



International High-Level Roundtable on Environmental Health aspects of the Lisbon Agenda and the Sustainable Development Strategy

**“Clean, clever, and competitive
from a citizen’s perspective”**

REPORT SUMMARY

Monday November 27th, 2006
Goethe-Institute Brussels, B-1040 Brussels

Programme and organisation by WECF, the Netherlands.
Chaired by Mary McPhail, Secretary General, European Women’s Lobby

This High Level Roundtable is part of the WECF project on Eco Efficiency and is held in the framework of the Lisbon Agenda and the review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS).
The workshop was sponsored by the Dutch Ministry of VROM.

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January 2007



Event Programme

Chair: Mary McPhail, Secretary General of the European Women's Lobby

14.00	Welcome by the Chair
14.05	Introduction: A healthy Europe: prerequisite for long-term competitiveness Sascha Gabizon, WECF International Director
14.25	Chemical Braindrain Prof. Philippe Grandjean, Harvard University USA and the University of Southern Denmark
14.50	A Revolution in Science - New opportunities to reduce the environmental burden of disease Dr. John Peterson Myers, Environmental Health Sciences, USA
15.15	The Environment and Health: Low Doses – High Impact? David Gee, European Environmental Agency
15.30	Q&A from the audience
15.45	Tea / coffee break
16.00	The Lisbon strategy and the protection of public health-reaction to presentations Ms. Georgina Georgiou, Member of the Cabinet, on behalf of Commissioner Kyprianou (European Commission for Health and Consumer Protection)
16.25	Roundtable Participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michel Catinat (Head of Competitive Aspects of SD Unit, DG Enterprise) • John Ryan (Head of Health Information Unit, DG Sanco) • Birgit van Tongelen (Policy Officer for Health and Environment, DG Environment) • Jean Huss (MP Luxembourg, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) • Laurent Vogel (Research Officer, European Trade Union Institute) • John Hontelez (Secretary General, European Environmental Bureau) • Prof. Philippe Grandjean (Harvard University USA / University of Southern Denmark) • Loredana Ghinea (Manager for Children's Health and Environment, European Chemical Industry Council-CEFIC) • Dr. Andreas Gies (Director of Risk Assessment, Chemicals and Biological Safety Division, German Federal Environmental Agency) • Sascha Gabizon (International Director, WECF) <p>Q&A from the audience</p>
17.40	Final conclusions by the Chair
17.45	Reception



Summary

On November 27th 2006 in Brussels, WECF organized an International High-Level Roundtable on Environmental Health and the Lisbon Agenda entitled, "Clean, Clever and Competitive from a Citizen's Perspective." The event captured the growing wave of scientific, social, and political concern regarding the environmental burden of disease (EBD) in the European Union, and set a forum for discussing new findings and challenges in the context of the European economic strategy, the Lisbon Agenda.

From the Presentations

Sascha Gabizon, WECF International Director, opened the discussion by quoting the High Level Group on Lisbon "if Europe is to compete in the global knowledge society, it must also invest more in its most precious asset—its people." She described the importance of children's health and the disturbing rise in asthma, allergies, and cancer cases in children (1% yearly for cancer). Asthma is the primary reason for children missing school, and 73% of children who survive cancer require lifelong care. In addition, scientific research is showing links between neuro-toxic chemicals in everyday use and neuro-developmental disorders. The trends, according to Gabizon, are not conducive to a "knowledge-based society." Gabizon went on to describe the numerous chemicals in everyday products and the impossibility for European consumers to research every purchase. As such, good protective legislation is needed based on the precautionary approach. Recalling a Eurobarometer on Lisbon, Gabizon explained that citizens said protecting the environment has priority over economic competitiveness. Another barometer said citizens were most concerned with the impact of everyday chemicals on their health. Gabizon closed with a proposed starting point for the debate to follow: "We cannot gamble with the health of our children.

Prof. Grandjean of Harvard University and Southern Denmark University, in his presentation, "Chemical Braindrain," described how it often takes decades before conclusive evidence of chemicals causing neuro-developmental damage can be proven. In presenting findings from his latest publication in *The Lancet*, Grandjean explained that neuro-developmental disorders such as attention deficit disorder, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, and autism (which are common, costly, and can cause lifelong disability) have been linked to exposure to a few industrial chemicals (e.g., lead, methylmercury, polychlorinated biphenyls [PCBs], arsenic, and toluene). But Grandjean and his colleague Prof. Landrigan identified at least 200 other chemicals with the same neuro-toxic properties. Exposure to these chemicals during early foetal development can cause brain injury at doses much lower than those affecting adult brain function. The news was troubling, especially when considering the amount of chemicals that have full toxicity information (only five), and that the majority of the 200 chemicals Grandjean identified in his research are not exotic, but rather commonly used. Grandjean contrasted a partially functioning liver to a partially functioning brain: one could get through life quite easily with such a liver, but one would want to maintain the integrity of the brain—and there's only one chance to develop it.

Dr. John Peterson Myers, author of "Our Stolen Future," and Founder of Environmental Health Sciences, discussed a revolution in environmental health sciences, with new opportunities to prevent disease. His main points included 1) Some contaminants alter gene behaviour at extremely low doses; 2) diseases and sensitivity to subsequent exposures can be programmed during development; 3) High dose experiments don't predict low-dose effects; and 4) Mixtures are ubiquitous and alter impacts sometimes unpredictably. The new discoveries challenge standard procedures in toxicology and epidemiology geared at identifying harmful exposures and strongly suggest that health standards developed from these approaches are too weak. Because of this, there is every reason to believe that strengthening health standards to reflect current science would achieve widespread benefits to public health and important opportunities to reduce the costs of health care. Dr. Myers concluded with a hopeful picture, where modern epidemics like allergies, asthma, and cancers, amongst others, could be diminished.

David Gee of the European Environmental Agency (EEA), outlined arguments that show why the conventional view that the European environmental burden of disease is less than 10% is likely wrong. These included complexity of the cause/effect relationships, "inconsistency" in results, the reality of multi-causality, the relative crudity of the main methods used for gathering evidence, and long periods between exposures and harmful impacts (e.g., several decades for many cancers or even two or more generations for some developmental toxicants). He also discussed the frequent use of high levels of proof (i.e. "beyond reasonable doubt") rather than a "balance of evidence," and a large scope for



“manufacturing doubt” about cause/effect links from within the considerable scientific uncertainties involved (e.g. the approach explicitly adopted by the tobacco industry). Gee concluded by reminding the audience that “absence of evidence of harm is not evidence of absence of harm,” and reiterated that when it comes to health, it is usually easier to remove or reduce our exposures to environmental factors than to modify genetic ones.

Commenting on the presentations, **Georgina Georgiou from the Cabinet of Commissioner Kyprianou (Health and Consumer Protection)** reinforced the findings of Prof. Grandjean regarding the vulnerability of the (unborn) child to pollution, and in particular the relation between exposure to chemicals and the development of the brain. Georgiou confirmed that European citizens are regularly exposed to complicated mixtures, and that even very low levels of exposure can cause adverse human health effects. She pointed out that there is Commission cooperation to improve research efforts in the area of health impacts from environmental stressors, namely the result of low level, cumulative and long term exposure. Georgiou also introduced the REACH legislation into the debate with its aims to improve the protection of human health and the environment through better and earlier identification of chemical properties. However, she conceded that the two years of debate would ultimately result in a compromise. Regarding the conflict between economic growth and environmental protection Georgiou referred to the renewed Sustainable Development Strategy and the fact that the Commission will continue to stress the role of health as a productive investment, a basis and determinant for economic productivity and progress, with the aims of integrating health into all policies in a more effective way.

From the Roundtable

Andreas Gies, German Environmental Protection Agency, explained that health shouldn't be integrated into the environment pillar of the Lisbon Strategy, but rather the economic pillar, because safe chemicals are an economic value. He followed with examples from major car companies like Mercedes, Ford, and GM. **Laurent Vogel, European Trade Union Institute (ETUI)**, wanted to be cautious about integration of health into the economic pillar as it could be ambiguous. He advocated avoiding concepts like “modern regulation” and instead wanted to see the focus on social and public control. He gave the example of asbestos and how industries had been allowed to self regulate on a so-called risk-based approach, which was ultimately a catastrophe. He explained that where there is a very dangerous substance, and when it's possible to substitute it, there should be no place for risk approach; banning is the only answer. **John Hontelez, European Environmental Bureau (EEB)**, explained that part of the environmental agenda has come into existence because of concerns about public health. Further, he questioned the existence of the environmental pillar of Lisbon, and explained that the main environmental issue in Lisbon is energy due to security and prices affecting competitiveness. He concluded by insisting on a very strong health and environmental agenda independently of the Lisbon Agenda. **Michel Catinat, DG Enterprise**, described that Lisbon is a framework for integration but cannot substitute environmental or public health policy, and presented the common position that growth is a necessary condition to reach social and environmental improvements. He concluded by remarking that the panel should not conclude that Lisbon is opposed to environment and public health, rather the challenge is to ensure that they go hand in hand. **John Huss, MP Luxembourg, Council of Europe**, focused on the forthcoming report from the Council of Europe regarding the prevention of environmentally related health hazards. He went further to describe the difficulty of cooperating with industry, based on past evidence of manipulated results. Huss expressed the importance of better, more transparent and effective public participation processes in relation to an earlier remark of social control of industry. On health integration, **Loredana Ghinea, CEFIC**, explained that industry has already taken this thinking onboard, demonstrated by the development of their Responsible Care and Product Stewardship programmes. Ghinea reiterated the idea that an effective economy is necessary for a healthy society, and expressed the need for industry to have safe products. **Birgit van Tongelen, DG Environment**, remarked that the Commission has a specific action point for enhancing public access to information, and explained that further investigation of the environmental health link, as called for in the WECF discussion paper, is underway in cooperation with DG Sanco and DG Research. Van Tongelen also took time to dispute the recent article in *Ends Europe Daily* that claimed DG Environment in the past had exaggerated environmental health risks. **Prof. Grandjean** questioned the paradigm that chemicals are innocent until proven guilty, and expressed that the risk assessment methods developed 25 years ago have not gotten us very far. He remarked that an ethics committee would never allow a scientist to expose pregnant women and children to substances that are probably neuro-toxics, yet we are doing that very thing daily. Grandjean concluded by advocating a new paradigm that leads to precautionary-based decision making, building on a previous Commission Communication on the matter. **John Ryan of DG SANCO**, agreed that integrating health into Lisbon is a good argument backed by many studies



commissioned by DG Sanco and discussed the launching of a new environmental health portal in “citizen” language.

Later in the debate, the representative from **DG Enterprise** discussed a need for a clear framework and set of rules, especially for issues like the substitution principle and the precautionary principle. The **CEFIC** representative reminded the audience that one cannot live in a chemical free world, and the representative from the **German EPA** agreed, but asked that the chemical industry be more proactive and engage in constructive dialogue. He also advocated truly independent research. The representative from **ETUI** discussed a social gap in life expectancy, and remarked that data shows differences in exposures to chemicals between blue and white collar workers; he argued there can be no single position on substitution because not everyone is exposed to the same dangers. The representative from **DG Environment** re-emphasized the DG’s continuing commitment to the field of environment and health despite the false alarms, and announced the future launch of a large-scale bio-monitoring project to aid policymaking. The **EEB** representative advised against connecting the health agenda with the economic agenda, nor to prove that better health is better for the economy or not. The **WECF** representative concluded by recalling some of the scientific findings, particularly for children, and reminding the audience that there are many substitutes for harmful chemicals available, but there must be legislation to enforce their use and markets to help them gain ground. She also called for the reversing of the burden of proof on chemicals and reiterated that humanity has become the guinea pig for the chemical industry.

Roundtable General Conclusions

Based on the dialogue from the High Level Roundtable, the following general conclusions can be made. More detailed information can be found in the WECF Position Paper: “A Healthy Population at the Heart of the EU Economic Strategy” (available on www.wecf.org):

- Integrating health into Lisbon is a good argument, backed by many studies commissioned by DG SANCO and the WHO, who have proven that health is an economic determinant.
- Health protection should be a priority irrespective of other agendas.
- Health should be an integral aspect for all policy sectors.
- The conventional risk assessment paradigm must be shifted to reflect the multi-causality and complexity of the environmental burden of disease, taking account the low dose effects on vulnerable periods of development.
- The precautionary principle should be the basis for political action targeting the environmental burden of disease, by preventing avoidable environmental health effects and particularly developmental and long-term health effects.
- Children, the basis of a future Europe, are the most vulnerable to effects of pollutants and need urgent health protection.
- Better regulation, stimulation for eco-incentives and other market incentives (e.g. to mainstream substitutes) can reduce the EBD and boost innovation and competitiveness.
- Citizens are concerned about health impacts from everyday chemicals, prioritise the environment over the economy, and need a greater voice in the policymaking process.

