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Air pollution is a major problem but we mustn't overlook other sources

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Pollution kills 8.4m and needs more UN focus GAHP says widen aims as eyes fix on air pollution

Adam Duckett

POLLUTION kills more than 8m people every year – many more than malaria – and shows that the UN must take a more comprehensive approach to its support of the developing world, says the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution (GAHP).

GAHP's analysis of data from the World Health Organization found that 8.4m deaths a year are caused by pollution, which is just under three times more deaths than malaria, HIV and tuberculosis combined.

Members of GAHP, including the World Bank, the United Nations Environment Programme and the Blacksmith Institute, say the figures show that pollution should be given higher priority in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are being drafted now and will set out development assistance for the next 15 years.

World leaders are downplaying the combined effect of pollution from sources including water and industry and focusing too closely on air pollution, GAHP warns.

"The problem is that the current SDGs include mention only of air pollution in the health goal and ignore other causes like chemicals and waste. Since the SDGs will determine what the world pays attention to and funds over the next 15 years, the importance of having all forms of pollution addressed is enormous," says Fernando Lugris, deputy director of the Uruguay government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a member of GAHP.

Well-developed legislation, regulation, and technical expertise in the US and other western countries have made life-threatening pollution a thing of the past, GAHP says. Now is the time to transfer technical knowledge to developing countries where millions of avoidable deaths occur each year.

"Many communities in poor countries are assaulted simultaneously with different combinations of these harmful pollutants, whether as airborne particles, industrial wastes discharged into rivers used for drinking and bathing, pesticides or herbicides on crops absorbed into food and seeping into groundwater, to name just a few," GAHP said in a press release.

Ghana alone has identified more than 200 places with contaminated air, soil or water that are putting around 6m people at risk, says 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 neighbourhoods. Plus we have poor sanitation in our villages, and air pollution from vehicle exhausts in our cities."

WHO stats show outdoor and indoor air pollution causes 6.58m deaths annually; water contamination and lack of sanitation and hygiene cause 842,000 deaths; while toxic chemical and industrial wastes kill a further 1m.

The scale of industrial pollution possible in developing economies was highlighted by China in April when it revealed that its race for industrial growth has polluted around a sixth of all its soils with heavy metals and organic chemicals.

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