

UNDP and Chernobyl: Q&A



United Nations Development Programme and the 20th Anniversary of Chernobyl: Questions and answers

Why was the Chernobyl Forum created?

The Chernobyl Forum was created at the initiative of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2003 in an effort to help the affected populations, the region's governments, and international organizations gain a clear understanding of the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident on health and the natural environment.

Studies such as the 2002 United Nations report, *The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for Recovery*, had demonstrated that many residents of the affected regions were deeply confused about the impact of radiation on their lives. This report is available at <http://www.undp.org/dpa/publications/chernobyl.pdf>

Many had an exaggerated sense of threat, often feeling condemned by radiation to ill health and early death. Fears of radiation-induced disease were pronounced. At the same time, many neglected basic safeguards, for instance by eating mushrooms and berries from contaminated forests.

The Chernobyl Forum set out to conduct a rigorous review of all available scientific evidence to arrive at "authoritative consensual statements" on the impact of the accident. The aim was to reach scientifically documented findings that could help residents of the affected areas make informed decisions about their lives, and also to give officials a firm foundation for important policy decisions, such as priorities for health care spending.

Who stands behind the Chernobyl Forum?

The Chernobyl Forum was initiated by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but the IAEA was joined in this effort by seven other UN agencies: the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR), and the World Bank.

The governments of the three countries most affected by Chernobyl - Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine - also took active part in the work of the Chernobyl Forum.

All of the participants in the Chernobyl Forum subscribed to the findings that were announced in September 2005 and summarized in the report *Chernobyl's Legacy: Health, Environmental and Socio-Economic Impacts*.

This summary report is available in English:

<http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Booklets/Chernobyl/chernobyl.pdf>

and in Russian: http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Booklets/Russian/chernobyl_rus.pdf

The Chernobyl Forum findings represent a remarkably broad and authoritative consensus. This consensus was noted in the UN General Assembly's 2005 resolution on Chernobyl. The General Assembly has urged the widest possible dissemination of the Chernobyl Forum findings.

For the General Assembly resolution, see: <http://chernobyl.undp.org>

Isn't this a case of outsiders telling affected people what to think?

The Chernobyl Forum findings rest on the meticulous work of some 100 top-notch experts on radiation and health, who met repeatedly in a number of topical sub-groups to review all the available scientific evidence from their fields. Many of these experts come from the three most-affected countries, so the Chernobyl Forum is not the work of "outsiders".

Isn't this just a whitewash of nuclear energy by the IAEA?

As mentioned above, the Chernobyl Forum findings reflect a consensus among eight UN agencies and the three most-affected governments. It does not reflect the particular interests of any agency or organization.

The IAEA had responsibility for compiling the expert report on the impact of the accident on the natural environment, whereas the World Health Organization (WHO) had responsibility for the expert report on health.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had responsibility for the third section of the Chernobyl Forum findings, on the impact of the accident on social and economic conditions in the affected regions.

All of the Chernobyl Forum findings are endorsed by all of the participants.

What were the Chernobyl Forum findings?

The detailed findings of the Chernobyl Forum are contained in 600 pages of technical reports. But, in summary, the findings provide a reassuring message on the impact of radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

The Chernobyl Forum found that radiation levels in the affected territories have declined several hundredfold owing to natural decay and man-made countermeasures. The majority of the territories initially designated as "contaminated" are therefore safe for settlement and economic activity.

The Chernobyl Forum concluded that two important groups had suffered medical harm from the accident: a small group of emergency workers who responded in the first days and succumbed to acute radiation syndrome, and some 5,000 people who were children in 1986 and contracted thyroid cancer owing to intake of radioactive iodine in the first months after the accident.

Aside from these two high-risk groups, however, the Chernobyl Forum concluded that the overwhelming majority of the population living in the regions deemed as "contaminated" have escaped health consequences. This is because they were exposed to low doses of radiation, not much higher than natural background levels found in other places around the world.

There has been no clearly demonstrated increase in the incidence of solid cancers or leukemia due to radiation. Despite popular assumptions to the contrary, there has been no radiation-specific increase in the incidence of birth defects or reproductive problems. No increase has been documented in immune system weaknesses, either. And mortality has not risen overall.

However, the Chernobyl Forum did detect an alarming increase in mental health problems in the affected communities. Such problems – including symptoms of stress, depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic disorders – are typical among populations that have fallen victim to disasters.

The "psychosocial" consequences of Chernobyl have been exacerbated by a shortage of credible information on the real level of risk faced by the affected populations – something Chernobyl Forum has set out to remedy.

How new are the Chernobyl Forum findings?

The Chernobyl Forum findings come as a surprise to many people with superficial knowledge of the accident. They contradict some widespread horror stories about the impact of the Chernobyl accident, such as the images of deformed babies depicted in the 2003 film "Chernobyl Heart".

However, the Chernobyl Forum findings are consistent with what expert bodies have been saying about Chernobyl for many years.

In particular, the findings reinforce the conclusions reached in earlier years by the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR), the body specifically mandated by the UN General Assembly to assess scientifically the sources and effects of ionizing radiation.

In its landmark 2000 report, UNSCEAR noted that "the population of the contaminated regions of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine need not live in fear of serious health consequences from the Chernobyl accident. Lives have been disrupted by this accident, but, from the radiological point of view, a generally positive prospect for the future health of most individuals is foreseen".

For more information on UNSCEAR, see <http://www.unscear.org>

People cite a lot of different figures for the impact of Chernobyl on health and the environment. Why should we believe yours?

Many people have grown accustomed to citing a death toll for Chernobyl of tens or even hundreds of thousands of people, in part because such dramatic claims are seen as a way of attracting international attention and sympathy.

These claims are not supported by reputable scientific evidence, however. It is not enough to document the number of people to have died in the affected areas since the Chernobyl nuclear accident; what is important is to compare trends in the affected areas with analogous "control groups" in unaffected areas to show a connection with radiation exposure. This is precisely what the Chernobyl Forum experts have done, without

finding a connection.

The scientific effort that has gone into Chernobyl Forum is unrivalled in both its breadth and depth, and in the renown of the experts involved.

There's a lot of evidence of ill health in the Chernobyl-affected regions? How can you say this is not a result of Chernobyl?

Critics of Chernobyl Forum have cited dramatic examples of ill health among Chernobyl-affected populations as counter-evidence. Poor health is indeed an issue needing urgent attention in the Chernobyl area -- but this applies every bit as much outside the affected regions as it does inside them.

Indeed, much of the former Soviet Union is currently experiencing a severe health crisis that has significantly reduced life expectancy over recent years, to an average of 65 years (59 years for men and 72 years for women). This is very low for countries at the income level of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

To find workable remedies for this health crisis, we need to understand its causes properly. Chernobyl Forum has helped us here by ruling out radiation as the source of most ailments. We need instead to look for the causes in "lifestyle factors," such as alcohol abuse, tobacco consumption, and poor diet. Low incomes and inadequate medical care are also contributing factors.

While the health challenges thus remain extremely daunting both in Chernobyl regions and outside them, they are in no way inevitable, as some misconceptions about radiation might suggest. We can fight them.

What is the "development approach" to Chernobyl?

The Chernobyl Forum findings provide further impetus to the general reorientation of the UN's work on Chernobyl. Since 2002 we have been moving towards an approach that focuses on promoting social and economic development as the most fruitful response to the Chernobyl legacy.

In line with this strategic shift, the United Nations Development Programme assumed responsibility for UN-wide Chernobyl coordination in 2004.

The development approach recognizes that a lack of social and economic opportunities – the result both of the resettlements and economic restrictions required by Chernobyl and of the dislocations that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union – is the biggest challenge facing Chernobyl-affected communities. To meet this challenge, we work with communities to help create new and sustainable livelihoods.

What is UNDP doing to help the affected populations?

In Belarus, UNDP works through the Cooperation for Rehabilitation program (CORE) to provide training, organizational support, and start-up business assistance to affected communities. Our efforts have the dual aim of promoting the creation of new jobs and helping to restore a sense of community self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

The creation of youth centres and health posts, the expansion of a village school, new connections to gas lines and new entrepreneurship activities can and do contribute to regaining independence, initiative, and identity.

For more information on CORE, see: <http://www.core-chernobyl.org/eng> and <http://un.by/en/undp/db/00011742.html>.

In Ukraine, the Chernobyl Recovery and Development Programme (CRDP) pursues similar aims. The CRDP assists communities in planning and executing projects that create jobs and meet priority community needs. It is currently active in 17 rayons in the four most affected oblasts of Ukraine.

By the start of 2006 the program had helped form more than 200 community organizations in 139 villages, with a total of 20,000 members. Over two years these community organizations have implemented more than 100 projects. More significant than this number, however, is the impact on attitudes, transforming a deep-seated helplessness into a spirit of activism.

For more information on CRDP, see: <http://www.undp.org.ua/?page=projects&&projects=14>

UNDP is also supporting the elaboration of a local economic development strategy and a business center that will support small and medium-sized firms in the Bryansk oblast, Russia's most-affected region.

For more information on the Bryansk project, see: <http://www.undp.ru/index.phtml?iso=RU&lid=1&cmd=programs&id=119>

A second focus for UNDP Chernobyl activities is factual and credible information designed to help citizens to re-energize and re-direct their lives. In part owing to the initial Soviet secrecy about the Chernobyl accident,

many residents of affected areas remain mistrustful of official declarations.

Fear of radiation has proved a health threat in itself, given the medical symptoms of stress that affect many residents. Recent sociological studies conducted by UNDP have shown that affected populations are extremely worried about their health and economic prospects. There is a need for accurate information to overcome this fear, on how to live safely in conditions of low-dose radiation, and on healthy lifestyles in general.

This need has guided UNDP and other members of the UN family to focus on information provision with the aim of identifying the questions to which Chernobyl residents most urgently need answers. The science behind Chernobyl Forum will be translated into easily accessible language. Our projects will provide trusted channels for dissemination.

UNDP is also working to provide policy advice to the affected governments, to help ensure that the large sums currently devoted to Chernobyl promote the recovery of affected communities in the most efficient way possible.

Many NGOs and charities are dedicated to helping the victims of Chernobyl, particularly children in the affected areas. Are you saying that this sort of work is not needed any longer?

There is still a huge need for assistance of all sorts, and NGOs and charities have performed an invaluable service over the past two decades. It is important, however, that these activities be carried out in a way that does not exaggerate the dangers of living in Chernobyl-affected regions.

In order to ensure that limited resources are used efficiently, it is crucial to understand the underlying causes of the problems that are being addressed.

Some charities may want to rethink their operations in light of the Chernobyl Forum findings, opting to help improve health outcomes in the affected communities rather than providing health "respites" to children abroad. Or they may want to offer such travel programs more widely, reaching out to all children in need of specialized medical care - or of wider cultural exposure.

For further information on UNDP and Chernobyl, please contact:

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To visit the UN Chernobyl website, please click [here](#).

International Atomic Energy Agency on "Chernobyl 20 years Later":
<http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/Chernobyl/index.html>

World Health Organization press release on Chernobyl:
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2006/pr20/en/index.html>

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