

UN Action Plan on Chernobyl to 2016
Draft for presentation
to the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Chernobyl
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The Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986 had devastating consequences for people living in the vast territories touched by radioactive fallout. Hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from the city of Pripyat and other surrounding areas, and millions of people still live in areas officially classified as “contaminated” by radiation. Those who were children at the time of the accident suffer elevated rates of thyroid cancer. The three countries most affected by the accident – Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine – have spent vast sums tending to the needs of local communities. Ukraine, in addition, has assumed the burden of ensuring that the damaged reactor poses no further threat.

Governments have shouldered the lion’s share of work aimed at overcoming the consequences of the accident. This has been a costly and demanding endeavor, and credit is due for the extent to which the population has been protected and the impact mitigated.

The United Nations (UN) has supported government efforts in a variety of ways. Many UN offices and agencies have been involved in Chernobyl initiatives, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR), the World Bank, and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Many civil society organizations, particularly the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), have also contributed to the Chernobyl response, both through emergency and charitable aid and through development-oriented activities.

Background: the development approach

In recent years a consensus has emerged among affected governments and UN agencies that, after two decades, a “development approach” is the proper way forward on Chernobyl. This approach builds on scientific studies – including the 2005 findings of the UN Chernobyl Forum,¹ a joint undertaking by eight UN agencies and the three most-affected countries – that have demonstrated that the nuclear accident was a “low-dose event” for the vast majority of people living in areas deemed to be contaminated. Most

¹ For a summary of the Chernobyl Forum findings, see <http://chernobyl.undp.org/english/docs/chernobyl.pdf>.

local residents thus face no risk of negative health effects from radiation exposure. Most people in the affected areas, in fact, can safely raise families where they are today.

Local communities still face obstacles, however. Owing in part to the disruption caused by the nuclear accident, many areas suffer social and economic hardship. Communities that had earlier depended on farming and forestry hindered by restrictions limiting commercial activity, and radiation stigma makes produce from the region difficult to market. Investment is scarce; infrastructure is often lacking or neglected. Skilled professionals tend to shun villages for more prosperous places with safer reputations. Young people often leave the region to seek better opportunities elsewhere. All of these factors were exacerbated the upheaval that followed the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In addition, government provision of a wide range of benefits to millions of people who were deemed as having suffered from the Chernobyl accident had the unintended effect, over time, of creating a “dependency syndrome,” even when fiscal pressures left governments unable to deliver on their pledges. Combined with widespread (and often unfounded) fears about the health impact of radiation, many communities fell into a state of passivity and helplessness. Sociologists dubbed this “Chernobyl victim’s syndrome.”

In recognition of these challenges, the UN made a major shift in strategy. In the place of the emergency humanitarian assistance delivered in the 1990s, the UN opted to focus on social and economic development. What people living in Chernobyl-affected areas needed most, it was concluded, were better economic opportunities, a restored sense of community self-reliance, and the information necessary to overcome fears associated with radiation and to address health threats arising from causes unrelated to Chernobyl. This shift was outlined in *The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for Recovery*,² a study commissioned in 2002 by UNDP and UNICEF.

The organizational reflection of this shift in strategy was the transfer, in 2004, of responsibility for UN coordination of Chernobyl activities from UN-OCHA to UNDP.

In the years since this shift in strategy, the development approach has yielded promising results and has the support of the three most-affected governments. There is agreement that, while radiation monitoring and focused health care programs are needed for specific areas and high-risk groups, assistance to most affected people should focus on helping them to rejoin the social and economic mainstream. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted in his 2007 report to the General Assembly, “after two decades, a return to normal life is a realistic prospect for most people living in Chernobyl-affected regions.”³

UN action plan: the rationale

The UN General Assembly has endorsed this approach. In a resolution dated 20 November 2007,⁴ the General Assembly proclaimed 2006-2016, the third decade after the Chernobyl accident, as the Decade of Recovery and Sustainable Development of the

² See <http://chernobyl.undp.org/english/docs/Strategy%20for%20Recovery.pdf>.

³ A/62/467.

⁴ A/RES/62/9.

Affected Regions. The resolution requested UNDP to coordinate the efforts of the UN system aimed at implementing the Decade and welcomed UNDP's preparation of a UN-wide "action plan" for Chernobyl recovery to cover the period through April 2016.

The UN action plan is meant to provide a practical framework for implementation of Decade of Recovery and Sustainable Development for the Affected Regions. Recognizing that funding for Chernobyl recovery efforts remains limited, it is designed, as the resolution states, "with the aim of maximizing limited resources, avoiding duplication of effort and building on recognized agency mandates and competencies."

Rather than an exhaustive presentation of a detailed list of projects, the UN action plan is designed to present a concise outline of general principles of engagement by the UN in Chernobyl recovery efforts, along with agency-specific priorities. This in part owing to the fact that agency planning horizons are shorter than the decade, and that the long-term design of specific projects will depend on fresh funding. The action plan is meant to assist in resource mobilization by demonstrating UN-wide consistency and coherence.

The UN action plan in many ways reflects activities already initiated. Indeed, the Decade of Recovery begins in 2006 because the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl accident showcased the UN-wide consensus surrounding the development approach to recovery.

This draft of the action plan will be reviewed by all UN agencies active in Chernobyl recovery efforts, as well as by the three most-affected governments. An editorial sub-group of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on Chernobyl, composed of representatives of IAEA, UNDP, UNICEF, the World Bank, and WHO, will review comments finalize the plan. The final version will be approved by the next IATF.

UN action plan: the vision for 2016

Where does the UN see the Chernobyl-affected areas in 2016? In his 2007 report to the General Assembly, the Secretary-General defined the shared goal foreseen in any UN action plan as ensuring that by 2016 "the area fully overcomes the stigma it now suffers, communities take full control of their lives, and normalcy becomes a realistic prospect."

UN assumptions about prevailing conditions include:

- The size of the contaminated territory continues to shrink;
- The radiation safety of members of the public is ensured through compliance with national legislation and international safety standards;
- More than half of the population of affected regions is born after the Chernobyl accident, or has migrated from other regions;
- The migration of young people from rural areas to cities continues and the demography of contaminated areas remains skewed;

- National budgetary support for contaminated regions is substantially reduced;
- Restrictions on consumption of certain foods remain in force in regions where the content of radionuclides in some local foodstuffs (e.g., mushrooms, wild berries, and fish) may exceed the national permissible levels;
- Limited radiological monitoring (of foodstuffs and public exposure) is continued in contaminated areas of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

Specific UN objectives include that:

- The radiological remediation of populated areas is completed.
- The classification of zones is revisited in accordance with consistent international standards.
- Government programs are differentiated depending on radiation level.
- A substantial part of contaminated land outside the Exclusion Zone is returned to economic activities and infrastructure improvement is permitted.
- The scientific community and environmental organizations achieve a broad consensus in their interpretation of available scientific data.
- The general public and decision makers are adequately informed about the radiological consequences of the Chernobyl accident, the factual levels of exposure, and the contribution of Chernobyl-related doses to the total dose due to natural radiation.
- The affected population regains confidence and trust in scientific information (data and interpretation), delivered through trustworthy local sources.
- Hygienic information, such as precautions in collecting and consumption of potentially contaminated foodstuffs (e.g. mushrooms), is widely disseminated among the population living on contaminated territories.
- The mass media uses factual information for reporting on Chernobyl-related issues.
- The promotion of healthy lifestyles and risk communication (both non-radiological and radiological) are included in the school curriculum and are pursued through a wide range of community-based initiatives.
- The climate for business, investment, and private-sector development (including conditions for small and medium enterprises) is improved in affected areas.

- Continued economic growth at the national level and increased investment at the local level stimulates the creation of new jobs and higher incomes.
- The negative “branding” of products originating in Chernobyl-affected areas is gradually overcome through better information and more credible monitoring.
- Communities in affected areas independently define and meet small-scale infrastructure needs, reducing the level of apathy and dependence.

UN action plan: principles of UN engagement

To be effective and make maximum use of scarce resources, UN agencies need to agree on a set of shared principles as guidelines for their work on Chernobyl:

- UN efforts support national strategies and follow government priorities. The affected governments have primary responsibility for recovery programs; given their modest resources, UN agencies are at their best when enacting innovative pilot projects that can point the way to government-driven activities on a larger scale; providing expertise and advice when requested; and undertaking advocacy efforts that give a global voice to the development approach to Chernobyl.
- UN agencies need to keep each other informed about their Chernobyl activities. The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Chernobyl provides a forum for regular updates. Good coordination is essential to avoid duplication and promote synergies. Sub-regional cooperation can help to share success stories.
- The UN Inter-Agency Task Force takes an inclusive approach, extending observer status to other multilateral organizations involved in Chernobyl recovery efforts.
- UN agencies work to deliver a consistent message on the impact of the Chernobyl accident, drawing wherever possible on the findings of the UN Chernobyl Forum. Alarmist communications about radiation are in particular to be avoided.
- Building on their mandates, UN agencies support the “development approach” to recovery and promote a “return to normal life” for affected communities.

UN agency priorities and projects

The agency-by-agency list of priorities and projects below is not exhaustive, and in most cases depends on availability of resources. Moreover, many priorities are not strictly related to the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, but rather respond to more general needs, such as the promotion of healthy lifestyles or universal salt iodization. The list nonetheless gives a sense of current Chernobyl goals and plans among UN agencies.

IAEA

- Broad dissemination of the findings of the Chernobyl Forum.

- Creation and management, together with UNICEF, UNDP, and WHO, of the International Chernobyl Research and Information Network (ICRIN), covering Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine (see below).
- Continued radiological support for the rehabilitation of the affected areas.
- Continued upgrading of national capabilities in controlling public exposure.
- Remediation of affected territories in Belarus using environmentally sound technologies.
- Assisting Belarus in the radiological optimization of forest exploitation on contaminated territories, through a pilot in the Polesie State Radio-ecological Preserve.
- Assisting Ukraine in improving safety at the Chernobyl site and other nuclear facilities in the region.
- Assisting Ukraine in the safety aspects of decommissioning Units 1, 2 and 3 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and Shelter in Ukraine.
- Assisting Ukraine with the safe management of radioactive waste.
- Supporting Belarus and Ukraine in the modernization of medical radiological equipment and the promotion of modern radiological methods.
- Organization in 2011 of an international Chernobyl conference on radiation protection and safety, covering the topics of control of public exposure, remediation, radiation safety of workers, and safety of radioactive waste management.
- Organization in 2016 of an international conference on Chernobyl-related themes dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl accident.

UNICEF

- Promotion of universal salt iodization
 - Enhancing national capacities for monitoring iodized salt quality.
 - Establishment of an efficient system for the prevention of iodine deficiency diseases.
 - Helping to investigate and disseminate information on iodine nutrition and the iodine deficiency status of children and women.

- Promotion of healthy lifestyles and risk reduction, especially among children, young people, and mothers in Chernobyl-affected areas.
 - Widespread distribution of the special Chernobyl edition of *Facts for Life* (published in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine in 2008).
 - Creation and management, together with IAEA, UNDP, and WHO, of the International Chernobyl Research and Information Network (ICRIN), covering Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine (see below).

UNDP

- UN coordination on Chernobyl
 - Maintenance of the Office of UN Coordination of International Cooperation on Chernobyl.
 - Organizational support to the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Chernobyl, with meetings convened at least once per year.
 - Organizational support to the Quadripartite Coordination Committee, with meetings held at least once every two years.
 - Preparation of the UN Secretary-General's regular reports to the General Assembly on Chernobyl.
 - Informal advisory support to the Missions of member states in preparation of General Assembly resolutions (currently triennial) on Chernobyl.
- Visibility and advocacy
 - Organization of regular events to commemorate the anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and other Chernobyl-related occasions.
 - Support to global visibility of Chernobyl recovery needs through the UNDP Goodwill Ambassador, tennis player Maria Sharapova.
- Provision of accurate information in an accessible format
 - Creation and management, together with IAEA, UNICEF, and WHO, of the International Chernobyl Research and Information Network (ICRIN), covering Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine.
 - Broad dissemination, in a format accessible to local residents, of the "message of reassurance" of the UN Chernobyl Forum
- Community development
 - Expanding the Chernobyl Recovery and Development Programme (CRDP) in Ukraine, to bring practical infrastructure improvements, job creation, and a message of self-reliance to more affected communities.

- Expanding community-development efforts in Belarus to areas not yet covered by the Cooperation for Rehabilitation (CORE) Programme.
 - Build on the CORE experience in Belarus through integrated community projects that will include, among other elements, improving the income of small private farmers by helping them producing radiation-free products; promoting the rebuilding of community structures; advocating healthy lifestyles; improving access to primary health-care services; and establishing school centres for radiological advice and training.
 - Promoting the replication of the Bryansk local economic development center in other Chernobyl-affected oblasts of the Russian Federation.
- Radiation and security
 - Assisting Belarus, through the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) initiative, managed together with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in obtaining comprehensive information about the radioactive contamination of the Polessie State Radio-ecological Preserve and the radio-ecological consequences of its movement across borders.

UNESCO

- Analysis of the impact of chronic radiation on flora and fauna and human beings in areas excluded from economic activity after the Chernobyl accident.

UNSCEAR

- As the body specifically mandated by the General Assembly to assess scientifically exposure to sources of ionizing radiation and the environmental and health effects of that radiation, continued provision of the scientific basis for better understanding of the health effects of the Chernobyl nuclear accident.
- Working toward increasing the population's confidence in scientific assessments of radiation exposures and resulting health and environment risks.
 - Submission to the General Assembly of a report on findings on the impact of radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear accident that have been verified since UNSCEAR's landmark 2000 report, including an assessment of potential harm resulting from chronic low-level exposures among large populations, and of the attributability of health effects.
 - Inclusion, in a general study of the consequences of radiation exposure for plants and animals, of findings from Chernobyl-affected areas.

World Bank

- Through the Country Assistance Strategy approved in December 2007, pursuit of Chernobyl recovery activities as part of a larger program Belarus.
 - With a general focus on global public goods, measures to reduce energy intensity, adapt to trade shocks, and improve growth and living conditions for Chernobyl-area residents.
- Inclusion of Chernobyl-affected regions in World Bank projects on water sector development and energy efficiency that are currently in preparation.

WHO

- Assisting the national authorities of the three most affected countries with health-care programmes and medical monitoring.
- Promoting priority research in the area of the health consequences of the Chernobyl accident, drawing on the recommendations of the Chernobyl Forum.
- Dissemination of the health findings of the Chernobyl Forum.
 - Creation and management, together with IAEA, UNICEF, and UNDP, of the International Chernobyl Research and Information Network (ICRIN), covering Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine (see above).

IFRC

- Continued screening for thyroid cancer in remote locations.

UN action plan: assessing progress

While principles of engagement need to be consistent, the action plan must be flexible to respond to evolving needs and ebbs and flows in funding. Progress in implementing the plan should thus be discussed reviewed regularly with the three governments to ensure continued relevance. A formal progress review should also be conducted at the halfway mark of the Decade of Recovery and Sustainable Development, in 2010, and included in an expanded version of the Secretary-General's regular report to the General Assembly that year. The General Assembly resolution on Chernobyl to be adopted in 2010 will provide an opportunity to assess progress on the action plan and suggest adjustments.