



CleanAirSIG e-conference:

16 – 27 July 2007

**“Taking ACTION to rid the world of Indoor
Air Pollution”**

Status: Draft

The Big Picture

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Few educated people in the world today doubt that household availability of clean water and sanitation is important for health. So ingrained is this in our psyche that we forget that, in historical terms, it is a rather recent discovery. Before the mid-1800s, washing was thought to be a risky behavior in many societies and cholera something that came through bad air from swamps. Even though parents then loved their children as much as they do today, they did not think it necessary to teach them to wash their hands after using the toilet or before eating. Dr. John Snow's insight in 1854 that the Broad Street pump, which still exists in reconstruction in Soho, was the source of cholera in London was revolutionary at the time and came through what we would call epidemiological methods. Appropriately, it is often cited as the start of the modern era of public health science. Even so, it was decades before the evidence was sufficient to convince London authorities to reroute the sewers to dump downstream from the drinking water intakes on the Thames.

In our lifetimes, we have experienced a similar evolution of understanding for a major health risk factor. As late as the 1950s, many scientists, even most physicians, denied any connection between smoking and health. Even though the scientific evidence was absolutely compelling by the mid-1960s, however, we are still waging the policy battle with the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control coming into force only last year [ck]. This is so even though tobacco is known to kill more people globally than nearly any other risk factor and is the chief cause of death and illness in many parts of the world.

Thus, that the world policy makers are seemingly slow to respond to the evidence on indoor air pollution (IAP) is perhaps not unusual or even unexpected. Like water/sanitation and tobacco, IAP causes ill-health at such a scale that most find it is hard to believe at first. How can a task so ancient and "natural" as cooking with wood be so deadly? Wouldn't evolution have rid the population of any vulnerability long ago? Wouldn't everyone be dead if it was so dangerous? Wouldn't we have seen it long ago?

We still need to recognize, however, that we humans are not very good at linking risk factors, even big ones, and ill-health and then we are not quick at translating the knowledge into action.

These two other risk factors are not just academic analogs, for they share direct connections with IAP. It is well recognized now that improved water must be accompanied by better sanitation to obtain health serious benefits and that hygiene education must be also be included for the benefits to be sustained. Just so with clean fuel and ventilation and associated household hygiene education. Tobacco, of course, is biomass, and exposure to its incomplete combustion products is responsible for its huge burden of disease. Just so with biomass used for fuel – pretty much the same toxins and same diseases.

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Fortunately, however, our field has some advantages over the others. We live in an age when information is shared quickly and easily, thus facilitating our task to reduce the delay between recognition of a problem and serious policy action. And we do not have to fight large commercial interests with a stake in confusing the issue and delaying action.

I think we are moving into a new phase, however, in which the skepticism we face is not so focused anymore on whether a health effect exists, although some doubts remain as to its exact character. The skepticism is now turning to whether there are any viable ways to do anything about it short of waiting until people become rich enough to buy clean fuels on their own. Thus, the kind of work being done by people presenting at this workshop is crucial. As is the careful work being done to document the results. If we collaborate and share, each of our individual successes will build on the last and we will be able to move past this latest kind of skepticism to true concerted international action.