

Two Worlds: Rich and Poor

"We are all responsible for all."
Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

Poverty is the single biggest threat to children's health. Poor children are more likely to die as infants, and are sick more often and more seriously than better-off children.

The poor and the marginalized – especially children – often bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Yet, because of their vulnerability, children are the very group that can least afford to be exposed to environmental hazards. They are not "little adults": they breathe more air, consume more food, and drink more water in proportion to their weight. Children's behaviour further puts them at risk. Their life takes place closer to the ground and young children frequently put their fingers in their mouths.

Exposure to environmental risks is one of the reasons for poor children being worse off than their wealthier peers. In developing countries, environmental risks are compounded in the poorest settlements, where housing is inadequate, water and sanitation are lacking, garbage collection is non-existent, and smoke fogs indoor air. In rich countries, low-income or minority neighbourhoods are sometimes disproportionately located near hazardous waste sites or polluting industries.

A rising income gap between the rich and the poor within countries around the world means that millions of children may be excluded from the health benefits of emerging prosperity.



Households on higher incomes mostly use electricity or gas for cooking. Those on lower incomes are more likely to use polluting solid fuels, such as dung, wood and coal. As a result, children living in these households suffer disproportionately from the adverse health effects of indoor smoke (map 9).

Every year smoke from burning solid fuels in the home kills one million children under five years.

