

looking ahead

SEARCH welcomes new partners



Comfort assessment is taking place in schools throughout the region

SEARCH is a research project supported by the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea (IMELS). Based on outcomes of the SEARCH I project (2006–2009), the initiative was reaffirmed at the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, held in Parma, Italy in 2010. SEARCH II was developed to geographically expand the monitoring of children's health and air quality. It also focuses on energy use in schools and student well-being. This follow-up project includes the design of environment and health capacity-building programmes for school staff and training for local implementation strategies.

Four new countries—Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine—have joined SEARCH I participants Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Italy, Serbia and Slovakia. Recommendations will be made for improving school environments, with efficient energy use of buildings based on data analysis. Upon completing the field studies, work continues with country data analysis and interpretation. ■

Anita Kocic, Eva Csobod



SEARCH is reaching out to more than 100 schools in 10 countries.

Our children are the future

I am fortunate to have been able to follow and participate in the scores of projects that the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea (IMELS) has supported through the Italian Trust Fund (ITF) during my years at the REC. Since its inception the ITF has played a key role in advancing environmental protection and improvements, and its impact has been felt across Europe and beyond. The increasingly intertwined topic area of Environment and Health has gradually achieved pride of place in the ITF's overall environmental commitment.

The SEARCH II project, like its groundbreaking predecessor SEARCH I, purposefully targets children—a group that is highly vulnerable to harmful environments. By spending many hours of the day within school walls, the odds of children being affected by a wide range of frequently downplayed polluting agents

and other dangerous substances can soar dramatically. SEARCH II field activity, carried out in over 100 schools across 10 countries, will help raise awareness of the importance and subsequently positive effects of growing up in clean, safe environments. It also sets the stage for introducing new green policies.

Empowering young generations is the cornerstone to safeguarding the future. Children spur reflection and help to shape the attitudes of peers, parents and elders alike. Children ARE the future, and it's our responsibility to ensure that they grow up in as healthy an environment as possible.

With activities in full swing across all 10 beneficiary countries, I sincerely wish all the best to the REC's SEARCH II Team and all other partners and contributors involved! ■

Stefania Romano

at a glance

55

international experts

10

countries

101

schools involved in the SEARCH II initiative

Albanian solutions

SEARCH gains local media coverage

SEARCH project staff members are frequently invited to appear before the media. Mihallaq Qirjo, Director of REC Albania recently addressed viewers of "Ora News", a nationally televised programme, from a school yard to discuss the importance of safe and comfortable schools.

"That is not just about closing doors and windows, but to be safe and healthy," said a journalist who introduced Qirjo to the audience.

"This is all very new, and it's not yet easy to get officials to understand, but parents and teachers alike are clearly aware that health comes first," said Qirjo, who is inviting all actors in a shared process to develop higher standards for Albanian schools. ■



Country takes aim at meeting new standards

Indoor air quality and comfort issues are rather new for Albania, but the SEARCH I programme, implemented by the REC, has broken new ground.

The rush to develop higher education standards while crowding more and more children into smaller spaces has resulted in little consideration being given to healthy school buildings. SEARCH helps school administrators to focus more attention on policies and standards for healthier buildings.

SEARCH implementation in Albania started in February 2012, with programme efforts being performed in 10 schools in Tirana and Durres counties. REC Albania's working team is led by energy expert Gjergj Simaku.

On March 13, REC Albania held a meeting in Tirana with principals of nine-year public schools to present preliminary findings of the monitoring phase of SEARCH I on physical and chemical conditions of school environments, and presented preliminary findings of contamination from various agents.

Eduart Cani, senior project manager at REC Albania, introduced experts' evaluations tools of indoor air quality and energy efficiency in schools as the main area of SEARCH II. Cani followed



Project staff discuss preliminary findings at a meeting in Tirana held in March.

with providing some practical recommendations for teachers.

Later, Simaku argued that comfort-related issues, such as thermal heating, acoustics, lighting and ventilation of interior environments, lead to better health and improved student and teacher performance in the classroom.

School principals greatly appreciate the initiative and consider it a welcome opportunity. They are happy to receive guidance and information on how to improve school health and comfort levels, and look forward to viewing the final results of measurements and undertaking more activities in future. ■

spotlight

Reka Prokai speaks with Hungarian school principal Attila Nagy

What is special about your school and its environment?

Diosgyori Calvinist Primary School is situated in Miskolc, an industrial city. Factories close to our school have had very bad effects on the air. Air quality has improved in recent years, but with 180,000 inhabitants and lots of traffic, pollution is still a problem. We care about good indoor air, as well as selective waste collection and good ventilation.

What are your impressions of SEARCH II activities?

The levels of knowledge and research used in SEARCH I was very impressive, and inspired us to participate in SEARCH II. We believe that we can learn a lot from this project and are looking forward to the results.

Which short and long-term impacts do you expect?

Before the SEARCH research we didn't realise that the bad air can reduce attention spans. Now we always take care to open the window during breaks in order to let in some fresh air before each class. We expect that children and school staff will be more comfortable if we can implement the SEARCH II recommendations. I would also be happy to see some energy-related improvements, such as changing windows and doors.



Project team member Reka Prokai looks on as Hungarian students complete a SEARCH survey.





Students take notes in a Tajikistan school.

Impact in Central Asia

CAREC

Local partner joins second SEARCH phase

The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC), established at Aarhus in 1998, is an independent, non-commercial and non-partisan international organisation. In February 2011, CAREC joined the second phase of the SEARCH II project, which is implemented by the REC with the support of the Italian Trust Fund (ITF) and the Government of Italy. CAREC is a local partner for project activities covering two Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. On February 8-9, the Central Asian team participated in project kickoff meeting at which country reviews and statistical data were presented. Ideas on project cities and schools were also shared. In May 2011, the project team took part in training conducted by the REC.

Kazakhstan

Extreme conditions pose unique challenges

Ten schools from four areas (Almaty, Astana, Karaganda region and Pavlodar) were selected for project implementation, and school principals signed special memoranda of understanding between CAREC and the Kazakh schools.

Project experts conducted measurements in Kazakhstan during the heating period of October 15–April 15. Due to its large size, Kazakhstan's weather conditions are highly variable: in some, with extreme cold temperatures ranging from -40° to -10° Celsius. As the result of extreme conditions in the north, schools were closed for two weeks, which postponed some monitoring activity.

Tajikistan

SEARCH project gains MoE support

The Ministry of Education of Tajikistan supported SEARCH II activities through special letters of recommendation, while school principals in Tajikistan and CAREC signed special memoranda of understanding on the SEARCH II project. All SEARCH II schools are located in Dushanbe.

Only one school had central heating during January–February, while others used radiators for heating. Measurements in Tajikistan were conducted from mid-December 2011 through end-March 2012. CO₂ levels are high in winter because windows remain closed to preserve heat produced by radiators. ■

expert view

Spirometry testing 'intriguing, rewarding'

Lucia Iannacito and I performed about 900 spirometry tests in 10 Italian primary schools. The children involved were between the ages of 10 and 12. It was an intriguing experience: occasionally difficult, often rewarding—even moving at times.

A very small percentage of children were unable to perform the tests—usually young children from immigrant families unable to understand Italian. In some cases we witnessed spirited competition—between girls and boys, different classrooms and peer groups—as everyone was eager to achieve the best results.

The children shared their hopes and dreams, what they would like to be when they grow up, and their favourite football teams. They asked several questions about the meaning of what we were doing, and showed a great deal of concern about preserving a clean environment for the future. ■

Lucia Iannacito (top), Margherita Neri



Three decades of experience

Having measured air quality for 30 years, I was selected to lead the exposure assessment programme within the framework of the SEARCH I project. I was responsible for designing and coordinating air quality monitoring at designated schools in 10 participating countries, and for completing an air quality database for further study and evaluation of indoor air pollution. My practical experiences can be used for working together with partners from four new countries involved in SEARCH II. ■



Eva Vaskovi



Solar is part of Portugal's renewables profile.

Lisbon ICEH highlights new developments

The Second International Congress on Environmental Health (ICEH 2012), held in May in Lisbon, showcased recent technological and scientific developments in the field of environmental health, while emphasising the synthesis of individual scientific disciplines, such as: air pollution, environmental toxicology, food safety, indoor air, occupational health and public health. The meeting brought together researchers from several different countries and continents.

Participants from eight countries gather in Latvia

Systematic assessments of health effects are needed for policy development and including health in the agendas of other sectors. WHO Europe provides tools and advice to EU member states through building capacity, developing methodology and carrying out assessments and reviews.

On March 19–23, 2012, 70 participants from the health and environment sectors of eight countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) attended a training workshop on environment and health in Riga, Latvia. The workshop was organised by the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health and the WHO Country Office in Latvia.

The event provoked new insights on environment and health, and provided new networking opportunities for participants from different sectors and countries. The workshop included lectures, case studies and three parallel modules that incorporated interactive activities.



Riga hosted multi-nation talks in March.

EHTF looks to 2016

The European Environment and Health Task Force (EHTF), the leading international body for implementing and monitoring the European Environment and Health Process, plans to meet annually in the period leading up to the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in 2016, including a high-level mid-term review in 2014. All EU member states in the WHO European Region, as well as partner NGOs and IGOs are nominated to the EHTF.

June 2012 saw one extraordinary

EHTF meeting on Parma follow-up indicators in The Hague, and another meeting in Bonn, titled 'Climate Change and Health: Lessons learnt in the WHO European region'. Both concluded that knowledge transfer is vitally important.



Children embrace the future.

European News contributed by Eva Csobod

calendar

► September 2012

Analysis of health comfort data and energy assessment data, including consultations with national environment and health experts about the results

► October 2012

Meeting of experts on energy and comfort assessment

► November 2012

Risk management and development of guidelines



The SEARCH II project is a continuation of the **School Environment and Respiratory Health of Children** initiative that was first launched in 2006. The research project is implemented within the international frameworks of the EU Action Plan on Environment and Health and the World Health Organization's Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe. This first issue of the project newsletter *aspire!* focuses on field studies in Albania and Central Asia, which include indoor air quality monitoring and health testing in schools. It also introduces new project partners, shares the insights of participating experts, and outlines project-related European news.

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EDITORS: Eva Csobod, Anita Kockic, Reka Prokai (REC)

CONTRIBUTORS: Stefania Romano (Editorial), Eva Csobod, Anita Kocic (Looking Ahead), Eduart Cani (Country Focus Albania), Malika Babadjanova, Tatyana Shakirova (Country Focus CAREC), Attila Nagy, Reka Prokai (Spotlight), Lucia Iannacito, Margherita Negri, Eva Vaskovi (Expert View), Eva Csobod (European News)

DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Tricia Barna, Juan Torneros (REC)

COPYEDITING AND PROOFREADING: Rachel Hideg, Nathan Johnson(REC)

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