Air pollution, climate change, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are three linked threats to planetary health that share common origins and joint solutions. Yet efforts to address these problems have too often moved down separate paths.

Air pollution is the world’s largest environmental threat to health and is responsible each year for an estimated 6·5 million deaths. WHO estimates that 80% of all people who live in cities and 97% of urban residents in low-income and middle-income countries are exposed to air that does not meet WHO air quality guidelines. In the absence of major intervention, the air pollution death toll is projected to double by 2050.

Fuel combustion—fossil fuel combustion in high-income and middle-income countries and biomass burning in low-income countries—is the root cause of both air pollution and climate change. Combustion of fossil fuels accounts for 85% of fine particulate air pollution and almost all airborne emissions of sulphur oxides and nitrogen oxides, and is the major source of greenhouse gases and short-lived climate pollutants. Air pollutants produced by combustion are major drivers of NCD mortality. These pollutants are responsible for 21% of deaths from cardiovascular disease, 26% of deaths from ischaemic heart disease deaths, 23% of stroke deaths, 51% of deaths from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and 43% of lung cancer deaths. They cause widespread cognitive dysfunction and neurobehavioural impairment.

Despite its many links to climate change and NCDs, air pollution is neglected in the global health and international development agendas. No major donor or foundation has made pollution prevention its priority. Only 15% of the climate change plans submitted by sovereign nations under the Paris Agreement to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions mention health.

Pollution has long been neglected in NCD control. In this fragmentation lies opportunity to use health as the linchpin that ties together pollution prevention, climate change mitigation, and NCD control. The recent inclusion of air pollution in the list of NCD risk factors in WHO’s Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases is an important step in the right direction. With health improvement as a common goal, synergistic strategies will be created that fast-track global solutions to clean air.

To seize this moment, the Berggruen Institute and the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation will launch the Every Breath Matters initiative on Oct 30, 2018, to mobilise policy makers, business leaders, and opinion-shapers to champion the right of all people to breathe clean air.

On that same day in Geneva, Switzerland, WHO, the World Meteorological Organization, UN Environment, the Secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and other partners convene the first
Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health. This high-level meeting brings together global, national, and local leaders in environmental health, climate change, and NCD control. The goal is to formulate comprehensive strategies to reduce air pollution and curb NCDs, while mitigating climate change and protecting the health of vulnerable populations. The conference will issue a “Call for Urgent Action” in which national and local leaders, representatives of civil society, and other participants will be asked to set targets and timetables for reducing deaths from air pollution by 2030 as a contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

These initiatives will accelerate the progress being made against air pollution at the country level. 13 cities in Europe, Asia, North America, and Africa have developed plans to reduce air pollution that include improving public transport, encouraging walking and cycling, procuring zero-emission public buses, and banning diesel vehicles from city centres. Legislative action on air pollution has a long-term impact—for example, air pollution levels in the USA have fallen 70% since the passage of the Clean Air Act in 1970.9

Health-based metrics should be used to track the impacts of these initiatives. To this end, several collaborations are underway. They include the Global Observatory on Pollution and Health at Boston College that launched, in July, 2018, a study of the economic costs and human capital losses resulting from air pollution in India;10 the Center for Climate Change and the Center for Climate, Health and the Global Environment (C-CHANGE) at the Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health; the Health Effects Institute’s State of Global Air; collaborative work coordinated by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine;11 and the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change.12 Close coordination between these efforts and the Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD) will be essential for ensuring that the health benefits of pollution prevention and climate change mitigation are reflected in GBD estimates.13

Control of air pollution is a winnable battle. Documentation of the positive effects of pollution control, climate change mitigation, and NCD control on health will build much needed support for these endeavours and empower local and national leaders who wish to save lives and foster prosperity by addressing these threats. Every breath matters and breathing should be for living.

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