

Main Findings and Recommendations of AFED Report on Health and the Environment in Arab Countries

Overview

- Over 676,000 Arab citizens will lose their lives prematurely in 2020 due to exposure to conventional environmental risks.
- Diseases most driven and impacted by environmental causes in the Arab countries include cardiovascular diseases, diarrheal diseases, respiratory infections and cancers.
- The main environmental risk drivers of these disease groups are ambient and household air pollution, lack of access to clean water, marine pollution, uncontrolled urbanization, land degradation and exposure to waste and harmful chemicals.

Water

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the lack of access to safely managed water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services.
- 50 million Arabs have no access to basic drinking water services and 74 million people in the region with no access to basic sanitation services.
- These poor WASH services cause 40,000 premature, avoidable deaths annually.
- Only 9 of the 22 Arab countries are on track to achieve SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation.
- Wars and refugees increased the stress on the already scarce water resources.
- Countries should develop and implement water and sanitation programs, commit to financing, and advance the enabling conditions that make strong policies, laws and plans possible.

Air

- Levels of air pollution exceed the WHO limits by 5 to 10 times.
- Several Arab cities are among the 20 most polluted cities in the world.
- Significant rise in the number of deaths attributed to indoor and outdoor air pollution.
- The overall disease burden due to air pollution is increasing, with a higher prevalence of cardiopulmonary disease, cancer incidence, and more cases of asthma.
- Coronavirus gave an added sense of urgency to enhancing air quality, as studies have shown evidence of the relationship between air pollution and the increase in and acuteness of cases.
- Need to improve health risk assessments based on air monitoring and modeling studies, which would provide Arab policy-makers with the right control tools to reduce the public health impact of air pollution.

Waste

- Solid waste generation has been increasing at an alarming rate in the Arab region due to population growth and changing production and consumption patterns.
- Health problems attributed to solid waste mismanagement: respiratory disorders, eye infections and gastrointestinal.
- 53 percent of all generated waste indiscriminately disposed of in an unsanitary manner.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the use of single-use items such as masks and gloves, generating more hazardous waste.
- Replace outdated waste facilities with new ones that can reduce associated health risks and halt the dispersion of pollutants.
- Circular and 3R-centric approach (Reduce-Reuse-Recycle) to waste management is critical to reduce the harmful impact of waste on human health and nature.

Marine Environment

- Direct discharge of untreated sewage into coastal zones, offshore oil exploration and extraction, and microplastics have impacted the health of the Arab population.
- Arab countries produce an estimated 12 billion m³ per year of wastewater. Only 60% treated. Half of the treated water is re-used. All the remaining is discharged, mainly in the sea.
- Untreated sewage can lead to the spread of pathogens that cause disease in humans.
- Oil exploration, extraction and transport cause major pollution to the marine environment, and has led to heavy metal contamination of fish that are subsequently consumed by humans.
- More research is needed to explore the direct impact of the state of the marine environment on human health in the Arab region, with a focus on pathogens, toxin transfer to humans and antimicrobial resistance.

Climate Change

- Direct impacts of climate change include cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, heatstroke, injuries and fatalities.
- A 1°C increase in average temperature is expected to lead to a 3 percent increase in mortality from all causes.
- Public health issues are generally missing in national climate change adaptation strategies.
- The region is largely lacking national adaptation plans that address legislative and advisory responses, based on projected health risks, to heat waves, extreme weather events, air pollution and infectious diseases.
- Arab countries need to gain a better understanding of the various factors influencing the impact of climate change on health in order to design effective mitigation and adaptation strategies, catered to country-specific situations, with direct and clear effects on the Arab population's health.

Overall, exchange of expertise in health and environment-related disciplines across the Arab countries is needed, with regional cooperation intensified, encompassing emergency

preparedness to face health and environmental disasters. Establishing a primary health care system, including health education, is an urgent task. Ultimately, regional strategies setting common goals to achieve the SDGs are required.

The AFED report demonstrates that a healthy environment is a prerequisite to healthy people.