



Building Regional and Global Networks

The International Federation of Environmental Health, IFEH

- a network of environment and health professionals

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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.

IFEHs 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.

IFEH currently has full members in 28 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 organisations.

IFEH represents 60.000 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.

IFEH was established in the mid 1980ies, is registered under British Company law and is run on an honorary basis.

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

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 behaviours.

To further clarify the connection or inter dependability between environment and health protection issues it is also relevant to refer to the United Nation 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 centre 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.

ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH PROTECTION PROFESSIONALS,

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ADMINISTRATION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In many countries environment protection and health protection are carried out by parallel organisations 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 environment protection from a health perspective. This gives the opportunity to take a more holistic view when it comes to identifying problems and finding solutions. 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 (SMEs) 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 incl. 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 organisations (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.

TRAINING AND STAFFING

In some countries there is a special education available for those who aim at practising 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 EHOs 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 EHOs 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 approx. 70000 inhabitants incl. those living only part time of the year.

The Environment and health protection committee has a staff of 9 EHOs, 3 experts (geologist, biologist, architect) and 3 administrative staff plus some part-time employees working with public information and participation programmes. 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 came into effect as of 1999. This Code combines Environment and Health protection laws and further emphasises 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 target areas. However there might often not exist a special education or profession for those who will have the task of implementing and enforcing environmental legislation.

THE GENESIS OF THE NETWORK AND HOW IT WAS ESTABLISHED

Environmental Health Professionals have joined together in the International Federation of Environmental Health, IFEH, which is an organisation run on an honorary basis.

Members of IFEH are National Organisations of Professionals working with all or only part of the environment and health protection areas mentioned above. IFEH also has Associate members and Academic Associate members which are likely to be academic institutions or research organisations involved in environmental health work.

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

IFEH 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 organisations are entitled to appoint one member for each one hundred of their members subject to a maximum of three members. The Council normally meets one or twice a year. At present IFEH represents 30-40000 Environmental Health Professionals. National Organisations of Environmental Health professionals in Australia, Austria, 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 IFEH. France and Iceland are about to join.

The IFEH network also includes Academic Associate members the Associate members and thus represents a much wider area than the countries mentioned above.

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING THE NETWORK

The IFEH network was established through the co-operation 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 e.g. Sweden also had adopted a similar approach and was also part of this early co-operation which during the 1980ies developed into the forming of the International Federation of Environmental Health.

IFEHs 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 U.S.A. in 2002, in South Africa in 2004 and in Ireland in 2006.

These congresses form an important link between the members of IFEH. 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 programmes 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 IFEH is between the member organisations and they in their turn involve their individual members.

IFEH circulates a fairly simple Newsletter that gives internal information to all members. This Newsletter is currently replaced by a Journal that will be issued twice a year starting in 1999.

IFEH also takes part in the International Journal of Environmental Health Research published by Carfax Publishing Company. IFEH 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

IFEH is developing its own website: www.ifeh.org which formerly has been linked to the Edinburgh University website. The internet will be used as a fundamental source of communication and also holds special sites for the Regional Groups.

Part of the information will be the IFEH Directory which currently is a hard copy edition that lists all members and gives basic information about IFEH.

WHO IS ASKED TO PARTICIPATE AND WHAT LEVELS IN THE ORGANISATIONS

National organisations of professionals 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 support IFEH as a Sustaining Subscriber.

SUBJECT THE NETWORK COVERS

Some of the IFEH OBJECTIVES can be summarised 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 organisation 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.

VEHICLES FOR EXCHANGE AND MEANS OF COMMUNICATION USED

The IFEH Directory holds primary information about its members. This information can also be obtained through Internet. So far our primary means of communication is via mail or faxes but e-mailing is fast developing. In some countries however its 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 IFEH Newsletter is used to circulate information among the members primarily used after each council meeting or other major event.

The biannual World Congresses on Environmental Health and the IFEH 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 IFEH Europe group e.g. there is a special Twinning agreement between the member organisations in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Norway and Sweden which is set up to facilitate professional exchange and also student exchange. Some of the IFEH member organisations are engaged in educational programmes aimed at developing environment and health protection in East European countries.

TOPICS ON WHICH EXCHANGE IS TAKING PLACE.

IFEH 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 develop locally policies on the environment which have an international context
- to co-operate with other organisations within this field

- to work for access to clean drinking water for all.

In this context it is important to remind of the work presently being done by the countries of Europe to set down National Environmental Health Action Plans, NEHAPs and to start implementing these and also to combine these with the work on National Environmental Action Plans, NEAPs. This work gives strength to the concept of Environmental Health and the integrated approach to environment and health protection.

Within IFEH 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 harmonise some of our practices.

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 IFEH 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.

IFEH as an organisation 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 organisation. One way to solve this is to constantly have in mind that you need to try to 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.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CHANGES ANTICIPATED FOR THE NETWORK

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

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

The development of closer co-operation with other organisations 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 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 feed-back on possible implementation i. e. the

London '99 Ministerial conference on the follow up of the NEHAP 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 harmonisation 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

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Reference:

IFEH Directory

IFEH website: www.ifeh.org

Foskett: 10th Anniversary Book

Ryman: IFEH - Past - present - future