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In Developing World, Pollution Kills More Than Disease

By Stephen Leahy



Air and chemical pollution are growing rapidly in the developing world with dire consequences for health, says Richard Fuller, president of the Pure Earth/Blacksmith Institute. Credit: Bigstock

UXBRIDGE, Canada, Jun 13 2014 (IPS) - Pollution, not disease, is the biggest killer in the developing world, taking the lives of more than 8.4 million people each year, a new analysis shows. That's almost three times the deaths caused by malaria and fourteen times those caused by HIV/AIDs. However, pollution receives a fraction of the interest from the global community.

"Toxic sites along with air and water pollution impose a tremendous burden on the health systems of developing countries," said Richard Fuller, president of the Pure Earth/Blacksmith Institute, which prepared the analysis as part of The Global Alliance on Health and Pollution (GAHP). GAHP is a collaborative body of bilateral, multilateral, and international agencies, national governments, academia and civil society.

Air and chemical pollution is growing rapidly in these regions and when the total impact on the health of people is also considered, "the consequences are dire," Fuller told IPS.

This future is entirely preventable as most developed countries have largely solved their pollution problems. The rest of the world needs assistance, but pollution has dropped off the radar in the current draft of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), he said.

The SDGs are the U.N.'s new plan for development assistance for the next 15 years. Countries, aid agencies and international donors are expected to align their funding and aid with these goals when they are announced in September 2015.

"Pollution is sometimes called the invisible killer...its impact is difficult to track because health statistics measure disease, not pollution," Fuller said.

As a result pollution is often misrepresented as a minor issue, when it actually needs serious action now, he said.

The GAHP analysis integrates new data from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and others to determine that 7.4 million deaths were due to pollution sources from air, water, sanitation and hygiene. An additional one million deaths were due to toxic chemical and industrial wastes flowing into air, water, soil and food, from small and medium-sized producers in poor countries.

The health burden of environmental pollution in these countries is on top of health impacts from infectious diseases, and smoking, said Jack Caravanos, professor of Environmental Health at the City University of New York and a technical advisor to the Blacksmith Institute.

It's extremely difficult to estimate the health impacts from many thousands of toxic sites contaminated with lead, mercury, hexavalent chromium and obsolete pesticides, Caravanos told IPS.

But the one million death estimate is likely a gross underestimate since investigations into the scope of the problem have only just started. "We've recently found sites filled with obsolete pesticides in Eastern Europe that have some very toxic chemicals," he said.

These chemicals don't stay put. Rain washes them into soils and waterways, and wind blows toxic particles long distances, sometimes coating crops and food, Caravanos said. A 2012 study by Blacksmith estimated that mining waste, lead smelters, industrial dumps and other toxic sites affect the health of 125 million people in 49 developing countries.

"We have identified over 200 places with contaminated air, soil or water that are putting at risk some six million people," said John Pwamang of the Ghana Environment Protection Agency.

"These include places with lead poisoning from recycling used lead-acid or car batteries, and e-waste dismantling areas, where cables are burnt in the open air and the toxic smoke poisons whole neighborhoods," Pwamang said in a release.

A growing body of scientific evidence is revealing an astonishing array of illness including cancers, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, ADHD, autism, Alzheimer's and depression, with links to the ever-increasing amount of toxic chemicals in our bodies, said Julian Cribb, author of the new book "Poisoned Planet: how constant exposure to man-made chemicals is putting your life at risk".

"There are at least 143,000 man-made chemicals plus an equally vast number of unintentional chemicals liberated by mining, burning fossil fuels, waste disposal," Cribb said in a release.

"Around 1000 new industrial chemicals are released every year, which the United Nations says are largely untested for human and environment health and safety."

GAHP members worldwide have come together to urge the U.N. to spotlight pollution in the SDGs (see the growing list of supporters). A position paper and a draft of GAHP's proposed

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revised SDG text have been created. These will be presented to the Open Working Group of the SDGs, meeting in New York City next week.

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