

## Scientists call for global action on air pollution

SA's science academy joins international peers in push for moves to limit life-threatening emissions

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A man wearing a mask walks through smog in Beijing, China. Picture: REUTERS/JASON LEE

SA's national science academy has joined its counterparts in Brazil, Germany and the US in calling for global action on air pollution, a major contributor to disease and climate change.

Air pollution cut global life expectancy by 20 months in 2016, rivalling the impact of smoking, according to the State of Global Air Report, published by the US Health Effects Institute.

“The health impacts of air pollution are enormous, it can harm health across the entire lifespan, causing disease, disability and death. It is time to move the issue much higher up in the policy agenda,” said Academy of Science of SA (Assaf) executive officer Himla Soodyall.

The science academies delivered a statement to senior UN representatives and high-level diplomats from the four countries at the UN headquarters in New York on Wednesday and called for a new global compact between business, governments and citizens to reduce air pollution.

The development adds to the pressure on the SA government, which faces a lawsuit from environmental activists who are trying to force it to reduce air pollution in the Mpumalanga Highveld by making big emitters such as state-owned electricity generator Eskom and fuel producer Sasol comply with emissions standards. Eskom and Sasol were previously given permission to delay compliance until 2025, due to the costs of modifying their facilities.

Environmental activists are also challenging Sasol directly and have launched legal action to try to stop the renewal of its atmospheric emissions licence for its Secunda synfuels plant.

The statement from the four academies of science and the US national academy of medicine calls for emissions controls in all countries and proper monitoring of key pollutants, including atmospheric particulate matter (PM) with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometres, known as PM2.5. These particles come from numerous direct sources such as power plants, vehicles and dust, but they also arise from chemical reactions in the atmosphere. They are among the smallest particles in the air we breath and can penetrate all the organs of the body.

The science academies called for greater public and private sector investments in measures to combat air pollution, noting that this would not only benefit human health but also help reduce global warming.

“Air pollution and climate change share an important common source: the combustion of fossil fuels. That is why tackling air pollution will also help us make progress towards combating climate change,” said Brazilian Academy of Sciences president Luiz Davidovich.

Rebecca Garland from the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research said monitoring air pollution required sustained funding at municipal level and proper maintenance of equipment

Bobby Peek, director of groundWork, welcomed the initiative but sounded a note of caution. “Let’s not call for another global compact, because it will be voluntary. We need

something legal and binding, so governments and corporates can be held to account,” he said.

“For the last decade groundWork has been calling for the health sector to be more vocal on energy, air pollution and climate issues. Last week we launched the Deadly Air legal case against government for their inaction on air pollution. We have provided clear evidence in this case that air pollution is detrimental to our health and well-being,” he said, referring to the case brought by the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) against the government on behalf of groundWork and the Vukani Environmental Justice Movement.

The CER is arguing that the government is violating the constitutional right to a healthy environment for the people living in the Highveld.

Air pollution from Eskom’s coal-fired power plants cost SA more than R30bn a year, said Peek.

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