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Climate and Health Summit, Paris 2015

Breakout Session: Energy and Air Pollution

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Points to consider:

* ***The health impacts and costs of air pollution from national and local energy decisions, as well as the benefits of mitigation***

According to 2014 data Turkey secures 48% of her energy production from natural gas and 30% from coal. In total energy production, the share of wind energy is 3% and solar energy is less than 1%. Moreover, the Government has plans to launch over 80 new coal-fired thermal plants in addition to existing ones.

It is estimated that there are annually at least 2,876 premature deaths which may well have climbed as high as 7,900 as a result of over twenty coal-fired thermal plants presently operating in Turkey. Given this, it is possible to say that negative health effects of coal-fired power plants account for more than 2% of total mortality in Turkey in the form of early deaths.

Besides early deaths, coal-fired thermal plants also cause thousands of cases of morbidity, applications to health facilities and hundreds of thousands of working days lost. The total number of working days lost as a result of sickness absence is close to 8 million.

The annual health cost of existing coal-fired power plants is estimated as ranging from 2.9 to 6.7 billion Euros which make up 8.9 to 20.7% of total health spending in the country.

Turkey is presently a source of serious concern for her support and incentives to coal-based energy production. According to the IMF, Turkey’s support to coal production and use amounts to 24.2 billion USD in 2015 (including costs of global warming and external costs of domestic air pollution). This amount is equivalent to 2.8% of country’s GDP.

Reducing the share of coal in energy production is critical for reducing early deaths as well as associated health costs. The Turkish Medical Association insistently calls of the Government to act along this line.

In case only a half of incentives accorded to coal extraction and use (1.4% of GDP in total) are transferred to the health budget, it will be possible to solve the problems of over 10% of population having no access to healthcare services due to various reasons including income test, unpaid contributions, etc.

It will also significantly reduce the burden on emergency services created by citizens who have no access to routine health services (i.e. There was over 104 million applications to emergency services in 2014. Considering that the total population of the country is 78 million, this is indeed a great burden).

There will also be lesser use of available health services for problems associated with air pollution; particularly in hospitals, the time allocated to patients may be extended to more reasonable periods (i.e. due to patient burden, many doctors in public hospital can today spare shorter than 10 minutes per patient).

* ***What role the UNFCCC, national governments, and local health professionals/regulatory bodies have in unlocking these health benefits***

It is clear that national governments have their important tasks in this respect. That is to say we need governments that support efficient energy use, base their energy plans on scientific projections, plan to reduce the use of fossil fuels in time and back up the use of renewable energy sources.

It is of course the people, society who is capable of ensuring that governments follow this path. As to building awareness in health effects of energy sources, it is the task of health professionals including doctors in the first place. It is for this reason that the Turkish Medical Association included the issue of energy and health in its agenda and is engaged in various activities in this respect.

In October 2014 the Turkish Medical Association (TMA) launched a campaign together with some other health organizations and called on the Government to abandon initiatives for new coal-fired thermal plants. Further, the TMA contributed to the document titled “The Unpaid Health Bill” prepared by the HEAL for Turkey, engaged in efforts together with other civil society organizations to launch the “Platform for the Right to Clean Air” and became a member of it. To inform the general public, the booklet “Health Effects of Coal-Fired Thermal Plants” was published by one of our member chambers and disseminated to groups engaged in activities against thermal plants.

* ***Opportunities for engagement with other sectors for a multidisciplinary approach to mitigating the health impacts of climate change***

In Turkey, from 1990 to 2013, there was 236% increase CO2 emissions originating from electricity production and the share of the energy sector in total CO2 emissions increased from 22% to 31%.

In 2012 Turkey ranked 19th in the world in terms of greenhouse gas emissions and emissions increased by 110% from 1990 to 2013. To attain the target of 2°C, Turkey has to immediately abandon her policies supporting the use of coal as fuel.

In order to reduce the negative health effects of climate change, health professional must wage a struggle together and in solidarity with all sections of society. The Turkish Medical is trying to give effect to this in many areas related to the environment. An example is the “Clean Air Platform” that the association was one of founders.

* ***Upcoming advances and progress in energy and air pollution in 2016 and beyond***

Looking at the programme of the new Government (in fact it is the continuation of governments in office since 2002) it seems difficult to expect any significant development in reducing air pollution stemming from energy sources for the year 2016 and beyond. But still we are determined to continue of struggle as the Turkish Medical Association. Health impact assessment may serve as an important instrument in this struggle.

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) should be a must for each and every industrial enterprise having the potential to affect health. We urge the Government to make necessary arrangements to ensure that HIA is compulsorily made before launching any industrial enterprise that may lead to air pollution and climate change including thermal plants and cement factories in the first place. Acting in line with this call will be conceived as a positive attitude on the part of the Government towards the right to breathe clean air.

If the “right to health” is a fundamental human right then governments are expected to engage in satisfactory initiatives to ensure efficient energy use, increase the share of renewable energy sources in total energy production, and abandon the idea of having more coal-fired thermal plants to translate this right into life.