

Distinguished speakers and participants, I would like to thank the organizers for giving me the opportunity to speak at the opening session.

Improving air quality is about our children's health. Exposure to air pollution already starts during pregnancy. A number of pollutants are absorbed in the blood of the mother, pass the placenta, and reach the fetus. There it can affect the growth and development of the fetus as a whole. It increases risks of preterm birth, lower birth weight, and fetal death. There is increasing evidence that air pollution can affect brain development and damage the DNA of the unborn child, with potential lifelong effects including on IQ and behavior.

Pregnancy followed by the first 1000 days of a child are the most important in terms of brain development. The finest particles these young children inhale and absorb in their blood, also reach the blood-brain barrier, where it can cause inflammations.

The lungs and the immune system of our youngest children are not yet well developed. Pollutants damage the lung tissue, making it vulnerable to infections. Globally, each year more than 600,000 children under 5 die from pneumonia related to air pollution.

When children are frequently sick and miss school, when their brain is at risk of being damaged by air pollution, they are likely in a disadvantage in the competitive world of today. If a large part of the population is at risk, it means the human capital of the country is at risk.

We also need to think about the consequences for the family. Oftentimes it is the mother who will look after the sick child, taking him to the doctor, staying with her in the hospital. It also means the mother cannot go to work, loses income, and possibly loses her job. And of course, the loss of income and high medical bills will have major financial implications for the family.

Reducing air pollution is not only for the environment and energy sectors to work on. To lower the risks of air pollution to maternal and child health, it also requires strong engagement of other sectors: Health, Education, Social Protection.

The only sustainable solution is to dramatically improve the air quality. UNICEF encourages government, development partners and private sector to invest more and invest smarter.

At the same time, we cannot expect children and pregnant women to hold their breath in. We also must invest in reducing the risks now. This means:

1. Provide clear information to the public about the health risks, and what people can do to reduce these risks
2. Invest in reducing exposure to air pollution. For example, improve indoor air quality in kindergartens, schools and hospitals.
3. Health practitioners must obtain in-depth knowledge of the health risks and be able to advise for example pregnant women.
4. When children do suffer from air pollution related health conditions, they should have access to affordable and good quality health care.
5. Finally, the health sector needs to start costing the long-term health impacts. Here in UB, we now have children that for the last 15 years have been breathing severely polluted air during the winter. Over the next few decades, it is likely that this generation will have increased health problems that need to be paid for.

Your commitment to greener and cleaner cities provides major opportunities for children. Cleaner air will protect their health and development. Green spaces will create opportunities for children to play. Modern transportation can improve road safety and better connectivity for children. Better street lighting improves children's security. Green and clean are essential ingredients for making your cities child friendly.

Globally and here in Mongolia, UNICEF is committed to step up its engagement in air pollution. Recently, the Governor of UB and I agreed to strengthen collaboration to continue to make UB more child friendly, including addressing the air pollution crisis. And I look forward putting that into action.