

Chernobyl Forum

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As many of you know, last year saw the **transfer of coordination responsibilities** for Chernobyl issues from the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, the humanitarian arm of the United Nations, to the United Nations Development Programme, my own organization. This shift in responsibility was a long-overdue recognition that, after 18 years, the challenges facing the communities of Chernobyl were best served by a focus on **economic development and the creation of new livelihoods** rather than on the provision of emergency humanitarian aid. This transfer was one of the many consequences of the “**new strategy**” on Chernobyl adopted by the UN in 2002. The creation of the Chernobyl Forum, the distinguished body that is now concluding its work with the impressive findings announced today, was another. [Copies of the strategy are being distributed here today by UNDP; this publication provides an excellent companion piece to the two main reports on Health and Environment.]

At the ceremony commemorating the 18th anniversary of the disaster, and marking this UN handover of responsibilities, the UNDP Administrator, then Mr. Mark Malloch Brown, began his speech by remarking that everyone remembers where they were in 1986 when they first heard about the nuclear accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. [Personal note on your own recollections.] Everyone remembers the terrifying news that a radioactive cloud was moving slowly over Europe -- news that emerged belatedly and haltingly owing to the initial Soviet silence on the accident. This was truly a **global shock**, when everyone shared fear of an invisible menace that threatened millions of people.

With a few notable exceptions—and here we’d like to recognize with gratitude the engagement and financial support of the governments of Japan, Switzerland, Canada, the US and the EU, as well as the tireless efforts of countless Chernobyl charities—those outside the region forgot about the issue years ago. Most people outside the region assume the problem has long been solved. For insiders, however, Chernobyl remains frozen in time. As one of the Belarus scientists put it during a Chernobyl Forum meeting this year, people in her country divide time into life before the accident, and life after it. Chernobyl changed things utterly.

Entire communities in affected areas have long felt themselves marked by Chernobyl; they have felt they faced a death sentence cast by radiation. The message of the Chernobyl Forum is thus a **profound breakthrough, a real milestone**. This message is a hugely reassuring and hopeful one. As we will hear in more detail in the expert sessions, for the vast majority of people, the fears associated with exposure to radiation from Chernobyl have been exaggerated. The damage, both to human health and natural environment, has been much smaller than is commonly assumed and still by many

propagated. People in the affected communities can, with very few exceptions, **pursue normal lives**.

We owe a **debt of gratitude to the scientists** assembled by IAEA and WHO, who have sifted through volumes of evidence to bring us such a welcome, and well documented, message. Although there are some caveats, footnotes, and unknowns, as well as recommendations for further research, the message is clear. We got off lightly. The impact was much smaller than anybody could have predicted. **The danger of radiation has largely passed**.

It is important to stress, however, that this message of reassurance does not in any way diminish the suffering that the affected communities have experienced. Their **suffering is real**, it continues to this day, and it would be a mistake to dismiss it as somehow “irrational,” “imagined,” or “self-induced”. To find solutions to the suffering that these communities have experienced, however, it is essential to **understand the causes**. And that is what Chernobyl Forum has helped us to do.

UNDP’s contribution to Chernobyl Forum

UNDP’s contribution to Chernobyl Forum has been to assess the **socio-economic impact** of the accident, and to make **policy recommendations** in this area to the three Governments. These findings are available in more detailed form in the Chernobyl Forum “digest” and in our 2002 “Strategy for Recovery” report.

In summary, the accident had an enormous socio-economic impact. Some effects are a **direct result** of the accident and the policies adopted in its aftermath: the shutdown of the reactor; the cost of alternate energy supplies; the cost of relocating 350,000 people; the cost of constructing new homes and infrastructure for those relocated; the cost of developing and applying “clean” cultivation and farming techniques; the cost of a vast system of radiation monitoring; and the overwhelming burden of benefits and privileges for those classified as victims of Chernobyl—a group that now numbers an estimated **seven million people**.

However, it is crucial to remember that the Chernobyl accident was followed in a few short years by the **disintegration of the Soviet Union**, the creation of **three new independent states** with significant Chernobyl-affected territories, the **breakdown of the old command economy** and Soviet-era trade ties, and their replacement with a range of **market-oriented reforms** and “transition” economic policies. These factors were everywhere disruptive, but in the “contaminated” regions the disruption they caused tended to be **blamed entirely on Chernobyl**.

Economic transition hit **rural communities** hard everywhere, particularly where collectivized agriculture had functioned with very large subsidies from the state. Since in Chernobyl affected regions most communities relied upon farming, this posed a double burden: first radiation made much agricultural production off-limits, then market forces made cheap inputs and preferential pricing vanish. Even after radiation receded to safe

limits, Chernobyl-area “**branding**” hampered sales. Investors stayed away. High unemployment and, particularly, underemployment were the result. For many, **dependence on state benefits** became a way of life.

Lack of opportunity and fear of radiation prompted an **exodus of young and skilled people** from the region. The demographic profile of the region became badly skewed. An aging population meant that deaths exceeded births, further fuelling fears that the region was somehow a poisonous death trap. As was the case across much of the former Soviet Union, **life expectancy fell** precipitously—though in Chernobyl, radiation rather than cardiovascular ailments or lifestyle causes such as alcohol and tobacco abuse and accidents wrongly took the blame.

As a result of all these factors, a “**culture of dependency**” developed in many communities affected by Chernobyl—though here, too, the legacy of Soviet over-centralization also played a role. People tended to wait for the state to come to the rescue, and when it did not, to sink into **apathy and fatalism**. A sense of abandonment took root, and the self-reliance needed to compensate was lacking.

The bottom-line message, then, that UNDP brings to Chernobyl Forum is that **poverty, not radiation, is the real danger**. This problem is not unique to the Chernobyl-affected communities, but they face it in a particularly acute form.

What is UNDP doing? What solutions do we have to offer?

For the world of science, Chernobyl Forum is an end point of sorts, as it resolves most of the long-running debates about the impact of Chernobyl. For the development community, however, it is really something of a starting point. That’s why our contribution to the conference is entitled “The Way Forward.” Radiation fears have been laid to rest, but the plight of communities remains dire. So UNDP’s contribution to this forum takes the form of proposed **solutions** to some of the problems faced by affected countries, communities and individuals.

These solutions, which build on both field work in Chernobyl-affected communities and UNDP’s development experience worldwide, fall into **three areas**, which our presenters will describe in greater detail at tomorrow’s session.

First, information. This has been a central challenge from the start. For outsiders, the Soviet failure to inform the rest of the world about the Chernobyl nuclear accident was a sign of the lurking menace of communism. For insiders, for citizens of the Soviet Union, who learned of the peril only over time, and in limited doses, and often only after their frustration found an outlet in the *glasnost* period and forced officials to disclose more information, the lack of prompt and proper information created a sense of **betrayal and mistrust** that persists to this day. In this sense, such serious publications as *The Economist* have even argued that it was Chernobyl that ultimately brought down the Soviet system.

Recent research has shown that people in the Chernobyl region **still lack the information** they need to lead healthy, productive lives. Information itself is not in short supply; what is missing are creative ways of disseminating information in a form that induces people to change their behavior. The Chernobyl Forum findings on radiation suggest, moreover, that **propagation of healthy lifestyles** is at least as important as providing information on how to live safely with low-dose radiation. To improve the mental health of the population and ease fears, credible sources need to **dispel the misconceptions surrounding Chernobyl**.

The Chernobyl Forum findings are invaluable **raw material** here. The fledgling **International Chernobyl Research and Information Network**—about which you’ll be hearing more tomorrow—is the vehicle we envisage for disseminating this information in a way that is both credible and accessible to local residents.

Second, policy. The findings of Chernobyl Forum should facilitate a **major reorientation in government policies**. Let me cite a few examples:

1. The mild impact of radiation should prompt an overhaul of zoning definitions and regulations, as many areas now classified as too dangerous for human habitation or commercial activity are in fact quite safe.
2. The reassuring prognosis for radiation-related diseases should provide yet another argument for channeling investment away from specialized hospital facilities and towards better primary and preventive health care.
3. The low, virtually risk-less levels of radiation risk faced by most Chernobyl-area residents should prompt a radical overhaul of Chernobyl benefits and privileges, so that the truly needy are covered by an efficient, targeted mainstream social welfare program that covers the entire population and the ailing are similarly assisted by mainstream health care provision—and so that scarce budgetary resources can be channeled to more productive spending that promotes growth, employment, and investment.

The point is not just to change policies specific to Chernobyl, but also to **adjust broader economic and social policies** in ways that will **spur economic development** nationwide, including, inevitably, in the Chernobyl regions. The development of sturdy local businesses depends heavily on sensible regulations at the national level, including straightforward rules on founding and registering companies, simplification of licensing and inspection rules, provision of affordable finance, and market-oriented training and education policies.

Third, community development. Here we draw heavily on our recent experience in Ukraine, where a holistic approach we call “area-based development” aims essentially to restore a sense of community self-reliance by showing local residents that they themselves hold the key to their own recovery, whether in the field of health, employment, or communal services such as heating and water. We find this an especially

exciting prospect because the methodology is simple; the costs are modest; and the impact can be stunning, as towns and villages once reduced to paralysis and resignation rediscover the true meaning of “community”.

Going forward, these are three areas—**information, policy, and community development**—around which UNDP intends to organize its efforts in supporting the three Governments on Chernobyl recovery. Cooperation among the three countries, assisted by our three Country Offices and our coordination efforts at United Nations headquarters, is crucial to this effort. Since funding is in short supply, successes in one area should be shared and replicated in others.

Concluding thoughts

Chernobyl has long inspired nothing but despair. Yet the Chernobyl Forum findings have shown conclusively that fear of radiation is a far greater threat to the affected individuals and communities than is radiation itself. We at UNDP are both honored and proud to have taken part in an undertaking that we believe will help to transform a generation of defeated “victims” into a generation of proud “survivors”. We intend to devote every effort to transform what has haunted the region as a symbol of fear and destruction into a triumph of human perseverance.

Thank you for your attention.