

UN Report Says Slash Fossil Fuel Subsidies

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A report presented in Moscow by the United Nations Development Program warns that industrial pollution and environmental degradation may slow human development across the world.

The Human Development Report 2011, unveiled in Moscow on Wednesday, argues that climate change and resource degradation could hinder economic growth and thwart efforts to improve quality of life as they impact the world's most vulnerable.

"The main issue that this report wants to emphasize is that sustainability challenges have a very unequal impact," Kori Udovicki, head of the UNDP for Europe and Central Asia told The Moscow Times in an interview prior to the presentation.

"Both among countries and within countries, the people most affected by environmental degradation tend to be those least empowered to effect change," she added.

In the former Soviet Union those inequalities are most often manifest in a lack of access to safe heating and cooking fuel. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, two of the poorest nations in the former Soviet space, are leaders in deaths from indoor air pollution.

Tajikistan lost 516 people per million to indoor air pollution in 2004, the benchmark year used to compare countries in the report's index. Kyrgyzstan lost 418 and Turkmenistan, which has grown comparatively rich on oil and gas, suffered 532 deaths.

Russia's kitchens are comparatively safe, with just seven deaths per million from indoor pollution, according to the report. More serious is outdoor air pollution, which killed 231 people per million in the country in 2004.

The report recommends adoption of incentive schemes and public-private partnerships to free up finance for environmental projects, and a complete abrogation of fossil-fuel subsidies.

Mechanisms the report writers suggest include empowerment of local communities, a financial transactions tax and a complete end to subsidizing consumption of fossil fuels — a measure that they claim could slash Russia's emissions by 20 percent by 2020.

Russia has maintained its rank at 66 out of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index 2011 — between Belarus at 65 and Grenada at 67.

The country and the wider Eurasian region have done relatively well in reducing carbon emissions in the past 20 years, though that was largely an unintentional side effect of the collapse in industry following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

But Udovicki also pointed out that Russia has done well at finding new efficiencies. "Over the past eight to 10 years, gross domestic product has nearly doubled and emissions have increased by only about 12 percent," she said.

Russia remains the fourth-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind China, the United States and India, releasing 1.57 billion tons in 2009, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

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