



A Call to Fight Air Pollution: RLP's Statement on World Environment Day (5 June 2019)

It's barely 45 years since World Environment Day (WED) was established. Since then, many countries have embraced the day as 'people's day'¹ with concrete actions in tackling environmental degradation. As a UN vehicle for drumming for international awareness and actions to ameliorate the constantly and negatively changing environmental trends, Refugee Law Project is pleased to join the world in beating air pollution on this day.

Why #BeatAirPollution? Why #BreatheLife2030? In 2018, for the first time since its own establishment in 1948, the World Health Organisation organised a conference on Air Pollution and Health. The theme? "Improving Air Quality, Combatting Climate Change – Saving Lives". This built on uncomfortable statistics showing that 9 out of 10 people breath air containing high levels of pollutants, and the related the realisation that more than 7 million lives are lost annually to illnesses attributable to air pollution.²

Globally, 4.2 million people die every year as a result of exposure to ambient (outdoor) air pollution and 3.8 million die from dirty stoves and fuels.³ 94 percent of air pollution related death occurs in low and middle income countries; 980,000 in Africa alone.⁴ Combined they account for 7.7 percent of global mortality. People living with high levels of air pollution have 20 percent higher risk of death from lung cancer.⁵ Air pollution is not only a problem for humans, it's estimated that over 1 million seabirds and 100,000 sea mammals are killed by pollution every year.⁶ In short, we need 'aspirational goals' ahead of 2030.

Why should the 'Pearl of Africa' worry? Uganda is undergoing a phase of industrialisation and urbanisation, both of which are known to cause pollution through the number of activities as well as the number of people involved. Urbanisation has negative consequences on health due mainly to pollution and overcrowded living conditions. According to #BreatheLife, a global campaign mobilising cities and individuals against air pollution, Uganda is 10.4 times above the safe level set by WHO, is the most unsafe country in terms of air quality and health burden compared to its neighbour Kenya and Tanzania. Annually, Uganda loses 31,160 people to pollution⁷ due to acute lower respiratory infections, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases, lung cancer, Ischaemic heart diseases and strokes in adults over 25 years.⁸

The world has woken up to the reality that unless collective actions are taken, the planet is heading fast forward towards peril. Last year, WED's commemoration was guided by the theme "Beat Plastic Pollution". This year, and hosted by China, we are reminded that 91 percent of the world's population reside in places where air quality exceeds WHO guideline limits⁹ and thus "Beat Air Pollution" has been set as the theme for WED 2019.

A critical look at past themes ignites questions worth asking; Are we consuming with care? Has demand for wildlife products reduced? Are people really connecting to nature? Aren't



plastics blocking our drainage all over again? Will air pollution be significantly addressed by end of 2019?

Commemorations cannot exhaust answers to such questions, but they are vital for further reflections by relevant stakeholders and concerned people. Above all, contemplating such questions reminds us that international days including WED need not be locked to just one day.

What's the big picture? The mortality rate resulting from household and ambient air pollution poses serious threats to achieving Sustainable Development Goals – specifically Goal #3 on health. Of the 7 millions deaths reported in 2016 due to air pollution, 8 percent are children under 5, 1 percent are between 5 and 15 years, 42 percent are women above 15 years, and 49 percent are men above 15 years.¹⁰ In other words, the world is losing its men and women who should be actively involved in realising Vision 2040 (for Uganda) and Vision 2063 (for Africa) – and this in turn impacts detrimentally on realising Agenda 2030. There is thus an urgent need to swiftly tackle these unfortunate and avoidable deaths as we eagerly move towards the desired SDG 11 target of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Whereas air pollution is not exclusively the result of human activity¹¹, human actions cannot be ignored. The proxy indicator for estimating household air pollution includes countries where people mainly cook with wood, dung, crop residues, coal, and kerosene among others – Uganda is no exception. Whereas significant progress has been made in households' access to clean, safe and re-usable energy, Africa has shown the 'slowest' progress with barely 4 percent increase in the use of clean cooking fuels since 2000. Currently, it is estimated that 83 percent of people in Africa and 3 billion people worldwide still rely on polluting fuels and technologies for cooking.¹²

If children are unquestionably our future, what will our future breathe if our current actions aggravate the already devastating situation of air pollution? Many families still cook inside already congested houses. Many children are known to hang around their mothers around the cook stoves and this tends to expose them to air pollution. It is not a surprise that many children are known to suffer from respiratory infections as a result of indoor pollution.

“Beat Air Pollution” reminds us that all our daily strides will lead nowhere if air pollution is not addressed. Conversations around what alternatives the poor - including refugees - have to cook their hard-earned meals is both contentious and turbulent in equal measures. However, that doesn't prevent re-tabling recommendations that Uganda needs to invest more effort and resources in researching clean, safe, and sustainable energy including reduction of taxes on gas cylinders to promote accessibility.

Uganda has made commendable policy progress; besides the recent Cabinet approval of the National Climate Change Bill, Uganda amended the Traffic and Road Safety Act in 2018 to deter importation of motor vehicles that were manufactured more than 15 years ago. At the

time of the ban, it was feared that average Ugandans may never afford a car in their natural lives, and that 11,000 jobs might be lost given the flow (then) of over 4,000 cars per month, most of which were older than 10 years. There was a related fear that government might lose UGX 182 billion in revenue annually.¹³ The ban has been effected, but with yet to be ascertained financial and environmental consequences. Whereas the ban is a demonstration of political will in tackling pollution in Uganda, such bans need to go hand-in-hand with other regulatory frameworks: Banning 15-year old cars while we watch 'new' cars billowing smoke down town due to inadequate servicing will not help in addressing the broader pollution issues in Uganda.

It is also worrying that while we strive to have a good policy environment, we are continuously destroying trees and forests that are known to be natural cleaners of the environment. Not only should we strive to have good policies but we must ensure that our actions and practices go along way in promoting a clean environment for all.

Building on the years past, Uganda and everyone else in the fight against air pollution should this year intentionally reflect on the ideas below as part of a broader network of ideas to curb air pollution and climate change more broadly;

- Emulate and translate what works: Countries including South Africa dedicate the entire June for month-long celebrations, with multiple activities that include commemoration of international days including World Oceans Day, and World Day to Combat Desertification.¹⁴ Uganda should take a leaf from such countries to concretise its actions in addressing its climate change agenda and contributing to the desired greener and healthier world that we all desire.
- Invest in technologies, quality data and scientific research on pollution to inform policies, practices and behavioural change: This should include research on the impacts of air pollution not only to our physical health but also psychological health and wellbeing.
- Communicate to the general population including refugees in languages they understand, and using the health impacts of air pollution as an important entry point. Ironically, the more we pollute, the more we die and kill many more out of visible reach. Behavioural change communication is important if people are to halt behaviours including bush burning. The latter not only pollutes the air and spoils the environment but also destroys the good organisms in soils that promote crop growth, as well as damaging biodiversity and property, and claiming human lives.
- Strengthen the ban on used cars and monitor progress on initiatives established to address pollution. Perhaps more importantly, it's time Uganda discussed completely banning certain used automobiles since increase in taxes has only reduced importation but not eliminated them.

It does no good to wait for another 5th June for a wakeup reminder that it's once again WED – and time to reflect on sketchy pledges and actions taken during the course of the year. WED should not only be a day during which ALL PEOPLE come together to support flamboyant actions and activities towards cleaner, greener, and brighter future – with little or no follow-up. Carefully crafted 'press statements', 'opinion pieces', 'articles', 'press releases', 'blogs', etc are necessary, but they MUST and CAN go hand in hand with tangible and bold actions in tackling household and ambient air pollutions.

As a human rights institution that 'walks the talk', we have embarked on afforestation programmes through tree planting and tree growing initiatives. Whereas trees in and by themselves are not *the* solution, we strongly believe that they contribute to the pool of initiatives towards realising the ideal world that we desire for ourselves and the future generation. We are also documenting the damage done by rampant logging and deforestation for charcoal production, and expect to release two videos on the same in the coming weeks.

May this day translate in the real lives of people through which solid actions are seen through our behaviour, attitudes and day-to-day actions. The small things we do all add up to the overall successes. Do one thing at least, and remind a neighbour, friend, spouse, relative or colleague to also do one thing.

A lot of damage has been done... but it's certainly not too late to reverse this undesirable trend. It requires all of us to challenge our own actions, to raise awareness, and to create a level of public outrage that can challenge complacency.

Nice 2019 World Environment Day Commemorations!

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.environment.gov.za/event/international/wed2016>

² <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9S6xGsoqIBUkBTzM6weiNUc1ZNMPT0-7>

³ The Global Health Observatory (GHO) data on mortality from household air pollution. Access: https://www.who.int/gho/phe/outdoor_air_pollution/burden/en/

⁴ https://www.who.int/airpollution/data/AP_joint_effect_BoD_results_May2018.pdf?ua=1

⁵ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-pollution#fn5>

⁶ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-pollution#fn4>

⁷ <https://breathelife2030.org/city-data-page/?city=3808>

⁸ https://www.who.int/airpollution/data/AAP_BoD_methods_Apr2018_final.pdf?ua=1

⁹ <http://maps.who.int/airpollution/>

¹⁰ https://www.who.int/airpollution/data/AP_joint_effect_BoD_results_May2018.pdf?ua=1

¹¹ https://www.who.int/airpollution/data/AAP_exposure_Apr2018_final.pdf?ua=1

¹² https://www.who.int/airpollution/data/HAP_exposure_results_final.pdf?ua=1

¹³ <http://eprcug.org/blog/643-how-will-the-recent-ban-on-importation-of-used-cars-older-than-8-years-affect-ugandans>

¹⁴ <https://www.environment.gov.za/event/international/wed2016>