

Humanity 'at a crossroads' as damage to planet poses growing risk to health, UN environment agency warns

Human activity is damaging the planet so badly, exacerbated by [climate change](#), that it will increasingly put our health at risk, warns a major report from the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)), released on Wednesday at the [UN Environment Assembly](#), currently taking place in Nairobi.

In a [statement](#), UN Environment described the [Global Environment Outlook](#), which was produced by 250 scientists and experts from more than 70 countries, as the most comprehensive and rigorous assessment completed by the United Nations in the last five years.

Unless environmental protections are drastically scaled up, the report says, there could be millions of premature deaths by the middle of this century, with pollutants in freshwater systems becoming a major cause of death by 2050.

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In addition, more chemicals, known as endocrine disruptors, will have an adverse effect on male and female fertility, as well as the neurological development of children.

The UN Environment Assembly is the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment, where environmental ministers from around the world are meeting to tackle critical issues such as [food waste](#), accelerating the spread of [electric mobility](#), and the crisis of [plastic pollution](#) in the oceans.

"The science is clear. The health and prosperity of humanity are directly tied to the state of our environment," said Joyce Msuya, Acting Executive Director of UNEP. "We are at a crossroads. Do we continue on our current path, which will lead to a bleak future for humankind, or pivot to sustainable development? That is the choice our political leaders must make, now."

Change outdated business models to save the planet

On a more optimistic note, the report makes clear that the science, technology, and financing exists to move towards a more sustainable global economy, and ensure that the worst-case scenario is avoided, but political leaders, together with much of the public and private sector, is still wedded to outdated, polluting models of production and development.

Ensuring a near-zero-waste economy by 2050 will require a new global business approach, and the report shows that “green investment” of just 2 per cent of countries’ GDP would deliver long-term growth comparable with a “business as usual” approach, but with fewer impacts from climate change, water scarcity and loss of ecosystems.

As well as policy changes that address entire systems such as food and energy, the report advises the adoption of low-meat diets, and a big cut in food waste: these two measures alone would cut by half the amount of food we will need to produce in order to feed the projected 9-10 billion people on the planet in 2050.

At present, the report states, a third of global edible food is wasted, and more than half of food produced in industrialized countries is thrown away.