



New country-by-country data show in detail the impact of environmental factors on health

13 JUNE 2007 | GENEVA -- The World Health Organization (WHO) is today releasing the first ever country-by-country analysis of the impact environmental factors have on health. The data show huge inequalities but also demonstrate that in every country, people's health could be improved by reducing environmental risks including pollution, hazards in the work environment, UV radiation, noise, agricultural risks, climate and ecosystem change.

The new data show that 13 million deaths worldwide could be prevented every year by making environments healthier. In some countries, more than one third of the disease burden could be prevented through environmental improvements. The worst affected countries include Angola, Burkina Faso and Mali, as well as Afghanistan.

In 23 countries worldwide, more than 10% of deaths are due to just two environmental risk factors: unsafe water, including poor sanitation and hygiene; and indoor air pollution due to solid fuel use for cooking. Around the world, children under five are the main victims and make up 74% of deaths due to diarrhoeal disease and lower respiratory infections.

Low income countries suffer the most from environmental health factors, losing about 20 times more healthy years of life per person per year than high income countries. However, the data show that no country is immune from the environmental impact on health. Even in countries with better environmental conditions, almost one sixth of the disease burden could be prevented, and efficient environmental interventions could significantly reduce cardiovascular disease and road traffic injuries.

"These country estimates are a first step towards assisting national decision-makers in the sectors of health and environment to set priorities for preventive action," said Susanne Weber-Mosdorf, WHO Assistant Director-General for Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments. "It is important to quantify the burden of disease from unhealthy environments. This information is key to help countries select the appropriate interventions."

The country profiles provide a preliminary estimate of health impacts caused by environmental risks. Countries can use these figures to refine their own estimates. Despite the uncertainties involved in these estimates, they indicated opportunities for targeted action to prevent disease.

For the purposes of this assessment, environmental factors include pollution, occupational factors, UV radiation, noise, agricultural methods, climate and ecosystem change, the built environment and people's behaviour.

The data show that household interventions could dramatically reduce the death rate. Using cleaner fuel such as gas or electricity, using better cooking devices, improving the ventilation or modifying people's behaviour (such as keeping children away from smoke) could have a major impact on respiratory infections and diseases among women and children.

Interventions at the community or national level would involve promoting household water treatment and safe storage, and introducing energy policies which favour development and health. For example, reducing levels of air pollution (measured by PM₁₀) as set out in WHO's Air Quality Guidelines would save an estimated 865 000 lives per year.

For media information, journalists may contact:

Nada Osseiran
Advocacy & Communications Officer
Public Health and Environment
WHO, Geneva
Tel.: +41 22 791 4475
Fax: +41 22 791 4127
E-mail: osseirann@who.int

Gregory Hartl
Communications Advisor

Health and Sustainable Development
WHO, Geneva
Mobile: +41 79 203 6715
E-mail: hartlg@who.int

For further information and interviews, contact:

Africa

Dr L. Manga
Health and Environment
Focal Point, Division of Healthy Environments and Sustainable Development
WHO Regional Office for Africa
Brazzaville, Congo
Tel.: +47 241 39338
E-mail: mangal@afro.who.int

The Americas

Dr Luiz Augusto Cassanha Galvão
Manager, Sustainable Development and Environmental Health Area
WHO Regional Office for the Americas
Washington, DC, USA
Tel.: +1 202 974 3156
E-mail: galvaolu@paho.org

Eastern Mediterranean Region

Dr Houssain Abouzaid
Coordinator, Healthy Environments
WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Cairo, Egypt
Tel.: +202 279 5362
E-mail: she@emro.who.int

Europe

Dr Roberto Bertollini
Director, Special Programme on Health and Environment (DHE)
WHO Regional Office for Europe
Tel.: + 39 06 477 7560
E-mail: rbe@ecr.euro.who.int

South East Asia and the Western Pacific

Dr Sattar A. Yoosuf
Director, Department of Sustainable Development, and Healthy Environments (SDE)
WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia
New Delhi, India
Tel.: +91 11 2337 0804
E-mail: yoosufa@whosea.org

Dr Hisashi Ogawa

Regional Adviser, Healthy Settings and Environment (RA/HSE)
WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific
Manila, Philippines
Tel.: +63 2 52 89886
E-mail: ogawah@wpro.who.int

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