

Press Release

YouthNet, Pure Earth, and UNICEF Organize Rally, Human Chain, and Discussion to Mark International Lead Pollution Prevention Week

20th October 2024, Bangladesh – YouthNet Global and Pure Earth Bangladesh, with the support of UNICEF, jointly organized a public awareness rally, human chain, and discussion in Rangpur district to mark "International Lead Pollution Prevention Week (October 20-26)." The event, under the theme "Bright Futures Begin Lead-Free," aimed to raise awareness of lead pollution and its effects. About 50 participants, including YouthNet Global volunteers, representatives from Pure Earth Bangladesh, UNICEF, local NGOs, government institutions, policymakers, environmental rights activists, media workers, and civil society members, took part in the event.

The rally began at 11 a.m. from Begum Rokeya University, covered key locations, and concluded at noon with the formation of a human chain. Participants carried banners, placards, and festoons promoting anti-lead pollution messages and chanted slogans like "Together, we can solve lead pollution". The primary goal of this initiative was to increase awareness at all levels and call on the government and policymakers to implement strict and effective measures to prevent lead poisoning. During the event, leaflets and stickers on lead pollution were distributed to the public.

The "International Lead Pollution Prevention Week" is observed globally every October to highlight the dangers of lead pollution. This year, from October 20 to October 26, the United Nations' World Health Organization (WHO) is calling on governments, civil society, healthcare workers, and the public to take urgent action to protect children from the harmful effects of lead.

Despite the severe prevalence of lead pollution in Bangladesh, awareness remains limited. Bangladesh ranks fourth globally in lead pollution, with approximately 36 million children—about 60% of the child population—suffering from elevated lead levels in their blood. Children exposed to lead often experience reduced intelligence, learning difficulties, and behavioral problems.

In adults, lead pollution has been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD), resulting in approximately 140,000 deaths annually. Lead in the blood of pregnant women poses additional risks, including miscarriage and stillbirths. The country's economic losses due to lead-related health issues are estimated at \$28,633 million annually, contributing to a 6-9% GDP deficit.

Many everyday products may contain lead, such as wall paint, aluminum and ceramic utensils, spices, children's toys, cosmetics, and even fish feed. Unsafe recycling practices, particularly the breaking and melting of lead-acid batteries in open areas, contribute significantly to environmental lead pollution.

Monjur Ahmed, Social and Behavioral Change (SBC) officer, UNICEF said, "Last year UNICEF has developed guideline to prevent lead pollution and working closely with development organization like Pure Earth to bring sustainable changes through capacity building, awareness raising and advocacy. The potential change agents are the youth. So it is important to engage them to address this public health concern."

Following the rally and human chain, **Dr. Mahfuzur Rahman, Country Director of Pure Earth Bangladesh**, emphasized the crucial role of youth in preventing lead pollution, stating, "*The youth are the architects of tomorrow's world. Their active involvement in preventing lead pollution will bring sustainable and constructive changes in their communities, ensuring a lead-free and safe environment for future generations.*"

Sohanur Rahman, Executive Coordinator of YouthNet Global, added, *"As we confront the silent threat of lead pollution, we are fighting for the health and future of our children and our planet. The time for awareness and action is now. We young people are standing together, raising our voices, and demanding a lead-free Bangladesh."*

At the end of the event, participants presented five key demands to the government and policymakers:

1. Implement strict monitoring to ensure safe standards in consumer products, preventing the inclusion of harmful lead, especially in items like aluminum cookware, wall paint, children's toys, and many more.
2. Establish safe and formal lead-acid battery recycling systems and prevent unsafe lead-acid battery factories across the country.
3. Set up monitoring systems to identify and clean lead-contaminated areas caused by illegal and informal battery recycling.
4. Review and update existing laws and policies on lead pollution and ensure their effective implementation.
5. Raise national awareness about the sources and dangers of lead pollution, involving all relevant stakeholders.

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