

Millions of babies, mostly in South Asia, risk brain damage from breathing toxic air, UNICEF warns

6 December 2017 – Almost 17 million babies live in areas where air pollution is at least six times higher than international limits, causing them to breathe toxic air and potentially risking their brain development, according to a new paper released on Tuesday by the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)).

[Danger in the Air](#), notes that breathing in particulate air pollution can damage brain tissue and undermine cognitive development – with lifelong implications and setbacks.

“Not only do [pollutants harm babies’ developing lungs](#) – they can permanently damage their developing brains – and, thus, their futures,” said UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake.

Satellite imagery reveals that South Asia has the largest proportion of babies under the age of one living in the worst-affected areas, with 12.2 million babies residing where outdoor air pollution exceeds six times international limits set by the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)). The East Asia and Pacific region is home to some 4.3 million babies living in areas that exceed six times the limit.

“Protecting children from air pollution not only benefits children. It also benefits their societies – realized in reduced health care costs, increased productivity and a safer, cleaner environment for everyone,” he stressed.

The paper shows that air pollution, like inadequate nutrition and stimulation, and exposure to violence during the critical first 1,000 days of life, can affect the development of their growing brains.

It explains that ultrafine pollution particles are so small that they can enter the blood stream, travel to the brain, and damage the blood-brain barrier, which can cause neuro-inflammation.

Some pollution particles can cause neurodegenerative diseases while others can damage brain areas for learning and development.

A young child’s brain is vulnerable: by a smaller dosage of toxic chemicals, as compared to an adult’s; as they breathe more rapidly; and because their physical defences and immunities are not fully developed.

The paper outlines urgent steps to reduce the impact of air pollution on babies’ growing brains, including immediate actions for parents to decrease children’s exposure at home to harmful fumes produced by tobacco products, cook stoves and heating fires.

It also suggests investing in cleaner, renewable sources of energy to replace fossil fuel combustion; provide affordable access to public transport; increase green spaces in urban areas; and provide better waste management options to prevent open burning of harmful chemicals.

Danger in the Air advises reducing children's exposure to pollutants by traveling during lower air pollution times of the day; providing appropriately fitting air filtration masks, in extreme cases; and creating smart urban planning so that major sources of pollution are not located near schools, clinics or hospitals.

It further recommends improving children's overall health to bolster their resilience, and promotes exclusive breastfeeding and good nutrition.

Finally, as reducing children's exposure begins with understanding the quality of air they are breathing, the report endorses improved knowledge and monitoring of air pollution.

"No child should have to breathe dangerously polluted air" and no society can afford to ignore air pollution," Mr. Lake concluded.

[Use fiscal stability to bolster inclusive and sustainable development in Asia-Pacific, UN report urges](#)

6 December 2017 – Countries in the Asia-Pacific region should make the most of the prevailing stable economic conditions to orient their economies towards a more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable path, the United Nations development wing in the region has urged.

"Unless economic growth is accompanied by an expansion of decent jobs and strengthening of social safety nets, the region will continue to see a rise in inequality and little progress in eliminating poverty," [said](#) Shamshad Akhtar, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific ([ESCAP](#)).

"Without concerted efforts, economic growth will continue to come at a significant, and often irreversible, environmental cost," she added, unveiling the [year-end update](#) to the Commission's flagship publication, the [Economic and Social Survey for Asia and the Pacific](#).

The report highlights that fiscal sustainability is not a concern in most countries but overcoming the wide financing gap "difference between public investments required to effectively pursue sustainable development and the prevailing trends" requires fiscal space to be enlarged, including

through the mobilization of resources, broadening private sector participation and strengthening capital markets.

It also states that countries can improve governance and fiscal management through effective leverage of technology.

“Through the use of technology, Governments can improve tax administration and compliance and the implementation of direct benefit transfers while improving public expenditure efficiency,” reads the year-end update.

Regional economic outlook for 2018 ‘broadly stable’ but private investment remains weak

The report also cautions that while the regional economic outlook for 2018 is “broadly stable,” private investment remains weak in most countries, partly as a result of overcapacity and debt overhang in the corporate and banking sectors of some major economies.

To achieve a stable and sustained economic growth momentum, higher wages supported by productivity gains and revival of private investment will be needed, it urges.

The Economic and Social Survey for Asia and the Pacific (published until 1973 as the Economic Survey of Asia and the Far East) has been [issued annually](#) by ESCAP since 1947. It is one of the longest, continuously running reports in the UN system, monitoring progress on and analysing emerging socioeconomic issues in the region and providing policy advice to the decision makers.

[Somalia Partnership Forum stresses job creation and poverty reduction to promote stability](#)

5 December 2017 – A gathering of senior representatives of the Somali Government, the United Nations and the international community concluded in Mogadishu today with a call for greater investment in the country’s economic development to create more job opportunities, rehabilitate essential infrastructure, and improve the living conditions of the Somali people.

For the second consecutive day, the Federal and state-level leaders of the country met with senior representatives of the international community in the so-called Somalia Partnership Forum to assess the various challenges facing Somalia, with today’s high-level conference focusing on humanitarian and development issues.

Participants commended the Government of Federal President Mohamed Abdullahi

Mohamed "Farmaajo" for its leadership in the country's drought response effort that averted a devastating famine in 2017. But several speakers also warned that the threat of a major humanitarian disaster still loomed over millions of Somalis, and continued support from international partners would be needed for the foreseeable future.

"Unfortunately, we cannot declare victory, and we have to exercise extreme caution because the situation remains the worst we have faced in recent living memory after four failed rainy seasons," said Peter de Clercq, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator and the Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Somalia.

"We continue to need deliveries of humanitarian assistance to the tune of \$100 million per month," he explained.

Mr. de Clercq noted that international partners have provided over \$1.2 billion in assistance to support the Federal Government's drought response effort this year, adding that a humanitarian response plan for Somalia in 2018 will seek to raise another \$1.5 billion.



Peter de Clercq (left), UN Deputy Special Representative for Somalia who is also the UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator, speaks during the Somalia Partnership Forum in Mogadishu. UN Photo/Omar Abdisalan

"Without the support of the international community, we could not have averted this famine," Somalia's Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khairi said in his remarks at the event.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)), poverty, marginalization, armed violence, insecurity, political instability, natural disasters and a lack of economic development have driven up humanitarian needs for decades in the east African country.

Also, a lack of access to basic services, especially in the areas of education and livelihoods opportunities, can easily tip residents into the vulnerable category in terms of relief needs, as well as encouraging outward migration in search of employment and increased susceptibility to recruitment by militant groups.

In his keynote address, President Farmaajo said his Government intends to reduce poverty by two per cent each year and had created jobs for thousands of Somali youth since taking office earlier this year with assistance from the international community.

"We must still do more to retain our young people," he added. "That is a must, not only to grow our country but also for preventing radicalization. We are fully aware that socio-economic improvements to the quality of our people's lives...will undoubtedly help bring about political stability."

President Farmaajo also reiterated his long-standing call for debt relief

that would provide Somalia with access to loans from international financial institutions to pay for urgently needed infrastructure improvements.

“If we are not able to build roads required by our small businesses to bring their produce to market, it would be difficult to meet our stated goal of reducing poverty,” the President said.

A communiqué issued at the end of the meeting welcomed the Federal Government’s pledge to hold one-person, one-vote elections in 2021. The document also stated that the next Somalia Partnership Forum would be held in the middle of 2018.

[Donors make initial pledges of \\$857 million to fund UN refugee agency’s work in 2018](#)

5 December 2017 – Donor governments on Tuesday pledged an initial \$857 million to fund the United Nations refugee agency’s work to help some 67 million displaced or stateless people worldwide in 2018.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) said that while [the pledges](#) made at an annual meeting in Geneva represent only 11 per cent of its total 2018 funding needs of over \$7.5 billion, they indicate the anticipated funding levels next year.

However, the gap between the funds received and the needs of refugees and other displaced people will likely continue growing, with new crises and worsening displacement running at record levels.

“Refugee crises grow. Refugee needs grow as well,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi.

This means that UNHCR has to prioritize, sometimes mercilessly, he explained.

“This can mean some (refugees) will be left to fend for themselves during the harsh winter months and others won’t get the assistance they need to reintegrate upon return,” he warned.

UNHCR’s work globally is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from governments, intergovernmental institutions and, increasingly, from individuals, corporations and foundations.

The agency’s work includes operations in some of the biggest emergencies around the world such as those in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

Mr. Grandi thanked the countries and communities hosting refugees because they are some of the largest donors in terms of space, resources, and the socio-economic and political cost of hosting refugees.

For 2018, UNHCR appeals to donors to sustain and increase support, through flexible and early contributions, to avoid uncertainty and enable it to channel funds where the needs are greatest without interruption.

[Amid alarming spike in violence, looming famine, Yemen gripped by uncertainty – UN officials](#)

5 December 2017 – Yemen remains gripped by uncertainty after the assassination of the former president and a spike in brutal violence in and around its war-ravaged capital, Sana'a, the United Nations envoy for the war-torn country said Tuesday.

“The [situation is reaching a new adverse development](#) with the killing of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and a number of GPC [General People's Congress] leaders,” Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, told a closed session of the UN Security Council Tuesday.

“These events will constitute a considerable change to the political dynamics in Yemen,” he added.

[Briefing](#) alongside Mr. Cheikh Ahmed was the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, who underscored that the humanitarian situation in the country remains severe, with millions on the cusp of the largest famine in modern times.

Intense fighting – including airstrikes and rocket attacks – have devastated the country and brought incredible hardships on its people. Over 17 million Yemenis (close to two-thirds of the population) is food insecure while a staggering 8.5 million people are on the brink of starvation.

In all, close to 21 million people across Yemen are in need of humanitarian or protection support.

The violence has also devastated basic services in the country, all but destroyed its water and sanitation system, and sparked a deadly cholera outbreak that has claimed thousands of innocent lives – including children.

Making matters much worse is that aid workers are not able to carry out their vital mission to save lives due to the scale of fighting and insecurity.

Overnight, 25 air strikes had targeted the Republican Palace, bridges and civilian infrastructure in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, forcing humanitarian agencies, including the UN, the Red Cross and non-governmental organizations into a lockdown.

Against this backdrop, the top UN relief official in the country, Jamie McGoldrick, had appealed Monday for a "humanitarian pause" today from 10:00 AM to 16:00 PM (Yemen time) to allow desperate civilians reach assistance and safety as well as for aid workers to reach them.

[Speaking](#) via telephone, from Sana'a, to journalists at a press briefing in Geneva today on his request for a pause in fighting, Mr. McGoldrick expressed that while he does not expect full compliance by all the parties, he hoped for some respite in the fighting to allow civilians to access supplies and medical care.

The "hallmark of the crisis," he noted has been the general disregard for international humanitarian law.

The UN and reiterated, time and again, reiterated the obligation of the parties to the conflict to ensure civilians are protected, and health and aid workers, and civilian infrastructure not be subjected to attacks.