

HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN

A REPORT ON EVENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA TO
OBSERVE WORLD HEALTH DAY APRIL 2003



Department of Health



World Health Organization

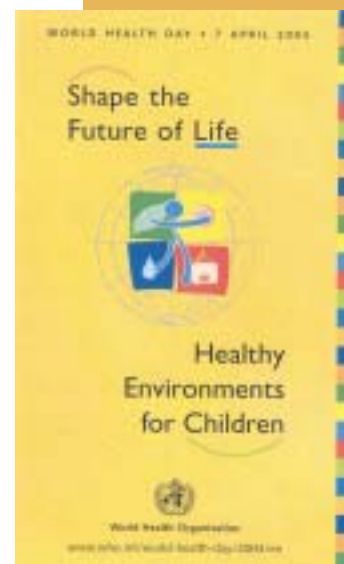
INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly acknowledged that up to one-third of the burden of death and disease in the world is attributable to factors in the environment, and that children bear a disproportionate share of the global burden of death and disease from environmental exposures. Children's innate vulnerability to environmental threats is exacerbated by factors such as poverty, inequity and malnutrition.

In South Africa, the health of large numbers of children is threatened by environmental risks in their homes and schools, which they face on a daily basis. These risks include poor access to water and sanitation, inadequate access to personal and environmental hygiene facilities, and consequently poor hygiene practices, exposure to dangerous levels of indoor air pollution from the use of solid and liquid fuels for cooking and space heating, and exposure to chemicals in the environment, including lead, pesticides and mercury. Environmental conditions within homes and schools may also predispose children to injury and death from, for example burn injuries, poisoning, motor vehicle incidents and drowning.

Increasing evidence of the environmental risks to children's health and safety prompted the Director General, Dr Gro Harlem-Brundtland, of the World Health Organisation to launch, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg on 1 September 2002, the global **Healthy Environments for Children Initiative** (HECI), and to announce that the theme for World Health Day (7 April) 2003 would be **Healthy Environments for Children**.

HECI gave rise to the global **Healthy Environments for Children Alliance** (HECA), which is described as a response to WSSD and the Johannesburg Declaration, as well as the challenge of meeting the Millennium Development Goals. The draft HECA mission statement speaks to the development of "a world-wide alliance to intensify global action on environmental risks to children's health that arise from the settings where they live, learn, play and earn, by providing knowledge, increasing political will, mobilizing resources, and catalyzing action."



The approaches of HECA focus on the placement of children, environment and health concerns higher up on political agendas, cross-sectoral action, expanding and scaling up action around children, environment and health and community participation.

The core HECA functions include advocacy and awareness-raising, the provision of knowledge, information exchange and expertise for decision-making, the promotion of effective policies and action at all levels, and across all sectors, support for countries and communities in creating and maintaining healthy environments for children, and monitoring and evaluation of progress.

WORLD HEALTH DAY 2003 IN SOUTH AFRICA



World Health Day 2003 was observed at several sites and in different ways across South Africa. The main events, with rural and urban foci respectively, were held in Cofimvaba, Eastern Cape on 7 April, and Bloekombos, Western Cape on 8 April 2003. What all of the events had in common however, was the degree of participation and enthusiasm for this year's theme of *Healthy Environments for Children*. As one participant put it "we all know, have or have been children – childhood defines us." Ministers and leaders, signatories, heads of organisations, community members and most importantly children, were in attendance in large numbers at the various events.

PLEDGE OF COMMITMENT TO HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN

A key component of Healthy Environments for Children activities in South Africa was the drafting of a ***Pledge of Commitment by the People of South Africa to the Healthy Environments for Children initiative***. In brief the Pledge acknowledges that children are vulnerable to environmental hazards and that factors such as poverty & malnutrition increase children's vulnerability to environmental hazards, outlines some of the key environmental threats to the health of young South African children, and commits signatories to scaled up action around the creation of Healthy Environments for Children.

Pledge signing ceremonies have been part of the key World Health Day celebrations in Cofimvaba, Cape Town and Pretoria. Thus far numerous national Ministers, provincial MECs (Members of the Executive Council), heads of organizations and agencies, and of course children, have come forward to add their signatures to the Pledge (*the full text of the Pledge of Commitment can be viewed on the websites of the Department of Health – www.doh.gov.za and the Medical Research Council - www.mrc.ac.za*). Further Pledge signing ceremonies are planned in association with various other events on the South African health and development calendar for 2003.



POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN



Dr Tshabalala-Msimang signs the Pledge.

There is high-level political commitment to, and interest in, the Healthy Environments for Children initiative in South Africa, which is important for momentum and strong action in this regard in the future. The Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, was amongst the very first to sign up to the global Healthy Environments for Children Alliance of the World Health Organization, launched on 1 September 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg. National Ministers and Deputy Ministers, as well as Provincial

MECs have been well represented at Healthy Environments for Children events throughout the country, including the Minister of Health (Dr Tshabalala-Msimang), the Deputy Minister of Health (Mr Renier Schoeman), the Deputy Minister of Provincial and Local Government, (Ms Ntombazana Botha), the MECs for Health, Education, Safety and Liaison in Gauteng (Dr Gwen Ramokgopa, Mr Ignatius Jacobs and Ms Angie Motshekga respectively), the MEC for Health in the Western Cape (Mr Piet Meyer), the MEC for Health in Mpumalanga (Ms Sibongile Manana), the MECs for Health in the Free State, Northern Cape and Limpopo (Mrs D Tsopo, Ms D Peters, Mr S Moloto respectively), Ms Lynne Brown, Speaker in the Western Cape Provincial Assembly, and traditional leaders.



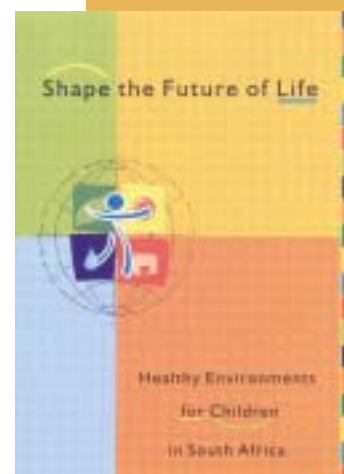
Dr Ramokgopa, MEC for Health, Gauteng, signs the pledge.



Mr Jacobs, MEC for Education, Gauteng, signs the Pledge.

CREATING AWARENESS OF HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN

In a partnership between the Department of Health, the Medical Research Council, the World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Urban Health and the South African Office of the World Health Organisation, an information brochure, outlining the background and essence of the Healthy Environments for Children initiative, with a focus on South African children, was drafted and widely distributed. Together with the brochure, a wide range of information, education and communication materials on the health of children in relation to the environment was available at Healthy Environments for Children exhibitions, held as part of all World Health Day 2003 events.



CREATING HEALTHY SCHOOLS

In support of the Health Promoting Schools initiative, the Minister of Health handed out awards to local schools in the district of Cofimvaba, which have adopted tobacco-free cultures and policies. The Minister also unveiled water and sanitation projects and helped to plant vegetables in the food garden of the Kaulele School in Cofimvaba.



The Minister of Health working in a school food garden, Cofimvaba.



ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS

In a partnership between a Cofimvaba school, the local Health Department and the community, a school classroom has been set aside for the provision of First Aid treatment to members of the school and broader community. On the request of the Minister, the MEC for Health in the Eastern Cape has agreed to provide a trained community health worker for the First Aid centre, as well as essential resources.

CREATING SAFE & HEALTHY HOMES

In Cape Town on 8 April 2003, in her keynote address on Healthy Environments for Children, the Minister of Health drew particular attention to the health and safety risks faced by children within their homes, emphasizing in particular aspects related to exposure to indoor air pollution in wood and paraffin using households and injury prevention. The Minister also announced the intention of the Department of Health to undertake a nation-wide campaign aimed at raising awareness of the risks to child health and school performance from exposure to high levels of lead in the environment. The Child Accident Prevention Foundation of South Africa exhibited a “safe house” used as a tool to educate communities about the range of risks to child safety within homes, which is in line with the community component of the IMCI (Integrated Management of Childhood Illness) strategy.

CHILDREN SETTING THE AGENDA

Throughout the World Health Day events, various mechanisms were adopted to ensure that children themselves were setting the agenda for planning and action around the creation of Healthy Environments for Children in South Africa.

A Healthy Environments for Children Drawing Competition in Gauteng

In Gauteng for example, on the initiative of the MEC for Health, Dr Gwen Ramokgopa, school children participated in a Healthy Environments for Children drawing competition, which required them to illustrate health concerns in their living environments. At a World Health Day event held in the City of Tshwane (Pretoria) on 16 April 2003, the winning submissions were awarded prizes by the MEC for Education of Gauteng Province, Mr Ignatius Jacobs.

Minister's Questions in Bloekombos, Cape Town

In Bloekombos, Cape Town, children were able to put questions to the Minister regarding their concerns around environmental conditions that were hazardous to health. Amongst the issues raised during the session were safety, drug abuse and gangsterism in schools, refuse and waste dump sites, traffic injuries, safe recreational facilities and abuse of girl children. Responses to most of the children's questions were given directly as part of the Minister's keynote address on the day, with the remainder being addressed in subsequent letters from the Minister to the children.

In Cofimvaba, a student representative addressed the assembly of around 8 000 participants in the World Health Day event, highlighting the key environmental concerns amongst local children in relation to health. In particular, she focussed on water and sanitation, cholera and safety in schools and homes.



The MECs for Health and Education (Gauteng) handing out prizes to winners of the HEC drawing competition.

ENTERTAINMENT



Threaded through the serious messages related to environmental hazards to children's health in homes and schools, were items of fun and entertainment which served also to showcase the skills and talents of young South African children. Included in the entertainment programme were signing and dancing performances, horse-riding displays, acrobatics, gymnastics and poetry readings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The next steps in the further development of the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance in South Africa have already been alluded to by the Minister of Health. A steering committee will shortly be established to consider aspects related to the structure, mechanisms of action, priority focus areas, consultative mechanisms, essential research, the development of an action plan and resource identification. Discussions are also being held in relation to a Healthy Environments for Children Summit and a Centre of Best Practice in focussing on the Creation of Healthy Environments for Children in South Africa. It is envisaged that the Centre will serve as a national resource for communities and institutions interested in the creation of Healthy Environments for Children.

Further information on the Healthy Environments for Children initiative in South Africa
may be obtained from:



Department of Health
Ms Zanele Mthembu
27 12 312 0165 (telephone)
27 12 312 3181 (facsimile)
mthemz@health.gov.za



Medical Research Council
Ms Angela Mathee
27 11 643 7403 (telephone)
27 11 642 6832 (facsimile)
amathee@mrc.ac.za



World Health Organisation
Ms Greer van Zyl
27 12 338 5211 (telephone)
27 12 320 1503 (facsimile)
gvzyl@un.org.za