

COMMEMORATING 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WHO PESTICIDE EVALUATION SCHEME (WHOPES)

Message of the Director-General

Colleagues in public health, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome such a wide gathering of intergovernmental agencies, government supported agencies, academia and industry to mark the 50th anniversary of one WHO's most important programmes.

The commemoration today of 50 years of the World Health Organization Pesticide Evaluation Scheme (WHOPES) allows us to take stock of a programme that has become a reference in setting standards for and evaluating pesticides used in public health.

The need to set up a body to evaluate pesticides for vector-borne disease control and to develop international quality standards for them became apparent during the second half of the 20th century in response to the increased needs of Member States, mainly developing countries, with high endemicity for vector-borne diseases.

WHOPES was established in 1960 at the request of WHO Director-General and with the approval of the World Health Assembly. I am proud to say that the Scheme has provided excellent global leadership in establishing norms and standards for safe and effective use of public health pesticides.

Ladies and gentlemen,

WHOPES – a cross-cutting programme based in the Vector Ecology and Management Unit of the Department of Control of Neglected Tropical Diseases – supports United Nations agencies and WHO programmes and assists Member States in safely and judiciously implementing vector control programmes.

Today, WHOPES works with experts from diverse backgrounds and functions through the participation of government representatives, manufacturers of pesticides and pesticide application equipment, WHO collaborating centres and research institutions.

During the past 10 years WHOPES has evaluated more than 40 pesticides for public health use and has reviewed more than 70 submissions for development of WHO specifications and quality standards for public health pesticides. It has also produced documentation and guidelines to help support Member States in implementing vector management.

One of WHOPES success stories is its testing and evaluation of insecticide-treated mosquito nets, which has enabled the development of a simple, practical and cost-effective new weapon in the struggle against malaria and other vector-borne diseases.

Collaboration between WHOPES and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations ensures complementary, harmonized and coordinated guidance and support to Member States and other stakeholders in managing pesticides throughout their life-cycle. It also helps to leverage expertise and knowledge and to build capacity in managing agricultural pesticides, which constitute almost 90% of all pesticides produced.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Successes cannot be called successes if they do not factor-in future challenges. One such challenge is the effect of climate change and the emergence and re-emergence in many parts of the world of vector-borne diseases, which account for about 17% of the estimated global burden of communicable diseases.

As pesticides still constitute the most important element in the integrated approach to vector control, we need not be complacent about resistance of insects to these chemicals, which may develop into a potential threat to vector control programmes, particularly malaria and dengue.

The number of insecticides available for vector control is rapidly shrinking, mainly because of resistance. Successes gained through the use of pyrethroid-treated mosquito nets are in danger if alternative insecticides are not developed in the near future.

Another challenge is that pesticides are designed to kill or control harmful organisms and pests. Their improper and inappropriate uses can trigger adverse and chronic effects on humans and the environment. We should build from the past and trust recommended products that have been properly evaluated.

As I said earlier, vector-borne diseases account for almost 17% of the estimated global burden of communicable diseases. Yet a significant number of countries in tropical and subtropical regions of the world do not have adequate national regulatory frameworks or human and financial capacity to regulate the availability, sale and judicious use of public health pesticides. We also need to help Member States in building capacity for the safe disposal of pesticide waste – something which is practically non-existent in the majority of developing countries.

Furthermore, the use of pesticides in public health has increased significantly. The availability of substandard, illegal and counterfeit products poses a problem and a substantial risk to human health and the environment as well as a loss of scarce financial resources.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

In May this year, the 63rd World Health Assembly recommended establishing or strengthening capacity to regulate pesticides, with a high degree of commitment from WHO to work closely with all stakeholders on the sound management of these chemicals. Although this task is immense, I am positive that WHOPES will forge yet better collaboration with other United Nations agencies, such as the FAO and UNEP, and nongovernmental organizations as well as with the pesticide industry in mobilizing resources and strengthening capacity.

WHO will advise Member States to set up parameters and create “enabling environments” for the proper regulation of public health pesticides – including relevant policies, strategies and resources – and help raise public awareness about the implications of pesticides on the overall welfare of human beings.

We strongly believe that the way forward is to sustain vector-borne disease control by increasing investment in research and developing new strategies, approaches and tools to control vectors and for personal protection in close collaboration with partners including research institutions and academia.

Happy 50th anniversary to WHOPES!

I thank you for your attention.