

Applying Human Rights as a Catalyst for Policies to Mitigate the Public Health

Risk of Household Air Pollution

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Objectives

- Despite the public health burden of household air pollution (HAP), advocates lack a human rights framework to mitigate HAP exposure through improved access to cleaner household energy systems.
- This study examines the role of human rights in framing obligations to mitigate HAP exposure, supporting environmental health for the most vulnerable.

Introduction

- With over 3 billion people dependent on traditional cooking and heating technologies, HAP exposure most significantly affects women and children of lower socioeconomic status in lower income countries.

- Efforts to address the health burden of HAP exposure are thus central to sustainable development objectives, including:

SDG 1 — No Poverty

SDG 3 — Good Health and Well-being

SDG 5 — Gender Equality

SDG 7 — Affordable and Clean Energy

SDG 13 — Climate Action



- Transforming access to clean cooking is viewed as central to lifting billions of households out of energy poverty, ensuring sustainable energy security, and realizing human rights.

Human Rights to Address Household Air Pollution

- Grounded in the right to health and rights to various underlying determinants of health, a rights-based approach to HAP provides a means to operationalize international law through public policy.
- Much like the rights-based response tobacco, where the plight of those impacted by cigarette smoke came to be seen as a human rights violation, the burden of HAP falls most heavily on the most vulnerable, who cannot readily change individual behaviors without policy support.

Household Air Pollution as a Threat to Public Health

- Over 3.1 billion people depend on polluting fuels and traditional technologies for cooking and heating, exposing millions of households to dangerously high levels of HAP.
- HAP exposure is associated with acute lower respiratory infection, asthma, bronchitis, cataract, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), low birth weight, emphysema, lung function decrement, tuberculosis & cancer.
- Energy poverty (lack of access to electricity and dependence on biomass cooking fuels) accounts each year for nearly 3.8 million premature deaths and 81.1 million disability-adjusted life years.

- This public health impact falls most heavily on vulnerable populations, particularly:

- Women

- Children

who remain in the home where cooking is done and face constant HAP exposure.

- The World Health Organization's 2016 report, "Burning Opportunity: Clean Household Energy for Health, Sustainable Development, and Wellbeing of Women and Children," assesses public health policy to mitigate the risks of HAP exposure.



- To achieve cleaner cooking and heating technologies, it will be necessary for governments to:

- intensify demand (motivating the cookstove customer and financing the purchase of clean cooking options);

- strengthen supply (establishing an inclusive value chain for the clean cooking sector); and

- create an enabling environment (promoting international standards and exhaustive testing protocols).

- Human rights can play a valuable role in these policy debates to realize cleaner household energy, framing the development and implementation of policies to address the determinants of energy poverty and mitigate the health effects of HAP.

A Human Right to Environmental Health

- Human rights have expanded to offer a framework for justice in environmental health, evolving through the:

- 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) – articulating obligations toward rural women in relation to development, health services, and living conditions.



- 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – formalizing government responsibilities "to combat disease...taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution."

- 2000 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) – interpreting the right to health to extend "to the underlying determinants of health...and a healthy environment."

Rights-Based Approach to Mitigating Household Air Pollution

- A rights-based approach to mitigating HAP can draw on intersectional obligations across the:

- Right to Health – where HAP requires a government response to protect individuals from harms in the built environment.

- Right to Development – where HAP undercuts conditions for salubrious development, requiring a global response to energy poverty.

- Rights of Women and Children – where HAP causes disproportionate harm to vulnerable populations, threatening substantive equality.

Facilitating Accountability for Human Rights Implementation

- Human rights advocacy can promote policy reforms to assure that cleaner household energy systems are available, accessible, acceptable, and of sufficient quality.

- Drawing on human rights claims analogous to tobacco, rights-based civil society advocacy can become a basis for accountability to mitigate HAP through

- International Treaty Bodies

- National Judicial Challenges

- Local Policy Advocacy

