



ERA-ENVHEALTH

Coordinating Europe's national environment
and health research programmes

Crucial collaborations

An initiative to consolidate research into the impacts of environmental factors on human health will enter a new phase from 2012. **Adrienne Pittman** describes the network created and how it will continue to unite important policy-relevant research on the links between environment and health



Why was ERA-ENVHEALTH created? What are its key objectives as an ERA-NET network?

The vast majority of deaths and illnesses in Europe are attributable to chronic disease and incidence rates continue to rise. At least part of the cause of this increase is linked to environmental factors.

Research projects involving several countries are mainly funded through large European Framework Programmes. European Research Area Networks (ERA-NETs) were developed to promote collaborative research and enhance cooperation between national funding agencies, contributing to the creation of a European Research Area (ERA), through networking and partnerships.

The strategic goal of the ERA-ENVHEALTH network is to ensure that research provides policy makers with evidence-based environment and health information. In the context of the current financial crisis, collaboration is especially important to maximise the use of research funding and help ensure coherent policies beyond national boundaries.

What problems does it aim to tackle?

The environment and health research field is broad and complex; it should contribute to defining policies and strategies. Actors are dispersed across several – often segregated – organisational structures, in numerous disciplines. It is also a transversal issue, impacting and being impacted on by many different sectors. Multidisciplinary research and cross-sectoral collaboration are therefore particularly important.

Who are the key collaborators in the project, and how are they involved?

The ERA-ENVHEALTH consortium is a unique network. It brings together 16 partners from 10 countries, mainly public bodies responsible for financing or managing research programmes in environment and health in countries belonging to the ERA. An external advisory committee, with representatives of academic institutions, NGOs, European agencies and other organisations, evaluates the impact and effectiveness of the activities. The project is coordinated by the ANSES, the French agency for food, environmental and occupational health & safety.

Governance arrangements are important in view of the diversity of programmes and institutional configurations. A General Assembly brings together top management representatives from all partners and a steering committee regularly convenes to discuss progress.

How does the project support EU policies concerned with environmental health, and how do you communicate your findings to decision makers?

ERA-ENVHEALTH contributes to EU policies and specifically those initiated in the Environment and Health Action Plan 2004-10. Activities must not only focus on the research areas of interest to the agencies, but also take into account the policy agenda and major trends influencing it.

The ERA-ENVHEALTH network has many links with decision-makers at the national level, through the participation of ministries in the network or through other organisations such as national agencies. The project has a website (www.era-envhealth.eu) and its newsflash is distributed to over 1,500 stakeholders.

What are the next steps for ERA-ENVHEALTH?

While project funding from the EC ends in late 2012, the network will continue to collaborate, using its own resources, striving towards better integrating environment and health research into policy.

The partners will continue collaboration using a light structure built around members' core

Sharing and caring

The final conference of the **ERA-ENVHEALTH** project is taking place in Paris in mid-June. This project for pan-European sustainable collaboration for studying the effects of environmental factors on health has met its primary objectives and now is entering a new incarnation

THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS of environmental factors on human health are a matter of great concern to individuals and governments alike. According to the World Health Organization, more than 20 per cent of diseases and illnesses, and millions of disabilities and deaths per year worldwide, are attributable to preventable environmental factors. In the urbanised and industrial environments in Europe, indoor and outdoor air, water and soil pollution and contamination are major risk factors for a variety of health effects.

European and national policies for reducing and preventing environmentally-caused ill health rely on scientifically-obtained evidence: the European Environment and Health Action Plan for 2004-10 pointed to a need to strengthen networks between researchers, policy-makers and stakeholders: "The ERA-ENVHEALTH project was therefore set up to bring together European organisations planning research in the environment and health arena with the objective of providing policy support," explains Adrienne Pittman, project coordinator at the French agency for food, environmental and occupational health & safety (ANSES) and coordinator of ERA-ENVHEALTH since its inception.

The ERA-ENVHEALTH project is a European Research Area Network (ERA-NET), created to maximise the potential for joint funding of research into common strategic issues across Member States in Europe. The goal of ERA-NETs is to foster exchange and sharing of expertise and resources across discipline, sector and country boundaries, complementing the national and European research environment. ERA-ENVHEALTH's task was to mobilise scientific research in support of European and national policies on environment and health issues: "The participants have extensive experience in working cooperatively at a European and international level and are all experts in the field," Pittman states.

Set up in September 2008, the project has committed €4 million to date to a number of research projects spanning different European countries.

PARTICIPANTS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The consortium comprises a wide range of institutions, both in terms of geography and complementary areas of expertise. For the various stakeholders, including policy

makers, Pittman feels that ERA-ENVHEALTH facilitates better communication and deeper understanding of the drivers and priorities for both scientists and policy makers: "Over four years of collaboration and cooperation, the network partners have joined forces and resources to increase the relevance and efficiency of Environment and Health research in Europe," she outlines.

THE ERA-ENVHEALTH FRAMEWORK

The network identified key strategic topics as priorities for research such as climate change, nanomaterials and indoor air.

The ERA-ENVHEALTH network has many links with decision makers at the national level, through the participation of ministries in the network as well as other organisations such as national agencies. Reports from the project are disseminated to a wide audience. One of the reports provided a description of the environment and health research landscape in the EU: "It reflected the diversity of the participating countries, their different cultures and structures for research and administration – and also their similarities," she explains.

One task, titled 'Bridging the Gap between Science and Policy', was designed to better understand the uptake mechanisms of scientific information into policy and the overall communication processes: "It also outlined priorities for Environment and Health policy, to support continuous action in the field, help prioritise research and continue the cross-sector collaboration and networks already established earlier," Pittman elaborates. Projects that ERA-ENVHEALTH supports therefore must not only focus on the research areas of interest to the participants, but also take into account public policy agendas and the major trends that influence them.

The project has set up a research database in the field across Europe, populated according to a common framework for describing projects and their results, as well as current and past research funding allocations. Analysis tools have been provided so that information can be obtained graphically, for example, showing the projects in progress according to distributions across topic areas.

A dissemination and communication strategy was drawn up and as a result, in addition to the regular progress reports, leaflets, posters

activities in the environment and health field and expand the network to new partners. The momentum and interest will be maintained by the signature of a vision document to signify membership.

The next major step is the final conference, 'Sharing a vision for Environment and Health research in Europe' taking place in Paris in June. This will provide the opportunity to take stock of four years of successful collaboration and open a high-level prospective debate with stakeholders on environment and health research priorities and concerns. The conference is also the first step for the future of the network for participants wishing to continue collaboration.

Are collaborative processes such as ERA-NET the future of EU research? What benefits are associated with this framework?

ERA-NETs increase the relevance and efficiency of research in Europe, particularly for the Environment and Health sector. They also bring new funding opportunities for researchers. ERA-ENVHEALTH's calls for research proposals bring added-value as the research consortia formed are newly established, multidisciplinary, transnational and flexible. ERA-ENVHEALTH's joint programme and calls allow the best researchers across Europe to link up with their peers in ways different from those currently possible under larger European projects or smaller nationally-funded projects. In the current climate, innovation is important when implementing methods for exchanging information and creating knowledge.

INTELLIGENCE

ERA-ENVHEALTH

COORDINATION OF NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH RESEARCH PROGRAMMES – ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH ERA-NET

OBJECTIVES

To propose a coherent set of priorities, joint activities and common calls in order to aid the establishment of collaboration among the different funding organisations of environmental and public health research communities.

PARTNERS

French agency for food, environmental and occupational health & safety (ANSES); French Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME); Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy (MEDDE), France • Belgian federal Science Policy Office (BelSPO); Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and environment (FPS), Belgium • Federal Environment Agency (UBA), Germany • Ministry of Health (MOH), Israel • Superior institute for Environmental Protection and Research (Ispra); National Research Council (CNR), Italy • Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment (IenM); National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), The Netherlands • Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Ireland • Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic (UVZ), Slovakia • Swedish Environmental Protection (Swedish EPA), Sweden • Environment Agency (EA); Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), UK

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ADRIENNE PITTMAN joined the French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety (ANSES) in March 2005. She has an MSc in Environmental Technology, focusing on Health and the Environment and has extensive knowledge of EC work and research. She has been coordinator of the ERA-ENVHEALTH project since 2008 and has been involved in the preparation and submission of a number of EC projects and studies throughout her professional experience.

and monthly news briefing notes have been produced and distributed. Partners have published articles in journals and the project has actively sought opportunities to network with other ERA-NETs.

PROTOTYPING ERA-ENVHEALTH

The subjects of the transnational research calls issued by ERA-ENVHEALTH were selected from important topics that required multidisciplinary policy-orientated research and were deemed important by all partners. The topics were prioritised by scientists and stakeholders. Two calls have been issued: the first one in March 2008 and the second in January 2012.

For the first call, the funding for the work came from three partners from the UK, France and The Netherlands. The topic was 'Health vulnerability resulting from future climate change impacts on soil-water ecosystems, land use and water resources on a regional scale' and reflected a common interest of the funding organisations. Two projects were allocated funding: 'Risk assessment of the impact of climate change on infectious diseases' and 'Environmental change and rising dissolved organic carbon trends: implications for Public Health'. For the second call, the funding came from five partners from France, Germany, Belgium and Sweden. In both cases a 'virtual common pot' arrangement was set up and each research team signs a contract with the funding organisation from its country.

The first call was designed to gain experience of launching and managing a transnational call for research proposals. An independent expert organisation was chosen to carry out the evaluation of this call, with support from an Evaluation Steering Committee including the three financing organisations, partners and members of the project's external advisory committee. The lessons learnt were then taken into account for the second call.

A MODEL FOR FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

Pittman appreciates that in the current economic and financial climate, national and European level priorities now mean that environmental health is no longer as high on the political agenda and offers reasons for this: "The benefits of preventative actions are often not in the same sector as the costs. Another reason is that health benefits can take a long time to materialise and even then, they may not be very clearly measurable or visible," she states.

Many current partners and stakeholders plan to maintain the network, albeit with a lean coordination function. Pittman is keen to express how ERA-ENVHEALTH has succeeded in raising the visibility of research into environmental health issues and its relevance to the political arena: "ERA-ENVHEALTH has shown that transnational collaboration fills an important niche. It provides an interesting forum to discuss challenges, visions and emerging issues".

The network partners
have joined forces and
resources to increase the
relevance and efficiency of
Environment and Health
research in Europe

