



UNEA-2 FACT SHEET:

HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT, HEALTHY PEOPLE

Why addressing the links between environment and health matters

Over 2,000 years ago, the Roman poet Virgil said, “The greatest wealth is health.” Two millennia later, this wisdom has yet to sink in. The world has made progress in eradicating diseases and reducing the poverty that damages our ability to live long and productive lives, but we are still creating new ways to harm ourselves. High on the culprit list are environmental health risks, such as exposure to harmful chemicals, lack of access to water and sanitation, poor waste management and climate change—the majority of which are consequences of the way the world has developed.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has set 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim to create a better future for people and planet. The environment cuts across virtually all of the goals, but nowhere is the importance of a well-managed environment as clear as in human health—which is simultaneously a standalone goal (number 3), a key factor in other goals such as those on education, economy and societies, and a way of measuring how sustainable development is progressing.

The state of play

- **12.6 million people died** as a result of living or working in an unhealthy environment in 2012.
- Environmental risks take their greatest toll on young children and older people. Yearly, the deaths of **1.7 million children under 5** and **4.9 million adults aged 50 to 75** could be prevented through better environmental management.
- **8.2 million** of the 2012 deaths came from non-communicable diseases, mostly due to indoor and outdoor air pollution – which is due in no small measure to a fossil-fuel based economy that pumps harmful materials into the air.
- Although information is only available for a small number of chemical exposures, it is estimated that some **107,000 people die** annually from exposure to **asbestos** and **674,000 died from exposure to lead** in 2010.
- Lead poisoning in children costs an estimated **\$977 billion dollars per year** – equivalent to **1.2 per cent of the world’s GDP** – by lowering the IQ of children in low to middle income countries (**\$137 billion** in Africa, **\$142 billion** in Latin America and **\$700 billion** in Asia).
- Floods, droughts and windstorms are the most frequently occurring natural disaster events; they account for almost 90 per cent of the 1,000 most disastrous events since 1990. Each year around **42 million human life years are lost in disasters**. As the impacts of climate change widen, disasters are expected to become more common.
- Cautious estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) under a medium-high emissions scenario indicate that **250,000 additional deaths could potentially occur** each year between 2030 and 2050 as a result of climate change.
- Since the first UN Climate Change Conference in 1995 (COP1), 606,000 lives have been lost and 4.1 billion people have been injured, left homeless or in need of emergency assistance as a result of weather-related disasters.

The benefits of action

- Investments in preventative workplace health programmes of around **\$18-60/worker** can reduce sick leave absences by 27 per cent. The return on investment in water and sanitation services is between **\$5 and \$28 per dollar**.
- Such investments will have a huge impact on the 2030 Agenda, impacting positively on Goal 3 (health) as well as many other goals, including those on reduced inequalities, education and gender equality.
- The pollution-related human health and environmental impacts of solar, wind and hydropower are a factor of **3 to 10 times lower** than fossil-fuel power plants. The Paris Agreement on Climate Change is an important vehicle for decarbonization, and therefore improvements in health and well-being, including through lessening natural disasters.
- Lead paint hazard control in homes to prevent children's exposure would yield massive social, health and economic benefits. In the USA alone, a **net saving of \$181–269 billion would be brought** when taking into account the costs of health care, lifetime earnings, tax revenue, special education, attention deficit disorder and direct costs of crime associated with elevated lead exposure.

Change across the globe

- Under the Montreal Protocol, the world phased out chemicals that were depleting the ozone layer. We are now on track for ozone layer recovery, and the benefits are astonishing: up to **2 million cases of skin cancer** and many millions of eye cataracts may be prevented each year by 2030.
- Lead in vehicle fuel was once the main source of human exposure to the toxic substance. Now, the use of lead in fuel has been phased out in all but **three countries**. Benefits from the elimination of lead in gasoline on a global scale have been estimated at **\$2.45 trillion per year**, or 4 per cent of global GDP, saving an estimated **1 million premature deaths** per year.
- UNEP and WHO established the Global Alliance to Eliminate Lead in Paint in 2009, which aims to eliminate the use of lead in paint by 2020. Lead in paint is now regulated in **59 countries**. In **the Philippines**, for example, legislation now bans paints with total lead content above 90 ppm. The testing of five paint brands revealed that the lead content has dropped from **2,330-126,000 ppm to 15-1,280 ppm**.
- Implementing proven, cost-effective measures to reduce emissions of short-lived climate pollutants such as black carbon and methane are expected not only to reduce global warming by 0.5°C by the middle of the century, but also to **save 2.4 million lives a year** from reduced air pollution by 2030.

Sources

World Health Organization: [Preventing disease through healthy environments: a global assessment of the burden of disease from environmental risks](#)

United Nations Environment Programme: *Healthy Environment, Healthy People*

UNEP (2012) *Global Chemicals Outlook*