

WHO to accelerate efforts to address air pollution

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The World Health Organization (WHO) recently called upon Member countries in its South-East Asia Region to aggressively address the double burden of household and ambient air pollution. The Region accounts for 34% or 2.4 million of the 7 million premature deaths caused by household and ambient air pollution together globally every year.

Of the 3.8 million deaths caused by household air pollution globally, the Region accounts for 1.5 million or 40% deaths, and of the 4.2 million global deaths due to ambient (outdoor) air pollution, 1.3 million or 30% are reported from the Region, as per the latest WHO report.

“Though there is progress in the Region as most countries have national action plans for prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, which incorporate measures to address household air pollution, and more and more cities are now measuring air quality, we need to do much more, and with an urgent and aggressive approach,” said Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of deaths globally and in the Region, and air pollution contributes significantly to NCDs such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and lung cancer. Cleaning up the air we breathe will help prevent NCDs, particularly among women and vulnerable groups such as children, those already ill and the elderly.

Dr Khetrpal Singh drew attention to the example of India’s Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Scheme under which, in the last two years 37 million women living below the poverty line were provided free LPG connections to support them to switch to clean household energy use. The country targets to reach 80 million households by 2020.

The availability of clean household energy affects us all and our families and is a key to sustainable development. All countries in the Region are making efforts to expand availability of clean fuels and technologies, however, over 60% population do not have clean fuel.

The combined effects of household air pollution and ambient air pollution become increasingly hard to address if not tackled early. The majority of countries in the Region are at early stages of accelerated urbanization and rapid industrialization. Hence, air pollution needs to be brought under control with urgent and effective action at the earliest to stand the best chance to prevent the situation from worsening as development proceeds.

A range of solutions exist. Governments need to invest in effective urban planning with energy-efficient housing and power generation; build safe and affordable public transport systems; improve industry and municipal waste management; eliminate emissions from coal and biomass energy systems; properly manage agricultural waste, forest fires and agro-forestry activities such as charcoal production; and support the transition to exclusive use of clean household energy for cooking, heating and lighting.

Individuals should also contribute by valuing the environment and adopting behavioral changes such as using public transport or 'soot-free' vehicles; using clean, low-or no-emission stoves and fuels for cooking; using clean household energies and technologies; and reducing and disposing of household waste in an environmentally sound manner.