

Clean air, healthy children and decent work

- ▷ Poor air quality affects children's development and their ability to contribute meaningfully to society.
- ▷ Governments should tackle air pollution to improve work, education, health and the environment.
- ▷ The UN General Assembly supports, for example, more efficient vehicles and stoves, and reforestation.

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Studies have shown that children who are exposed to poor air quality suffer from poor physical and psychological development, not only impairing their quality of life but limiting their ability to benefit from education, to engage in decent work, and to contribute meaningfully to society as a whole.

The latest state of the evidence on air pollution and children's health is surveyed in a new report by the World Health Organization, summarised on pages 138–141 of this issue. But the challenges go beyond healthcare costs and burdens. Some lasting impacts take years or decades to become evident. A recent Unicef report (2017) states:

... studies have found associations directly between air pollution exposure and cognitive outcomes, including reduced verbal and nonverbal IQ, memory, test scores and grade-point averages among school children, as well as other neurological behavioral problems.

In fact, the authors noted that one study found a four-point drop in IQ by age 5 among exposed children.

This is particularly worrisome for countries that are striving to achieve inclusive economic growth, to eradicate poverty, and to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. When children suffer physical or psychological impairments due to air pollution, this can have serious detriments on their ability to learn and develop, restricting their access to education and their eventual participation in the job market.

In fact, it has become abundantly clear among healthcare workers and social workers that the first 1000 days of a child's life are of critical importance. This is when the brain undergoes the most rapid and, some would argue, important growth. The seeds planted during this time, the development stages that are reached, lay the pathway for all future development, easing the way for more mature human interaction, for processing memories, for controlling behaviours, etc. All efforts, therefore, must be made to ensure that children are given the opportunity to fully realise their potential during this phase, and any potential impairments, including but not limited to poor air and water quality, should be avoided or reduced.

Through my term as President of the General Assembly for the 73rd Session, I have highlighted both 'the environment' and 'decent work' as issues of critical importance. With the obvious and clear linkages between environmental impacts, access to education/work and air quality, it is important that countries, communities and private sector companies take steps to rein in this ever-growing problem, especially as it pertains to children, our most vital resource and those for whom our work matters most.

Because the challenges are diverse and many. Poor vehicle emission standards in some countries, coupled with traffic congestion; industrial plants located near housing and education facilities; a lack of affordable clean energy resulting in continuing dependence on coal- and wood-burning stoves, often inefficient ones at that; and rapid deforestation, are all factors that are affecting air quality. Underlying all these issues is the rapid rate of urbanisation, which at current rates will see nearly 70% of the world's projected 9+ billion people reside in cities by 2050.



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Structural changes are urgently needed. Urban planning and development initiatives must consider carbon emissions and other industrial pollutants and their proximity to homes and schools. Likewise, efforts must continue to transition families away from inefficient and highly pollutant coal- and wood-fired home heating and cooking facilities towards renewables or energy-efficient cooking stoves that not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but protect children and families.

And green spaces, including in urban environments, as well as large-scale reforestation campaigns, are critical to help ensure that our planet's natural defences against air pollutants are secure and fit for purpose. An ongoing initiative in Pakistan for instance, the 'Billion Tree Tsunami' initiative, has already seen 1 billion trees planted ahead of schedule, with a new goal of 10 billion to be planted over three years. This initiative is being supported by nearly the entirety of the United Nations System and demonstrates respect for the role of forests in the health of ecosystems, livelihoods, and people and communities.

'To address air pollution requires the willingness to take decisions that may be difficult in the short term but will pay off later.'

Finally, support for electric vehicles and better public transport must be strengthened. While the shift towards greener vehicles is well underway – and we see this in countries such as Morocco, which launched a fleet of electric buses, and in Europe, where diesel-powered vehicles will be banned in France by 2040 – more must be done to ensure cleaner air, everywhere.

It is important to note that these efforts constitute a win-win for all involved. Not only does reforestation support environmental and personal health and well-being, it creates jobs and boosts livelihoods. Similarly, for the automotive sector, investing in cleaner vehicles and better public transport can help boost innovation. Governments can ensure this shift by putting in place regulatory measures to require the production of cleaner vehicles.

While public spending and regulation are often met with some backlash, a strong public advocacy campaign highlighting the clear benefits – to decent work, to public health, and to environmental well-being – will help to facilitate support.

Key to all of this of course is a strong commitment from stakeholders – governments, public health officials, and private sector representatives – to address the challenge. This must include a willingness to take decisions that may be difficult in the short term but, much like the long-term impacts on a child's well-being, will pay off in dividends later, even if not immediately apparent. Consistent studies and analysis of air quality will also be important, and India has taken strong steps in this regard, regularly issuing alerts when pollution is too high, while taking steps to reduce pollution and educate citizens.

At the end of the day, investing heavily in efforts to curb air pollution, water pollution and any other environmental factors that may inhibit or impair the health, potential and well-being of our children is an investment in the health, prosperity and future of every society.

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REFERENCE

Unicef. (2017). *Danger in the Air: How air pollution can affect brain development in young children*. Data, Research and Policy Working Paper. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/press-releases/glo-media-Danger_in_the_Air.pdf (accessed February 2019).