

Climate change, air pollution and children's rights

A report by KidsRights



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ABOUT



KIDSRIGHTS

KidsRights is an international non-governmental organization that promotes the wellbeing of vulnerable children across the world and advocates for the realisation of their rights. KidsRights strives for a world where all children have access to their rights and are empowered to realise the great potential they carry within them. KidsRights sees children as 'changemakers' who have the power to move the world and facilitates them in voicing their opinions and in taking action to bring about change.

KidsRights supports children by commanding global attention for the realisation of children's rights and acting as a catalyst to ignite change, together with children and youth. This advocacy is supported with research and action. The foundation also finances local projects aimed at directly improving the rights of vulnerable children and stimulating child participation and *changemaking* by youths.

www.kidsrights.org 

THE CLIMATE CHANGE THREAT

One billion children, which is nearly half of all children, are at **extremely high risk** from the impacts of climate change¹. Climate change leads to, among other things, intense droughts, water scarcity, severe fires, rising sea levels, flooding, declining biodiversity². 2011 to 2020 was the warmest decade ever to be recorded³. This year, it was recognised for the first time that by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that **human influences unequivocally warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land**⁴.

In 2016, we already declared that our survival as humans depends on the preservation of the environment⁵. Five years later, we reiterate this statement, and call for urgent action from governments.

AIR POLLUTION

Air pollution can be defined as "the contamination of the indoor or outdoor environment by any chemical, physical or biological agent that modifies the natural characteristics of the atmosphere"⁶. The most common sources of air pollution are household combustion devices, motor vehicles, industrial facilities, and forest fires⁷.

AIR POLLUTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Air pollution and climate change are two issues that are closely connected.⁸ In fact, one of the main causes of climate change is the emission of greenhouse gas, which is also a form of air pollution. Reducing air pollution will help protect the climate⁹.

AIR POLLUTION AND PEOPLE

Not only does air pollution harm the environment, it is also the "**single biggest environmental threat to human health**"¹⁰.

Air pollution is one of the causes of climate change, and exposes people and children to a wide range of severe health risks. How does air pollution affect children at the global, regional and local level?

1. AIR POLLUTION: GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

A WORLD

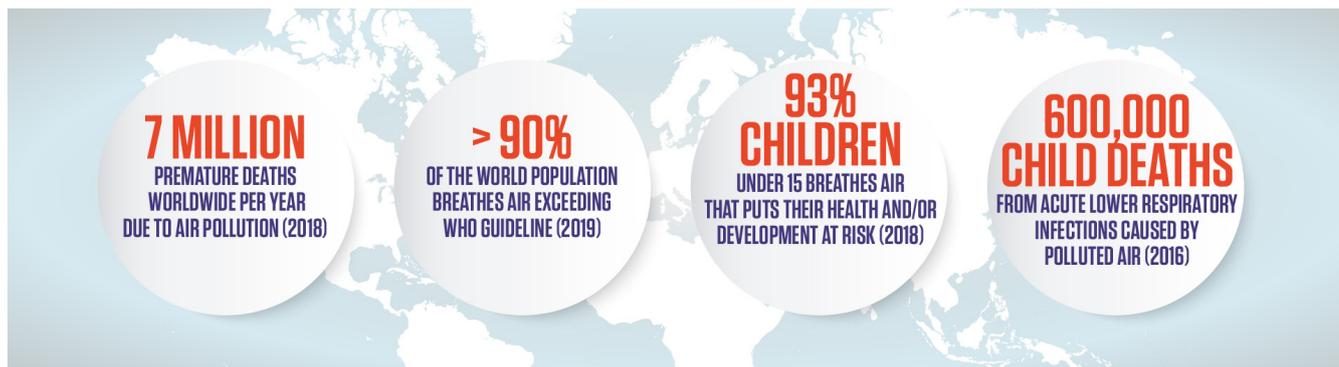


Figure 1. Estimates of impact of air pollution on people's health worldwide. Source: WHO.²⁸

B ASIA

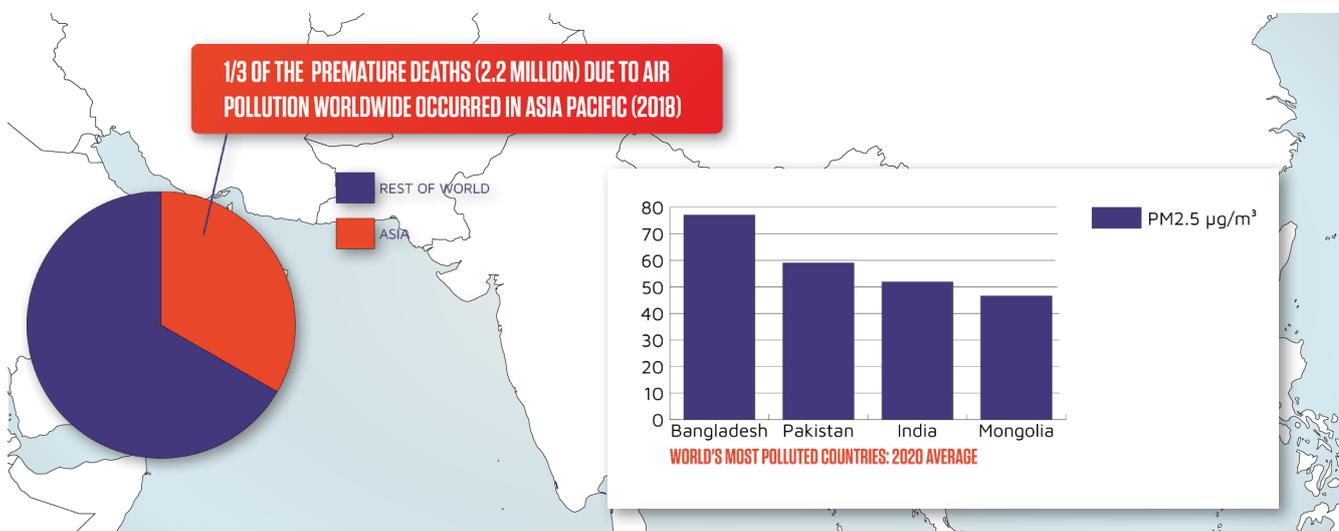


Figure 2. Deaths due to air pollution in Asia Pacific, WHO 2018.²⁹

Figure 3. Air pollution in India, IQAir 2020.³⁰

C INDIA

In some countries, children are particularly affected by air pollution. For example, India was the **world's third most polluted country** in 2020. It is home to 13/14 of the world's most polluted cities in the country¹¹. New Delhi, its capital, was the **world's most polluted capital** in 2020 for the third straight year¹².

Air pollution severely harms the health of children and puts their lives at risk. Children living in particularly polluted regions, countries and cities are even more vulnerable to air pollution. What are the consequences of exposure to air pollution and the effects of climate change on children's rights?

2. IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND AIR POLLUTION ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Children rights are human rights. Children's rights are laid down in the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, adopted in 1989¹³. All States, except the USA, are Parties to the CRC, and must respect it. As a consequence to air pollution and climate change, children are being denied their rights. These are some of the main rights that are being infringed:

RIGHT TO LIFE (ARTICLE 6 CRC)

- 26% of deaths of children under 5 years old could have been prevented by the reduction of environmental risks (2012).¹⁴
- Air pollution caused the death of 600,000 children under 15 years old in 2016.¹⁵

RIGHT TO HEALTH (ARTICLE 24 CRC)

- One quarter of the disease burden of children under 5 is caused by environmental risks.¹⁹
- 93% of children under 15 years old worldwide breathe air that puts their health at serious risk.²⁰

RIGHT TO EDUCATION (ARTICLES 28 AND 29 CRC)

- 24.9 million people were displaced due to natural disasters and extreme weather events in 2019. These people are at risk of being deprived access education.¹⁶
- Between 2005 and 2019, more than 3,200 schools have been damaged or destroyed each year due to the climate crisis.¹⁷

RIGHT TO PLAY (ARTICLE 31 CRC)

- 93% of children under 15 breathe polluted air that puts their health at risk. Therefore, they expose themselves to environmental harm when they play outside, and cannot fully enjoy their right to play.²¹

RIGHT TO NON-DISCRIMINATION (ARTICLE 2 CRC)

- Some children are particularly at risk of environmental harm (e.g: girls, indigenous children, children with disabilities, children from lower income families).¹⁸

RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING (ARTICLE 7 CRC)

- Due to lack of clean air, environmental degradation interferes with children's right to an adequate standard of living (food, housing, water, sanitation).²²

Air pollution has an impact on many children's rights. This has made children stand up and raise their voice to demand action to address climate change and mitigate air pollution.

3. CHILDREN IN ACTION! INITIATIVES TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE AND AIR POLLUTION

A. CHILDREN ASKING FOR ACTION: PRE-COP 26

In September 2021, the Youth4Climate event was held. This event gathered **hundreds of young climate leaders who put together ideas and proposals** to present to Ministers during Pre-COP26, the event where Ministers discuss expectations for the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26)²³. Children and youth raised a number of **key demands** that can be accessed [here](#).

B. CHILDREN HOLDING GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE

Children are also taking action to hold governments accountable, and make them take action! For example, **16 children from 12 countries filed a petition to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**, the Committee in charge of monitoring States' compliance with the CRC, against Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey. They claimed the States failed to prevent and mitigate the consequences of climate change, and therefore violated their rights.

The Committee decided that States emitting carbon are **responsible for the negative impact of the emissions originating in their territory on children's rights, even those who are not on their territory**. It stated that "[...] the collective nature of the causation of climate change does not absolve the State party of its individual responsibility that may derive from the harm that the emissions originating within its territory may cause to children, whatever their location".²⁴

However, it did not decide on whether the States had violated the CRC in that particular case, because the children had not been through national courts and exhausted domestic remedies.

In light of the impact of pollution on children's rights, and taking into account children's actions to fight against climate change and pollution, is the right to a clean environment and clean air considered as a human right?

4. AIR POLLUTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In October 2021, the Human Rights Council recognised **for the first time** that the **right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a "human right that is important for the enjoyment of human rights"**²⁵. The Human Rights Council is the inter-governmental body within the UN that is responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights worldwide. The **right to breathe** clean air is one of the **vital elements** of the right to a healthy environment.²⁶

More than 80% of UN Member States already recognise the right to a healthy environment²⁷, but it is the first time that the UN did. However, it is not included in any of the main human rights conventions.

The right to safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a human right! However, it is not included in any of the UN's main human rights conventions.

5. CALL TO ACTION

We call on governments to stand together and commit at COP 26 to taking strong actions to mitigate climate change.

We call on the UN to fully recognise the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right of children, and to add an independent article on this right in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child!

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