the appropriate science is used to contribute to sound decisions, for example not relying on adult studies or the wrong types of studies. When there is not adequate scientific knowledge, conservative and protective measures should be taken.
- **Strengthening the knowledge base for long-term solutions** should be among the core aims of the cooperative efforts of the three nations. The Board strongly supports the need for the U.S. National Children's Study and its expansion to include Mexico and Canada. As noted above, further work is needed to improve biomonitoring and health surveillance.

Concerted efforts need to be made to obtain the resources needed to implement the Cooperative Agenda. Such efforts such include building elements of the Cooperative Agenda into ongoing programs of the national governments and into the existing work program of the CEC, seeking partnerships with groups and organizations outside of government, and pursuing extra-budgetary resources.

The Board stands ready to support the Council in advancing work on children's environmental health and to participate in, and contribute to, other program areas of CEC, such as the Sound Management of Chemicals initiative, including the development of the NARAP on Environmental Monitoring Assessment.