25 May 2016 – WHO launched on 12 May 2016 its ambient (outdoor) air pollution database, including data from more than 3000 cities, including 85 cities in 15 countries in our Region. By all means, this is a good achievement as only 26 cities reported such data in 2014. Air pollution is a major cause of disease and death. It is good news that more cities are stepping up to monitor air quality, so when they take actions to improve it they have a benchmark.

Globally, more than 80% of people living in urban areas that monitor air pollution are exposed to air quality levels that exceed WHO limits. While all regions of the world are affected, populations in low-income cities are the most affected.

According to the latest urban air quality database, 98% of cities in low- and middle-income countries with more than 100 000 inhabitants do not meet WHO air quality guidelines. However, in high-income countries, that percentage decreases to 56%.

WHO was able to compare a total of 795 cities in 67 countries for levels of small and fine particulate matter (PM10 and PM2.5) during the 5-year period, 2008–2013. PM10 and PM2.5 include pollutants such as sulfate, nitrates and black carbon, which penetrate deep into the lungs and into the cardiovascular system, posing the greatest risks to human health. Data were then analysed to develop regional trends.

Key trends 2008–2013

Global urban air pollution levels increased by 8%, despite improvements in some regions.

In general, urban air pollution levels were lowest in high-income countries, with lower levels most prevalent in Europe, the Americas, and the Western Pacific Region.

The highest urban air pollution levels were experienced in low-and middle-income countries in WHO's Eastern Mediterranean and South-East Asia regions, with annual mean levels often exceeding 5–10 times WHO limits, followed by low-income cities in the Western Pacific Region.

In the Eastern Mediterranean and South-East Asia Regions and low-income countries in the Western Pacific Region, levels of urban air pollution has increased by more than 5% in more than two thirds of the cities.

In the African Region urban air pollution data remain very sparse, however available data revealed PM levels above the median. The database now contains PM measurements for more than twice as many cities than previous versions.

Related links

Public health, environmental and social determinants of health at the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly

WHO Global Urban Ambient Air Pollution Database (update 2016)

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