

Christiana Figueres: ‘Coal is a public health emergency’

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At the World Health Organization’s first global conference on air pollution, the former UN climate chief launches a campaign to tackle toxic emissions at source



A child scavenges for coal scraps in smoggy Manila (Photo: Flickr/Adam Cohn)

By Megan Darby

Coal is not just a problem for the climate, it is a “public health emergency”.

That is one of the key messages of an anti-air pollution campaign launched by former UN climate chief Christiana Figueres on Tuesday.

At the World Health Organization’s (WHO) first global conference on health and air pollution in Geneva, she joined forces with its chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to call for action.

It is closely linked to the climate fight, she told Climate Home News: “It makes the whole challenge that we are facing on climate change or greenhouse gases personal. It brings it down to my personal experience, it brings it down to the lungs of my children, it brings it down to the brain development of my child. It so happens that sources of greenhouse gases are the same sources of local pollutants.”

Nine out of ten children worldwide are breathing toxic air, which harms their health and development, according to a report released by the WHO. It accounts for one in 10 deaths among infants under five-years-old, the report said.

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While it does not make demands of specific polluters, the campaign highlights coal burning, dirty diesel vehicles and slash-and-burn agriculture as sources of air pollution to tackle.

The aim is to raise the profile of existing anti-pollution efforts and give them “the size of megaphone that they deserve,” said Figueres. She has recruited actor Leonardo DiCaprio as an advocate.

Tedros described air pollution as “the new tobacco” in terms of its public health impact, in a comment article for the Guardian.

At a high-level session of the conference on Thursday, ministers, mayors and leaders of international organisations are expected to announce commitments to tackle the problem.

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