

COMMENT



PROTECTING OUR HEALTH: THERE IS LIFE AFTER COAL

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PUBLIC health professionals from around the world have called for a ban on coal. A resolution by the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) demands that governments stop the opening of all new coal mines worldwide, accelerate closure of existing coal mines, accelerate the transition to clean renewable energy, and secure a just transition for affected workers and communities.

The WFPHA was established in May 1967 and is now composed of over 115 associations, mostly multidisciplinary national public health associations, including the Public Health Association of South Africa.

Together they represent some 5 million public health professionals worldwide including doctors, nurses, health scientists and public health professionals who look after our health needs on a daily basis.

As the only worldwide professional society representing and serving public health, its mission is to promote and protect global public health. At the recent General Assembly on June 9, the Federation announced a new environmental policy titled “A call to ban coal for Electricity Production”.

The resolution describes the costly and detrimental health effects of coal use for electricity. It argues that the contribution of coal fired energy generation to climate change makes it lethal.

The policy also provides estimates of the societal costs of coal. These are the “external costs” that are not accounted for by governments and polluting sectors of the economy. The Federation suggests that 95% of the externalised costs of coal consist of adverse health effects on the population. In Australia, the health costs from merely one coal producing valley are estimated at \$2.6 billion (R44bn) per year and globally, the pollution from all fossil fuels are estimated to cost \$540 billion per year, the majority of which is attributable to coal.

These annual health costs are staggering to comprehend in South African rand terms – roughly R10 trillion annually.

The WFPHA urges governments to put an immediate halt to the opening of new coal mines worldwide, enact immediate strategies to accelerate closure of existing coal mines, accelerate the transition to alternative sources of energy, such as renewables, accompanied by promoting adoption of more efficient electrical appliances, and introducing steps to reduce total demand for energy and electricity, and create alternative employment options for communities currently reliant on the coal industry.

The Life After Coal Campaign (Centre for Environmental Rights, Earthlife Africa, groundWork) has called for the end of coal and the transition to a low carbon economy. The groundWork 2019 report titled Down to Zero states that the best option for people and the country is for a rapid transition to renewable energy. Associated with the impacts of coal are the climate change risks including droughts and floods that will further impact on people’s health. Rapidly reducing fossil fuel burning to zero emissions, along with restoring the land and increasing its carbon absorption and storage capacity will help restore our environment and people’s health.

Similarly, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, tweeted on June 29 that “there is no good reason for any country to include coal in their #Covid19 recovery plans...”. This is the time to invest in energy sources that don’t pollute, generate decent jobs and save money. Now is the time to end business as usual, build a global economy that is sustainable and fair, and put into practice our commitments to future generations.

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