

Five National Academies Call for Global Compact on Air Pollution and Health

Jacqueline McGlade and Philip J. Landrigan

Air pollution causes 7 million premature deaths each year,¹ and deaths due to ambient air pollution are on track to double by 2050.² Yet despite its enormous health and economic impacts, air pollution is accepted by many governments as an unavoidable consequence of economic growth. Prevention of air pollution is underfunded in official development assistance and, as yet, no major foundation has made air pollution its priority.

Fortunately, this situation has begun to change: between 2016-8, the UN Environment Assembly issued a global call for a pollution-free planet³; the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group recommended increasing support for pollution management; WHO, the UN Environment Programme and other partners convened the first Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health, and the Berggruen Institute and the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation launched the Every Breath Matters initiative.⁴

Five national academies of science and medicine have now added their voices. The science academies of Brazil, Germany, South Africa and the USA and the US National Academy of Medicine have examined the data on air pollution and health. These academies found that the pollutants of greatest health concern are fine airborne particulates produced by combustion of fossil fuels and biomass, and they consider the evidence associating particulate air pollution to heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive lung disease, lung cancer, premature birth, dementia and brain development to be unequivocal.⁵

The five academies confirm that air pollution can be prevented in all countries, through a combination of policies, legislation, regulation, standards, technology and enforcement, coupled with increasing social awareness. Pollution prevention is cost-effective. It fosters economic growth by averting disease and preventing productivity losses.

The academies note that existing international agreements, including the Montreal Protocol, the UN Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and the World Health Assembly Resolution on Air Pollution address different aspects of air pollution, but none includes a comprehensive plan for air pollution control.

The academies therefore propose adoption of a new Global Compact on Air Pollution and Health. The Compact would recognize the right to clean air, ensure sustained engagement to tackle air pollution at the highest level, make pollution control a core priority in all development strategies and all business planning in every city and country, and catalyse major investments in renewable energy and urban planning.

To bring this message to the widest attention, representatives of the five academies will go to the UN on June 19, 2019, to issue a global call to action. The academies argue that enough is known about the dangers of air pollution to take effective action to tackle the problem, and that air pollution must therefore be prevented now.

The final word from the academies is that economic growth that accepts air pollution and ignores its health and environmental impacts is unsustainable and unethical.

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