

Toxic air may impact 8 million Indian kids: Unicef official

NEW DELHI: As many as 10 Indian cities have figured in the 20 most polluted cities across the world leaving over eight million children in the country exposed to toxic air and potentially putting their brain development at risk, said Yasmin Ali Haque, Unicef Representative in India.

Creating awareness among all stakeholders to move toward green practices will help reducing pollution levels, Haque told IANS in an interview on Wednesday, against the backdrop of the release of a new global Unicef paper.

The paper said almost 17 million babies under the age of one live in areas where air pollution is at least six times higher than international limits.

"It is a global problem. Field burning happens in South Asia and Africa. Coal power plants are all over the world. As per the reports we have on climate change, action might be taken in a country but the reaction is (felt) in another country," Haque said.

There is a need for action by all countries so children are born and grow up in an environment that is healthy, she said.

The paper -- Danger in the Air: How air pollution can affect brain development in young children -- noted that breathing in particulate air pollution can damage brain tissue and undermine cognitive development, with lifelong implications and setbacks.

Even if a pregnant woman inhales toxic air, it might have an impact on her baby, she added.

Haque said there was hope, citing the global momentum on climate change, but added the bigger hope comes from children themselves.

"In India, we have seen children are raising their voices, educating others. As future citizens of the country, they are raising the issues they are concerned about. That is very important," she said.

Haque said government regulations would work but the more important aspect was involvement of all stakeholders such as agriculture groups and industries.

"There can be regulation but beyond that, you need a change in your behaviour. This is where industries have a role to play. Cooperative groups, agriculture bodies can get farmers agreed on a code of conduct (field burning)," she said.

"Conglomeration of various industries can come together and see how their practices can be greener. We need to invest time in educating people." Haque said the country could prompt hybrid, electric-operated vehicles especially public transport.

However, it needs action from not just government but by all stakeholders in society, she concluded.