Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion

WHO recognizes health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”

Of the 5.9 million deaths of children under five each year, 26% are attributable to the environment, deaths which can only be prevented with multilateral action.

Living in a healthy environment is a right for the child

Under Article 24 of the Convention, governments have an obligation “to combat disease and malnutrition through, inter alia, the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution”.

In its General Comment no.15 – on the child’s right to health and health care – the Committee on the Rights of the Child urges governments to “take measures to address the dangers and risks that local environmental pollution poses to children’s health in all settings.”

The Committee also draws attention to the relevance of the environment, beyond environmental pollution, to children’s health, notably the effects of climate change.

Children have the right to:

Clean air

* household air pollution causes 500 000 deaths of children under five each year
* ambient air pollution causes 170 000 deaths of children under five each year
* 15.5 million healthy life years of children under five are lost each year due to fine particulate matter

SDG 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

* Inefficient burning of polluting fuels for cooking, heating and lighting can cause pneumonia and acute lower respiratory infections, depriving children of their right to healthy lives

Clean water and sanitation

* 361 000 child deaths from diarrhoea could be prevented each year with improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene; this is 58% of all child deaths due to diarrhoea
* 1/10 of the world lacks access to improved drinking water; 1/3 are without sanitation facilities

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

* Fetching water takes hours of children’s educational and playing time
* Living and playing around unsafe water puts children at high risk of intestinal diseases, hindering growth and development

Protection from the impacts of climate change.

SDG 13: take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, as these impacts, including extreme weather and increased levels of asthma-inducing pollen and mould, are most harmful to children.

Nutritious food, free from chemical contaminants

* 156 million children under five are stunted; 56% live in Asia, 36% live in Africa
* 40 million children are overweight and obese

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

2.1 end hunger by 2030

2.2 end malnutrition (including overweight and obesity) by 2030

* Malnutrition and stunting result in poor physical growth and immune function, and impair intellectual development

SDG 3.9: by 2030 substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water, and soil pollution and contamination

SDG 12.4: by 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order ot minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment

* over 140 000 synthetic chemicals have been produced, some of which are known to be harmful to children (neurological development, endocrine and immune systems)
* lead accounts for 600 000 new cases of intellectual disability per year
* major gap: ratified conventions on limiting the chemical load
  + Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants
  + Rotterdam on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade
  + Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal
  + Minamata Convention on Mercury

need to implement

* examples: lead out of petrol, phasing out of paint

Shelter

* Every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for their physical mental spiritual, moral and social development – recognized by the UN in 1989
* In poorly ventilated dwellings, indoor smoke can result in small particulate matter being 100 times higher than acceptable levels
* Healthy, safe and energy-efficient housing can significantly decrease the risks of injuries and both communicable and noncommunicable disease, and are crucial for children’s physical and mental development

SDG 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Freedom from child labour

* 168 million children are employed in child labour; 85 million in hazardous child labour
* one example is the growing industry of e-waste: discarded electronics are often shipped to low and middle income countries, where valuable parts are extracted by burning and with acid, often done by children. Exposure to chemicals and toxicants can lead to reduced IQ, attention deficits, lung damage, DNA damage and cancer.

SDG 8.7: take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms

**Recommendations**

1. Special attention should be paid to enforcement and monitoring of regulations designed to protect children from environmental exposures. Although legislation is a very positive step in protecting children’s rights, it must be effectively monitored and enforced.
2. Multisectoral action and the involvement health professionals, the education sector, communities, families, the transport sector, the energy sector, the agricultural sector, and the manufacturing sector, among others, is necessary to prevent exposure to harmful environmental toxicants and reduce the impact of global change. We can only achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, if we ensure all other SDGs are met.
3. Policy makers should view the environment not only as a risk to children’s health but also as an opportunity to protect children. Environmental management and low-cost interventions have the potential to prevent negative health effects and save significant government resources. Many environmental exposures are preventable.
4. Actors at all levels should invest in preventing early life environmental exposures, before birth, during early childhood and during adolescence. Because of the high long-term costs of some early life environmental exposures, including direct medical costs, education costs and lost productivity, this is often more cost-effective.