



EUROPE

Note for the press EURO/04/05
Copenhagen, Rome, 15 February 2005

Kyoto Protocol: major step towards preventing deaths from environmental hazards

The entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change¹ is a key opportunity for the protection of human health. It could not only help to prevent deaths related to climate change by reducing greenhouse-gas emissions but also prompt integrated action in other sectors, such as transport, thus reducing the large burden of associated disease.

With the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, industrialized countries are to cut their combined emissions of six major greenhouse gases during the period 2008–2012 to below-1990 levels. The European Union (EU) is to cut its combined emissions by 8%. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) from fossil-fuel combustion is the largest contributor to climate change: if CO₂ concentrations continue to grow, average surface temperatures will further increase, extreme weather events will be more likely and sea level will continue to rise.

In recent years, the temperature has risen by about 0.6°C globally. In the WHO European Region, 15 major floods killed about 250 people and affected 1 million others in 2002, and heat-waves caused 35 000 deaths in 2003. Changed climatic conditions affect the distribution, seasonality and incidence of diseases transmitted by rodents, sandflies, mosquitoes and ticks. They can also alter ecosystems and facilitate the introduction of new disease-transmitting species and pathogen hosts in the Region.

“This is a serious picture, but we are not just talking about taking measures to avoid the health risks arising from altered climates,” says Dr Roberto Bertollini, Director of the Special Programme on Health and Environment at the WHO Regional Office for Europe. “The ratification of the Kyoto Protocol is a key milestone towards reducing greenhouse gases through action in the transport, energy and industry sectors. But it is also an opportunity to obtain immediate health benefits for the people of today through the reduction of other environmental hazards, such as air pollution.”

Transport is the fastest growing source of fossil-fuel CO₂ emissions. In the EU, it accounts for about 35% of total energy consumption, with a 20% net increase of the resulting greenhouse gas emissions over the past decade, owing to a rise in transport volumes that outweighs improvements in vehicle efficiency. Current policies are estimated to be insufficient to stop this growth, and should be strengthened to achieve the target. Similar trends are observed in

¹ The Kyoto Protocol is a legally binding international agreement that commits industrialized nations to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, principally carbon dioxide, to around 5.2% below their 1990 levels over the next decade. Drawn up in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997, the agreement needed ratification by countries responsible for at least 55% of the world's carbon emissions in 1990 to come into force. On 18 November 2004, with the Russian Federation depositing its instrument of ratification with the United Nations, the ninety-day count-down started. On 16 February 2005, the Protocol will become legally binding on its 128 Parties.

eastern countries in the WHO European Region, where the growth of freight and private transport is accompanied by a decline in public transport.

Meeting the Kyoto targets will require more than technological improvements in vehicles and fuel efficiency. These would take a few years to produce visible benefits and would not address the other health effects of unsustainable transport policies. Integrated climate-change policies that simultaneously tackle all the environmental and health effects of transport therefore represent a big opportunity for health gain. Such policies would help not only to achieve the Kyoto targets, by reducing greenhouse-gas emissions from private transport, but also to reduce the transport-related health burden from road traffic injuries, the effects of noise and air pollution, and the risks related to physical inactivity. Getting more people walking, cycling and using public transport is a clear example of an approach with multiple benefits.

“This means that the hundreds of thousands of lives lost to transport, directly and indirectly, every year in the European Region could be saved, along with those possibly associated to the changing climate”, concludes Dr Roberto Bertollini.

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