
BUILDING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL NETWORKS

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SUMMARY

The International Federation of Environmental Health, IFEH, is a Federation of National associations of professionals working within the field of environment and health protection or with other words environmental health.

Its primary task is to facilitate professional exchange of experience and expertise and to promote the development of environment and health protection and research in this area. It works to disseminate knowledge concerning environmental health and promotes interchange of people working in this sector and exchanges publications of a scientific and technical nature produced by its members.

The Federation currently has full members in 26 countries and also has 28 Academic Associate members e.g. universities or institutions especially engaged in education and research work within this field as well as 8 Associate members e.g. subnational organizations.

It represents 30-40,000 individual members who are engaged in environment and health protection work. These professionals are mostly employed by public authorities at all levels, local, regional as well as national or engaged in teaching or research.

The International Federation of Environmental Health was established in the mid 1980s, is registered under British Company law and is run on an honorary basis.

Further information can be obtained at www.ifeh.org.

1 THE CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

“Environmental Health comprises those aspects of human health including quality of life that are determined by chemical, physical, biological, social and psychosocial factors in the environment.

It also refers to the theory and practice of assessing, correcting and preventing those factors in the environment that can potentially affect adversely the health of present and future generations.”

(Definition by WHO)

Environmental health services are those services which implement environmental health policies through monitoring and control activities. They also carry out that role by promoting the improvement of environmental parameters and by encouraging the use of environmentally friendly and healthy technologies and behaviors.

To further clarify the connection or inter dependability between environment and health protection issues it is also relevant to refer to the United Nations Environment and Development summit meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 when the countries of the world adopted the Rio Declaration and the Agenda 21 in order to secure a sustainable development and settle the agenda for the 21st century.

The 1st article of the Rio Declaration reads:

“Human beings are at the center of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.”

In short environmental health is an integrated approach to environment and health protection issues. It is important not to make this into a semantic issue but to try to look at what is actually carried out and what responsibilities lies within the field of Environmental Health and in what way professionals in different countries can be of help to one another in developing environment and health protection and strategies to achieve this.

2 ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH PROTECTION PROFESSIONALS, ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ADMINISTRATION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In many countries environment protection and health protection are carried out by parallel organizations with too few links between them. This may very well lead to less effectiveness and wrong priorities in both areas.

In other countries a tradition has developed to work with environmental protection from a health perspective. This gives the opportunity to take a more holistic view when it comes to identifying problems and finding solutions. The current development of National Environmental Health Action Plans is a token of a rising awareness of this.

The Swedish system can serve as one example of environmental health work. Supervising and monitoring the environment is mostly carried out at Local Authority level (Sweden has 288 Local Authorities, with a very high degree of self governance, all of which has an Environment and health protection committee).

Their responsibilities of supervision and correction lies within the fields of:

- Industry, of which small and medium sized enterprises make up the big part and also causes many problems since they often are not clearly regulated and often lack environment expertise and resources.
- Air, ground and water protection and surveillance.
- Noise, both outdoors and indoors.
- Chemicals.
- Waste management control including hazardous waste.
- Waste water handling.
- Indoor climate; radon (very often from the ground or the ground water), ventilation (where the outdoor air is an important factor), mould (wrong construction or building sites), etc.
- Public places and beaches.
- Farms both with and without live stock.
- Drinking water.
- Food safety, “from seed to feed” which means not only hygiene factors but also the production, distribution, handling and consumption of food. The environmental impact from the food chain is today assessed as being one of the major areas we have to tackle.
- Nature protection.
- Animal welfare.

- Pest control.
- Spatial planning procedures.
- Information and participation programs involving the citizens, enterprises and organizations (this usually being part of the local Agenda 21 implementation).
- Occupational Health is not included in the Environmental Health work in Sweden as it is in many other countries. Occupational Health work has a strong affinity to environment protection work.

3 TRAINING AND STAFFING

In some countries there is special education available for those who aim at practicing environment and health protection.

Those that are employed to carry out the implementation and enforcement of environment and health protection laws in Sweden are mostly trained as Environmental Health Officers (inspectors).

One training course that is available nowadays is a 4 year degree course at Umea University which includes the training to implement and enforce laws and to monitor and supervise as well as practical training in the different fields of work mentioned above. These Environmental Health Officers are trained to take a generic outlook and apply a holistic approach.

Many other environmental health professionals are also employed within the field as experts in different areas i.e. chemistry, ecology, biology and work together with the Environmental Health Officers or are taken on as consultants.

To give an example regarding staffing from Sweden, the Local Authority of Osteraker, close to Stockholm and partly in the archipelago, has approximately 70,000 inhabitants including those living only part time of the year there.

The Environment and health protection committee has a staff of 9 Environmental Health Officers, 3 experts (geologist, biologist, architect) and 3 administrative staff plus some part-time employees working with public information and participation programs. It carries the full responsibility for environment protection within its geographic area. Licensing of big plants however lies at the regional or national level.

An Environmental Code has been decided on in Sweden and will shortly come into effect. This Code combines Environment and Health protection laws and further emphasizes the close link between these two.

Other countries that have developed the concept of environmental health have different mixtures of the above mentioned areas of work. In countries where the concept of environmental health is not prevalent or these words are not used it is still often customary to combine several of these targets. However, there might often not exist a special education of profession for those who will have the task of implementing and enforcing environmental legislation.

4 THE GENESIS OF THE NETWORK AND HOW IT WAS ESTABLISHED

Environmental Health Professionals have joined together in the International Federation of Environmental Health, IFEH.

Members of the International Federation of Environmental Health are National Organizations of Professionals working with all or only part of the Environment and health protection areas mentioned above. The International Federation of Environmental Health also has Associate members and Academic Associate members which are likely to be academic institutions or research organizations involved in environmental health work.

The International Federation of Environmental Health can be seen as an umbrella organization and most of the actual work is carried out on a regional or sub regional level. The International Federation of Environmental Health currently has four regional groups: The International Federation of Environmental Health African Group, the International Federation of Environmental Health Americas, the International Federation of Environmental Health Europe and the International Federation of Environmental Health Pacific Rim Group.

International Federation of Environmental Health was inaugurated in September 1985 and incorporated under U.K. Company Law as a company limited by guarantee and having no shareholders.

Its Constitution is to be found in its Memorandum and Articles of Association which includes the objectives of the Federation and also provides for the election of officers.

The Executive body of the Federation is its Council. Member organizations are entitled to appoint one member for each one hundred of their members subject to a maximum of three members. The Council normally meets once or twice a year, which is an organization run on an honorary basis.

At present International Federation of Environmental Health represents 30-40,000 Environmental Health Professionals. National Organizations of Environmental Health professionals in Australia, Botswana, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, United Kingdom, Finland, Germany, Greece, China (Hong Kong), Indonesia, Ireland, Kenya, Latvia, Malaysia, Malawi, Mauritius, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania, USA, Zimbabwe are full members of the International Federation of Environmental Health. Iceland and Austria are about to join. The International Federation of Environmental Health network also includes Academic Associate members the Associate members and thus represents a much wider area than the countries mentioned above.

5 DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING THE NETWORK

The International Federation of Environmental Health network was established through the cooperation between professionals in the U.K., Australia, Scotland and Ireland and came from the need to exchange professional advice and expertise in order to develop the profession

In the former British Commonwealth countries a similar legal system and professional concept had developed which facilitated the identification of brothers and sisters in the trade. There also existed an exchange of professionals and joint education of professionals. Not only former British Commonwealth countries had this tradition. For example, Sweden also had adopted a similar approach and was also part of this early cooperation which during the 1980s developed into the forming of the International Federation of Environmental Health.

The International Federation of Environmental Health's inaugural World Congress on Environmental Health was held in Australia in 1988, followed by the second World Congress in the U.K. in 1991, the third World Congress in Malaysia in 1994, the fourth World

Congress in Scotland in 1996 and the fifth World Congress in Sweden in 1998. The oncoming biannual Congresses will be in Norway 2000, in the U.S.A. in 2002 and in South Africa in 2004.

These Congresses form an important link between the members of International Federation of Environmental Health. In between Congresses, the work is mostly carried out at regional or sub regional level in the form of projects between groups of members. These projects can take the form of "twinning" which includes professional or student exchange programs or the form of identifying and working towards different environmental health targets like the development of National Environmental Health Action Plans and the implementation of these.

The primary link within the International Federation of Environmental Health is between the member organizations and these are in their turn obliged to involve their individual members.

International Federation of Environmental Health currently circulates a fairly simple newsletter that gives internal information to all members. This newsletter will be replaced by a journal that will be issued twice a year starting in February 1999.

International Federation of Environmental Health also takes part in the International Journal of Environmental Health Research published by Carfax Publishing Company. International Federation of Environmental Health is represented at its editorial board. This journal is an international quarterly devoted to publication of research within this area and also acts as a link between research communities and practitioners in environmental health. For further information see: www.carfax.co.uk.

International Federation of Environmental Health is developing its first website which is currently linked to the Edinburgh University website and can be found at www.ifeh.org. The internet will be used as a fundamental source of communication and will in due course also hold special sites for the Regional Groups. Part of the information will be the International Federation of Environmental Health Directory which currently is a hard copy edition that lists all members and gives basic information about IFEH.

6 WHO IS ASKED TO PARTICIPATE AND WHAT LEVELS IN THE ORGANIZATIONS

National organizations of professional within the field of Environment and Health protection can become full members. There are also Academic Associate members and Associate members. As an individual you can join as a Sustaining Subscriber.

7 SUBJECT THE NETWORK COVERS

Some of the International Federation of Environmental Health objectives can be summarized as follows:

- To provide a focal point for national officers, whether in state or local government, or private employment, whose concern is the control of the environment in the interest of public health.
- To provide a means of exchanging information on environmental health matters, including systems of organization and management.

- To promote the study of environmental sciences and to exchange information about training and education.
- To promote field studies of environmental health control and research and disseminate knowledge concerning environmental health.
- To promote the interchange of persons engaged in environmental health work.

8 VEHICLES FOR EXCHANGE AND MEANS OF COMMUNICATION USED

The International Federation of Environmental Health Directory holds primary information about its members. This information can also be obtained through the Internet. So far our primary means of communication is via mail or faxes but e-mailing is fast developing. In some countries however it's very difficult to rely on some of these electronic systems so so far we are taking a flexible approach meaning that we use different means of communication with different members. This of course is not very effective but has so far proved to be the most reliable sort of communication.

The International Federation of Environmental Health newsletter is used to circulate information among the members primarily used after each council meeting or other major event.

The biannual World Congress on Environmental Health and the International Federation of Environmental Health Council meetings are also major links in this chain that keeps the Federation together.

The regional groups are motors in many ongoing projects especially when it comes to professional exchange. Within the regional groups it is easier to keep up personal contacts even to have more frequent meetings of both formal but mostly informal nature. Within the International Federation of Environmental Health Europe group e.g. there is a special "twinning" agreement between the member organizations in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Norway and Sweden which is set up to facilitate professional exchange and also student exchange. Some of the International Federation of Environmental Health member organizations are engaged in educational programs aimed at developing environment and health protection in East European countries.

9 TOPICS ON WHICH EXCHANGE IS TAKING PLACE

International Federation of Environmental Health has adopted some policy statements covering some areas of work that have been found of great importance.

These policy papers cover issues like:

- Access to adequate environment and health education for enforcement officers within the field.
- To ensure that environmental policies are continuously monitored and reviewed and have regard to best practical means.
- To attempt to develop locally policies on the environment which have an international context.
- To cooperate with others.
- To work for access to clean drinking water for all.

In this context it is important to remember the work presently being done by the countries of Europe to set down National Environmental Health Action Plans. This work gives strength to the concept of Environmental health and the integrated approach to environment and health protection.

Within International Federation of Environmental Health we strive at getting an overview of professional practices in different areas and in different countries and try to see in what way we can learn from each other, develop our practices and our administrative framework and eventually harmonize some of our practices.

10 HOW THE NETWORK OVERCOMES DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE AND LEGAL AND OTHER DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

So far we have been able to operate with English as our common language. However that is becoming increasingly difficult and to some extent we must now rely on individuals that can help out as interpreters. In some cases we have had help from WHO in translating documents for circulation. Since the financial basis for International Federation of Environmental Health is still very weak and depending on honorary work and minor membership fees we will probably have to keep to this limitation for the near future.

The International Federation of Environmental Health as an organization has so far not really had to tackle severe definition problems other than the definition of environmental health or environment and health protection. However these questions do come out in all kinds of professional contacts between individual members of the organization. One way to solve this is to constantly have in mind that you need to try and get at the heart of things and not react at its face value. This is a further incentive for trying to get people to have personal contacts and also to go for professional exchange.

11 FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CHANGES ANTICIPATED FOR THE NETWORK

A major area of work is to try to identify professionals and if possible professional organizations in many more countries. There certainly are professionals dealing with these matters in almost all countries but since there very often are no organizations to contact we need to find other ways to communicate.

We have also been asked and have offered to help organize professionals in countries where such organizations do not yet exist.

The development of closer cooperation with other organizations in this field

The development of the concept of environmental health or environment and health protection and to what use it can be especially in the newly emerging states in Eastern Europe and also in some other countries.

The implementation of international agreements and the enforcement at the local level of environmental health legislation but also the necessity to try to influence these documents before they are agreed upon in order to give feedback on possible implementation i.e. the London 1999 Ministerial Conference on the follow up of the National Environmental Health Action Plans process in Europe with all its background papers and drafted outcome papers.

The development of methods to assess and evaluate our work.

The development and eventually harmonization of professional procedures and methods is a vast but extremely important area

The promotion of education to become an enforcement officer with skills necessary to implement and enforce legislation.

