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Polluted Logic Taints WHO Reports on Children's Health

Pro-Growth Free Market Policies Make for a Wealthier, Healthier World

By Angela Logomasini*

The world has been getting wealthier in recent decades. That economic growth has enabled millions of people around the globe to rise out of poverty. For instance, during the decade from 2005 to 2015, global per capita GDP grew by 15.1 percent, from \$8,858 to \$10,194, while infant mortality declined by 28.4 percent, from 44.3 to 31.7 per 1,000 live births.¹ That is good news, but millions still remain mired in poverty in developing countries.

Unfortunately, the United Nations' public health agency seems uninterested in advancing the policies that have helped make these advances possible—economic liberalization and open trade.

Two recent World Health Organization (WHO) reports claim that pollution kills 1.7 million children a year—a claim that captured many news headlines.² Policy recommendations outlined in the reports include reducing the use of fossil fuels and certain “toxic” chemicals. But these supposed solutions will do more harm than good because “pollution” is not really the issue as much as the lack of economic development.

The two WHO reports seem more directed toward advancing policies that force private enterprise to take a back seat to government planning. Specifically, they define children's health challenges as driven by “environmental hazards” that involve “increasing urbanization, industrialization, globalization, and climate change.”³ But urbanization, industrialization, and globalization are all necessary processes for development. As for climate change, creating wealth enables societies to better face whatever challenges it might present. The problem is not pollution. It's poverty.

The authors of the WHO studies create the impression that “industrial pollution” is the core problem, and they reinforce this idea by painting an incomplete picture. Specifically, the reports have four major shortcomings:

- First, they broadly define pollution in a way that confuses readers about the relative importance of each factor.
- Second, they fail to distinguish between political and economic causes of pollution and the different nature of those problems around the world.
- Third, they fail to acknowledge critical public health benefits associated with various modern technologies.

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- Fourth, while one report points out important positive health trends, it paints a depressing environmental pollution narrative that fails to acknowledge the importance of economic growth in making those very public health strides.

Defining Pollution. In the first report, *Inheriting a Sustainable World: Atlas on Children's Health and the Environment*, the authors start by defining “environmental factors” or “environmental hazards” as the main cause of public health problems. They go on to imply that health challenges are largely pollution challenges, because they are “environmental.” This creates the impression that industrial pollution and economic activity are the problem.⁴

But in their definition of “environmental factors,” industrial pollution is only a small part. According to the report, “environmental factors” include both quantifiable “traditional hazards” and “emerging hazards.”⁵

Traditional hazards are major factors that affect health around the world—such as untreated drinking water and mosquito-transmitted disease—for which health impacts are substantial and quantifiable.⁶ So-called emerging hazards include unquantifiable and questionable factors like climate change and trace chemicals in consumer products. Lumping all these categories together and casting them as “pollution” wrongly creates the impression that “industrial pollution” is the major problem.

It is not industrial pollution, but the *lack of industry* and economic development that leads millions of people to suffer largely from traditional hazards. A chart in the second report, *Don't Pollute My Future!*, clearly demonstrates that the problem results from inadequate access to life's most basic necessities.⁷ In developing nations, millions still lack water purification and sanitation systems, modern and clean burning heating and cooking technologies, and pesticides to prevent exposure to dangerous insects and to help produce an affordable food supply.

Rather than focus on the need for economic development to reduce human misery, both reports draw irrelevant conclusions. For example, the authors of *Inheriting a Sustainable World* maintain: “Climate change, caused by burning fossil fuels, is one of the greatest new threats to children's environmental health.”⁸ And a table in the report that lists health problems includes “climate change” among the factors affecting diarrheal diseases.⁹ Diarrheal disease in developing nations is a serious, age-old problem related to “traditional hazards,” such as untreated water, poor sanitation, and food contamination.¹⁰ It has nothing to do with climate change.

These reports also claim that trace chemicals found in consumer products are a form of pollution that presents alarming health risks. Such claims are frequently based on many small studies reporting weak and largely meaningless associations between chemicals and some health effects.¹¹ But association is not causation, and those claims are undermined by myriad other studies that find no such relationships. As of yet, there is no compelling body of evidence to support the idea that trace chemicals in consumer products pose any substantial public health threat.¹²

Still, *Don't Pollute My Future!* suggests that “endocrine disrupting chemicals” are an alarming threat to children’s health.¹³ The authors note that these substances are “confirmed or *suspected* to disrupt the normal functioning of human and/or animal endocrine systems.”¹⁴ [Emphasis added] The term *suspected* strips the claim of any meaning. “Although it is debated,” they note, “there is evidence of an association between some endocrine disrupting chemicals”¹⁵ and certain health effects. Again, mere associations are not good “evidence.”

Identifying the Sources of Pollution Problems. These reports also intermingle the challenges of less developed nations with those of more developed ones, while ignoring political factors that play a major role. They then define problems in all areas as merely environmental—that is, pollution-related. However, pollution problems, causes, effects, and solutions vary substantially from one part of the world to the other, affected by economic and political factors that either limit or expand opportunity for improvement. Consider air pollution issues.

In largely democratic and generally free-market nations, serious health problems stemming from ambient air pollution are largely a thing of the past. Countries with strong protections for private property and economic and political freedom enjoy the highest standards of living and the cleanest environments. In these nations, fossil fuels are the primary energy source and economic development has enabled people to produce air pollution control technologies that facilitate relatively clean use of fossil fuels from coal to gas. That is why air quality has vastly improved in United States and other developed nations during the past few decades, even as industrial activity and fossil fuel use has increased.¹⁶ As this progress demonstrates, eliminating fossil fuels is not the key to improving public health.

Meanwhile in developing nations, air quality—particularly indoors—is an enormous problem because many people cannot afford electricity or modern home heating systems.¹⁷ Instead, many people still cook and heat their homes by burning biomass—animal dung, wood, coal, or other solid fuels—in homes without proper ventilation, or even a chimney, in many cases. The incidence of respiratory illnesses is high among people living in these smoke-filled spaces.¹⁸ These populations desperately need economic development and increased access to electricity, as well as modern appliances and HVAC systems that run on fossil fuels. This type of development will come when these nations transition to developed, modern, free-market economies that protect private property and free trade. Yet, *Inheriting a Sustainable World* repeatedly points to fossil fuels as part of the problem and calls for “shift from fossil fuels to sustainable and cleaner energy sources,” a policy prescription that will only contribute to continued misery.¹⁹

Serious outdoor pollution problems in China present an entirely different scenario. The Chinese people have achieved substantial economic growth, within a hybrid system that allows *some* economic freedom within a socialist economy. Unlike mostly free-market economies, China has failed to get industrial pollution under control, as development has continued. China’s situation continues to demonstrate how central planning undermines environmental improvement around the world.²⁰ Without true economic freedom, property rights, and adequate political representation, citizens have little power to prevent

government-owned or -subsidized manufacturing facilities from churning out pollution without much accountability. And according to one report, most of China's Fortune 500 corporations are government-owned.²¹ Accordingly, China needs both political and economic reforms that provide economic and political freedom to address its serious air pollution problems.

The report blames fossil fuels for pollution and public health problems related to global warming, but that focus is misguided.²² Eliminating fossil fuels and the economic activities they make possible is not a sound public health strategy because it means keeping people trapped in the poverty that industrialization is helping to reduce. The authors of *Inheriting a Sustainable World* acknowledge that improvements to indoor air quality have resulted from adoption of cleaner burning fuels, including fossil fuels such as liquefied natural gas and electricity, along with "cleaner technologies such as electricity and solar."²³ However, they never mention that coal, which the report calls a "polluting fuel,"²⁴ is the world's leading fuel for producing electricity, followed by natural gas.²⁵

Understanding the Impact of Technology. The discussion of various modern technologies, from fossil fuels to pesticides, throughout the reports focuses on them as mere pollution generators or toxic poisons without much consideration of their benefits. Failing to weigh risks and benefits in any discussion about technology creates a lopsided view of industrialization.

Consider both reports' negative coverage of pesticides in terms of public health. "Pesticides are environmental hazards of growing concern because of their links to chronic disease in children," notes *Inheriting a Sustainable World*.²⁶ *Don't Pollute My Future!* maintains that pesticides are "linked to" or "associated with" various health problems from leukemia to Parkinson's disease to congenital abnormalities, although they present little evidence for that claim.²⁷

When used properly, pesticides provide enormous health and environmental benefits.²⁸ They have helped address one of the world's most substantial public health challenges: insect-borne diseases. In particular, strategic use of DDT and pesticide-treated bed nets have proven critical in the battle against malaria around the world. Allowing communities the freedom to deploy indoor residential spraying of DDT in recent years has greatly reduced transmission.²⁹

The authors of *Inheriting a Sustainable World* understand the seriousness of insect-transmitted disease. They explain: "The parasites, bacteria, and viruses transmitted to humans by these vectors account for one sixth of the global burden of illness and disability."³⁰ But rather than offer a substantive discussion on the value and strategic uses of pesticides, the report lumps insect-transmitted disease in with "environmental factors" that jeopardize public health. And after noting that DDT and insect-treated bed nets are used to fight malaria, they recommend their eventual elimination: "WHO seeks to eventually eliminate DDT use and supports the development of alternative effective, sustainable vector control methods."³¹

Clearly, if there were better options, market forces would replace DDT. But these reports push to eliminate such products despite market demand or public health needs. Government meddling in the pesticide market has advanced an anti-pesticide agenda and misguided regulations that undermine efforts to control insect-transmitted disease.³²

Neither report focuses on pesticides' role in increasing access to food and essential nutrition. Pesticides, coupled with genetic modification, have helped make farming vastly more productive, thus increasing food supply and reducing prices. A 2007 report by Jerry Cooper and Hans Dobson of the University of Greenwich highlights many of the benefits documented over the past several decades. Specifically, they detail how agricultural products to control pests have led to "greater availability of food, at a reasonable price, all year round."³³ Pesticide use means more food is produced per acre of land, less land is needed for agriculture, and more land is available for conservation.

Thanks to modern farming methods, food production has outpaced population growth—providing people in both developed and developing countries with more food per capita and helping in the battle against hunger. Per capita grain supplies have grown by 27 percent since 1950, and food prices have declined in real terms by 57 percent since 1980.³⁴ At the turn of the 20th century, before the use of modern agricultural practices, Americans spent 20 percent of their income on food. Today the average American family spends less than 9 percent of its income on food.³⁵

Economic Growth is the Key. Market-driven economic growth, rather than politically managed "sustainable growth," is the key to improving public health around the world. *Inheriting a Sustainable World* does acknowledge that public health achievements have come as nations industrialized and grew.³⁶ This good news should have captured headlines, but the authors did not emphasize it in either the WHO news release or the report summary.

Here are some key achievements listed in the report (quoted verbatim):

Child mortality has been halved, from 12.7 million under five deaths in 1990 to 5.9 million in 2015.

The proportion of underweight children dropped from 25% in 1990 to 14% in 2015, but in 2015, 156 million children under five were stunted and 50 million wasted. At the same time, obesity is rising rapidly.

In 2015, 91% of the global population used an improved drinking-water source, compared with 76% in 1990. 2.6 billion people have gained access to improved water in this time.

Since 1990, 2.1 billion people have gained access to improved sanitation, and the proportion of people practising open defecation has been reduced almost by half.

Diarrhoeal disease-caused deaths in children under five have fallen from 1.2 million in 2000 to 526,000 in 2015.

From 2000 to 2015, the number of malaria deaths in children under five has declined by 58%, both globally and in the WHO Africa Region. The proportion of children under five sleeping under insecticide-treated nets in sub-Saharan Africa has increased from 2% in 2000 to 68% in 2015.

Lead has been removed from most petrol, with the number of countries using leaded petrol for vehicles dropping from 82 in 2002 to only 3 in 2016. 62 countries have now begun to phase out lead in paint (as of June 2016).³⁷

The authors are right to list these achievements but they do not focus on what helped caused them.

Economic growth has reduced the number of people living in poverty around the world, which means more people now have access to technologies that people in the developed world have long taken for granted. Greater wealth means access to pesticides for increased agricultural productivity, pesticides for mosquito control, chlorination and development of water supply systems to eliminate deadly pathogens, energy from fossil fuels for modern heating and cooling systems, better housing, and many other benefits. The “sustainable growth” advocated in these reports, on the other hand, means controlled growth, government management of resources, and restrictive policies that will hinder much needed economic development.

Conclusion. Economic growth driven by free markets is the key to reducing poverty and addressing public health challenges around the world. Rather than acknowledge that reality, both WHO reports cast the problem as “environmental” and call for “sustainable growth” policies that would curb economic freedom, private enterprise, and access to affordable energy from fossil fuels and beneficial products like pesticides. The WHO’s lopsided approach runs counter to the stated goal of its reports, which is to promote children’s health. Instead, they focus on promoting policies that could threaten public health by undermining economic growth. To improve public health, policy makers should focus on promoting truly humanitarian pro-growth, free-market policies.

Notes

¹ Marian L. Tupy, “Human Conditions Improving at a Remarkable Speed,” HumanProgress.org, March 28, 2017, <http://humanprogress.org/blog/human-conditions-improving-at-a-remarkable-speed>.

² Julia Zorthian, “Pollution and Environmental Risks Kill 1.7 Million Children Each Year, WHO Says,” Fortune.com, March 6, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/03/06/who-pollution-children-deaths>.

³ *Inheriting a Sustainable World: Atlas on Children’s Health and the Environment* (Geneva: World Health Organization 2017), p. x, <http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/inheriting-a-sustainable-world/en>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p. xi.

⁶ Ibid., p. ix

⁷ *Don’t Pollute My Future! The Impact of the Environment on Children’s Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization 2017), p. 2, <http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/don-t-pollute-my-future/en>.

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- ⁸ *Inheriting a Sustainable World*, p. xii.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ¹⁰ *Diarrhoea: Why Children are Still Dying and What Can Be Done* (Geneva: United Nations Children's Fund/World Health Organization, 2009), https://www.unicef.org/health/index_51412.html.
- ¹¹ For example, see Angela Logomasini, *A Consumer's Guide to Chemical Risk: Deciphering the "Science" behind Chemical Scares* (Washington D.C.: Competitive Enterprise Institute, 2014), <https://cei.org/issue-analysis/consumers-guide-chemical-risk>.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Don't Pollute My Future*, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Joel M. Schwartz and Steven F. Hayward, *Air Quality in America* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2007), http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/-air-quality-in-america_134905535523.pdf.
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- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Inheriting a Sustainable World*, p. 46.
- ²⁰ Colin Grabow, "If You Think Communism is Bad for People, Check out What it Did to The Environment," *The Federalist*, January 13, 2014, <http://thefederalist.com/2014/01/13/if-you-think-communism-is-bad-for-people-check-out-what-it-did-to-the-environment>.
- ²¹ Scott Cendrowski, "China's Global 500 companies are bigger than ever—and mostly state-owned," *Fortune.com*, July 22, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/07/22/china-global-500-government-owned>.
- ²² *Inheriting a Sustainable World*, pp. x xi, xii, 14, 17, 38, 44-47.
- ²³ *Inheriting a Sustainable World*, p. 53.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ²⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Electricity," *International Energy Outlook 2016*, Report Number: DOE/EIA-0484(2016), May 11, 2016, <https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/ieo/electricity.cfm>.
- ²⁶ *Inheriting a Sustainable World*, p. 67.
- ²⁷ *Don't Pollute My Future*, p. 7,
- ²⁸ Angela Logomasini, "Rachel Was Wrong: Agrochemicals' Benefits to Human Health and the Environment," *Issue Analysis* 2012 No. 8, Competitive Enterprise Institute, November 2012, <https://cei.org/issue-analysis/rachel-was-wrong>.
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- ³⁰ *Inheriting a Sustainable World*, p. 38.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- ³² Angela Logomasini, "Regulatory Hurdles Impede Zika Control: Communities Need the Freedom to Deploy the Most Effective Tools against Dangerous Vector Borne Diseases," *On Point* No. 222, Competitive Enterprise Institute, November 3, 2016, <https://cei.org/content/regulatory-hurdles-impede-zika-control>.
- ³³ Jerry Cooper and Hans Dobson, "The Benefits of Pesticides to Mankind and the Environment," *Crop Protection*, Vol. 26, No. 9 (September 2007), pp. 1337-1348.
- ³⁴ Dennis Avery, "Saving the Planet with Pesticides," in *The True State of the Planet*, ed. Ronald Bailey (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 52-54.
- ³⁵ International Food Information Council Foundation, *IFIC Review: On Pesticides and Food Safety* (Washington, D.C.: IFIC Foundation, January 1995). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Data Products: Food Expenditures, Table 7—Food expenditures by families and individuals as a share of disposable personal income, last updated on October 1, 2012, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-expenditures.aspx#26636>.
- ³⁶ *Inheriting a Sustainable World*, p. xiv.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*