

Challenges for our century: an environmentally healthy world is possible

In this early 21st century, the terms “ozone layer”, “global warming”, and “climate change” have moved emphatically from scientific journals into the mainstream media. This expanded scope shows the growing social concern over the consequences of an economic development model marked by a cycle – from intensive extraction of raw materials to the consumption of industrialized goods – that has left predatory marks on the environment, including soil, water, and air pollution, destruction of biodiversity, and alterations in the climate. The hazardous situations resulting from this model transcend the limits of industry itself, affecting not only workers but the overall population as well.

Global warming has become a concern for the main leaders of both the developed and developing countries. But despite this concern, actual measures to deal with the problem only appear in the discourse of governments, and while the latter postpone the solutions, inequalities increase between nations, whereby 20% of the world’s population (nearly all of whom in the Northern Hemisphere) consume 80% of the Earth’s raw materials and energy and produce more than 80% of the pollution.

In 1962, the classic book *Silent Spring* by journalist Rachel Carson called attention to the loss in quality of life resulting from the indiscriminate use of chemical substances. The publication sparked the world’s environmentalist movement. Various World Conferences followed, like that of Stockholm in 1972, and since then environmental problems have reached the national agendas, emphasizing that environmental protection means not only preserving Nature, but promoting and guaranteeing life. More recently, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change placed the responsibility for global warming on human activity and predicted a scenario of environmental catastrophe. Human activities have contributed to speeding up the global warming process, and although environmental damage affects all populations, its impacts are different, aggravated by the inequality in the population’s health situation.

ABRASCO, through its Working Group on Health and Environment, has discussed and elaborated documents for a better understanding of the relationship between environment and health. This special Supplement of *Cadernos de Saúde Pública/Reports in Public Health* seeks to provide different angles and analyses on environmental impacts and their implications for human health, with the complexity that the theme demands. The Debate article offers a systematic reflection on the link between health, environment, and development, with an instigating rebuttal and re-rebuttal on related problems such as neutrality versus partiality in science. The Review article presents a new view on ecological economics, political economics, and collective health, with the interface between developmental sustainability and health promotion. Other articles in this Supplement focus on air pollution, radioactivity, water, chemicals, environmental surveillance, and environmental health indicators, with important contributions for an understanding of the damage caused to the planet.

We hope that reading this Supplement will contribute to the kind of in-depth reflection that is so necessary and urgent for the field of Health and the Environment.

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