World Environment Day, 5 June 2019

Message from Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh
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This year’s World Environment Day focuses on air pollution, which is also one of today’s most pressing public health issues. Every year, air pollution kills around 7 million people globally. An estimated 4.2 million deaths are caused by a diverse range of pollutants, while around 3.8 million come from a single source – exposure to smoke from fuels and inefficient cookstoves in the home. As the slogan of today’s commemoration emphasizes, though we can’t stop breathing, we can do something about the air we breathe.

This is especially crucial in the WHO South-East Asia Region. Region-wide, people in 99% of cities breathe air that is far in excess of WHO guidelines. Remarkably, 63% of all households are still exposed to unacceptable levels of pollution from the use of wood, animal dung and crop waste used as fuel for cooking. Both forms of air pollution are causing increased incidence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive respiratory diseases, lung cancer and – among children under five – pneumonia.

Efforts to turn the situation around are ongoing. As per national NCD Action Plans, all Member States are striving to meet self-defined targets to reduce household air pollution. Cities and towns Region-wide are increasingly signing up to the WHO/UNEP Breathing Life Network, an initiative to promote greener and more live-able cities. High-level advocacy is meanwhile growing stronger by the day, while several Member States are pioneering innovative schemes to promote the use of cleaner cooking fuel at the household level.

Accelerated, year-round action and progress is nevertheless needed. As part of the Region’s Flagship Priority of preventing and controlling NCDs, its quest to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 – to ‘ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages’ – and its drive to meet several other SDG targets, a series of key interventions should be rolled out as a matter of priority.

First, innovative policies that encourage households to switch to cleaner forms of energy should be devised and implemented. Doing so has the potential to avert more than 1.5 million pollution-related deaths Region-wide every year, while also significantly improving the health and well-being of women, girls and small children, who are the first to be exposed to and suffer from household pollution. Importantly, doing so would also promote girls’ education by removing the heart rending choice between attending school and foraging for wood and other fuel.

Second, the health sector must have the tools needed to fully grasp air pollution’s health impacts and recommend appropriate, evidence-based measures able to mitigate them. While evidence of air pollution’s impact on the cardiovascular and respiratory systems of both adults and children has been known for decades, there is increasing evidence that air pollution is associated with several other health problems, from autism and diabetes to adverse pregnancy outcomes. Greater investment in innovative, intervention-based research is needed to ensure at-risk groups can be better protected.

And third, while recognizing that change must be society-wide and is dependent on the full implementation of evidence-based policies, each of us must embrace our own capacity to pitch in and make a difference. That means conserving energy wherever we can, whether by using less electricity or forgoing fuel subsidies to help the less fortunate gain access. It means choosing to walk, cycle or take public transport instead of using a private vehicle. And it also means segregating waste as a matter of habit, while using purpose-built systems for mulching and composting. We cannot expect change to come unless we ourselves embody it.

That is an important point, and one to reflect on as we mark World Environment Day and its focus on air pollution’s deadly impact. Though pessimism is easy to affect when it comes to the many and varied environmental issues we face, when considering air pollution, we really can make an immediate and powerful difference, both at the policy and personal level. By implementing innovative policies that promote clean fuels and limit household air pollution, for example, millions of deaths will be averted each and every year. The scope for change is real, and there for the taking. WHO is committed to supporting Member States do precisely that.

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