

International Day
of Clean Air
for blue skies



Key Messages

Air pollution is one of the greatest environmental health threats of our time, contributing to an estimated 8.1 million premature deaths in 2021 alone. Nine out of 10 people breathe air that is unsafe, causing untold sickness, deepening inequalities and hampering economic growth.

The theme of this year's International Day of Clean Air for blue skies is "Invest in #CleanAirNow." It emphasizes the urgent need to view clean air as an asset that is essential for driving socio-economic development. Unfortunately, right now clean air efforts are chronically underfunded, attracting only 1 per cent of international development finance.

There are so many ways we benefit when our air is clean. We enjoy a better quality of life. Our children are healthier. Our economies are more productive. And we help to stave off climate change.

The good news: we can end the air pollution crisis. So, let's get moving and invest in #CleanAirNow.

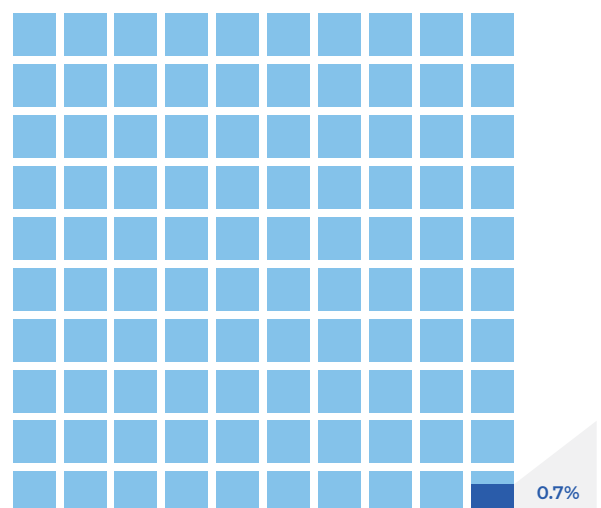
Air pollution is one of the greatest environmental threats to human health.

- Air pollution contributed to an estimated 8.1 million premature deaths in 2021, according to a recent report from two prominent research organizations, the Health Effects Institute and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.
- Air pollution is the second-leading risk factor for early death in the world, surpassing tobacco.
- Airborne contaminants affect every major organ system in the human body and can trigger heart disease, lung disease and diabetes.
- The impacts of air pollution extend beyond individual suffering. Air pollution burdens healthcare systems with growing numbers of the chronically ill and hampers the growth of plants, contributing to food insecurity.

Air pollution is especially devastating for young children.

- In 2021, 709,000 children under five died from respiratory diseases, such as pneumonia, attributable to air pollution, according to the Health Effects Institute and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. That makes it the second-leading cause of death in that age group, after malnutrition.
- Air pollution was linked to 16,600 deaths among children aged 5–14 in 2021.
- Approximately 93 per cent of children under the age of 15 breathe air that is so polluted it risks their health and development.
- Air pollution is also dangerous for pregnant women, increasing the likelihood of preterm births, stillbirths and miscarriages.

Less than 1% of global funds go towards clean air projects. *



* 2015 - 2021

Combating air pollution can help counter the ever-deepening climate crisis and vice versa.

- Many of the substances that pollute the air, like methane and black carbon, also accelerate global warming, feeding the climate crisis.
- Reducing these so-called super pollutants could slow the rate of global warming by up to 0.5°C by 2050.
- Limiting emissions of methane – a powerful greenhouse gas and precursor to a form of air pollution known as ground-level ozone – could prevent 255,000 premature deaths, 73 billion hours of lost labour annually, and avoid 26 million tonnes of crops lost annually.
- Air pollutants and greenhouse gases often come from the same sources, such as oil, gas and coal extraction and use, internal combustion engine vehicles, industrial production, agricultural burning, waste incineration, wildfires and the burning of biomass, like wood, for household use.
- Countering climate change can also help prevent air pollution. For example, two common side effects of climate change, droughts and heat waves, can stoke wildfires that spread air pollution across continents.

The next round of national climate pledges, due in 2025, should foster the reduction of super pollutants.

- Next year, countries that have signed the Paris Agreement are due to deliver updated plans for countering climate change. These are known as nationally determined contributions.
- By setting targets or including specific actions for reducing super pollutants, which are responsible for up to 45 per cent of global warming, countries can unlock resources that will both help improve air quality and limit climate change.

Clean air is a human right and is vital for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, humanity's blueprint for a better future.

- Some 99 per cent of the planet breathes air that the World Health Organization considers polluted. But it is the poorest and most marginalized who suffer the most from dirty air. This widens already existing inequalities nationally, internationally and between generations.

- Limiting air pollution is crucial to reducing inequality and realizing the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to health, child mortality and environmental sustainability.
- It is also a necessary step towards ensuring a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, which the UN General Assembly has declared a fundamental human right.

Investing in clean air initiatives can pay massive dividends for human health and the global economy.

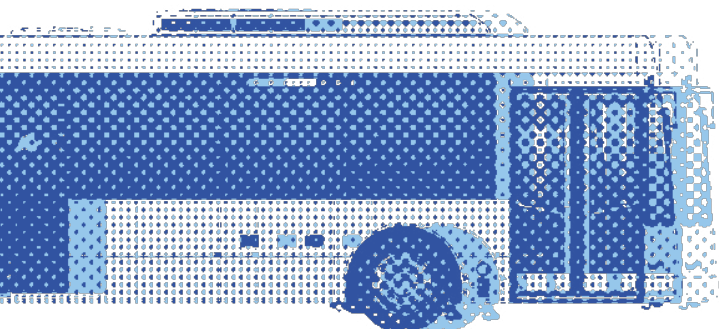
- The health costs associated with air pollution amount to US\$8.1 trillion annually, equivalent to 6.1 per cent of global GDP, according to the World Bank.
- Air pollution reduces the productivity of workers, the learning potential of children, and the operating conditions for businesses.
- A 20 per cent decrease in just one common pollutant, PM2.5, could lead to a 16 per cent jump in employment growth and 33 per cent jump in productivity, found the World Bank.
- Investments in clean energy, sustainable transportation, greener industrial practices, cleaner household cooking fuels and alternatives to agricultural burning can all help to counter air pollution.

The good news is that air pollution is preventable and governments around the world are stepping up to address the crisis.

- Some cities have halved their air pollution levels, proving that change is possible.
- Countries worldwide have committed to reducing methane (a precursor to ground-level ozone, a potent air pollutant) through the Global Methane Pledge and developed integrated plans to comprehensively tackle air pollution.
- Earlier this year the UN Environment Assembly, the world's highest decision-making body on matters related to the environment, passed a resolution calling for increased cooperation to reduce air pollution.

Everyone has a role to play in combating air pollution.

- Air pollution does not recognize borders. It is a global problem that requires collective action from governments, businesses and individuals. Here is how those groups can help forge a future free of air pollution.
- **Governments** can:
 - set and implement stricter air quality standards;
 - invest in air quality monitoring to identify and track pollution hotspots;
 - build their institutional capacity to address air pollution;
 - roll clean air measures into national policies and plans;
 - set targets for reducing super pollutants in nationally determined contributions, as they are crucial for limiting warming and attracting international climate finance;
 - offer or redirect subsidies and other incentives to promote the adoption of clean technologies, like renewable energy;



- support innovative solutions, including public-private partnerships, to mobilize the financial resources necessary for addressing air pollution; and
- use finance vehicles, like green bonds, social bonds and results-based funding, to steer private capital into air quality projects.
- **Businesses** can:
 - invest in clean technologies and practices that reduce emissions; and
 - assess their air pollution footprint and make clean air a core aspect of their business planning.
- **Development organizations and financial institutions** can:
 - Ramp up funding for clean air initiatives, which remain chronically underfinanced despite their clear social, environmental and economic benefits; and
 - foster partnerships between the public and private sectors to fund and implement clean air projects.
- **Individuals** can:
 - contribute to better air quality by choosing more sustainable behaviours;
 - vote who supports action on air pollution and climate change; and
 - engage in civic activities to raise awareness, especially on the International Day of Clean Air for blue skies.

The International Day of Clean Air for blue skies is an opportunity to galvanize the global movement to end air pollution.

- This marks the fifth edition of the International Day of Clean Air, which is celebrated annually on 7 September.
- The UN General Assembly recognized the observance to raise awareness about the rising costs of and solutions to air pollution.
- This year’s theme, “Invest in #CleanAirNow”, emphasizes the urgent need to view clean air as an essential asset for equality and socio-economic development.

For further information:

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UNEP is the leading global voice on the environment. It provides leadership and encourages partnerships in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. Emphasizing the need to improve air quality and reduce air pollution to protect human health and acknowledging that improving air quality can enhance climate change mitigation and vice versa, the United Nations General Assembly designated 7 September as the International Day of Clean Air for blue skies.

