
ADVANCING HEALTH FOR ALL IN A CHANGING CLIMATE: Health Day at COP28

BACKGROUND

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) came into effect in 1994 and is now ratified by 198 countries¹. The convention places the onus on wealthy polluting countries to take the lead in addressing the impacts of climate change and directs new funds to countries impacted by climate change, many of which are in the Global South. The UNFCCC convenes two major sessions annually: the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice and the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SB 58) in June, and the Conference of the Parties (COP) in November or December.

In 2015 at COP21 in Paris, governments adopted a landmark agreement that, for the first time, brought all countries together to combat climate change and adapt to its effects and impacts on people and planet. The Paris Agreement operates on a five-year cycle of increasingly ambitious climate action carried out by countries, and countries have been submitting their national climate action plans – called nationally determined contributions (NDCs) – since 2020². NDCs outline the actions a particular country will take to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and efforts to develop resilient adaptation strategies in order to reach the goals and targets in the Paris Agreement. The next deadline for NDCs is 2025, and the current commitments made in 2020 are insufficient to keep global warming to a minimum of 1.5 C.

In order to support developing countries to operationalize their NDCs, the Paris Agreement also mandated the development of the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which is the world's largest climate fund and invests 50% of its resources towards mitigation and 50% towards adaptation efforts³. The GCF invests across four areas: the built environment; energy & industry; human security, livelihoods and wellbeing; and land-use, forests and ecosystems. GCF support can take the form of several mechanisms, including grant, concessional debt, blended finance, and private investment. Currently, GCF is providing support in over 100 countries, working directly with country focal points and government agencies to deliver mitigation and adaptation interventions. To date, less than 5% of climate adaptation funding is directed towards the health sector⁴.

COP28

COP28 will be hosted in Dubai by the United Arab Emirates from 27 November – 12 December. This year marks the operationalization of the new Loss and Damage Fund (LDF) that was established at COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. The fund is expected to seek pledges to address the impacts of climate change, including adaptation to the climate crisis on health care systems in vulnerable countries. In early November, the UAE COP28 Presidency convened negotiators in Abu Dhabi to discuss operationalization of the LDF, which resulted in an agreed list of recommendations to implement the Fund; these will be taken forward at COP28⁵. Moreover, the COP28 Action Agenda will prioritize policies on improving people's lives and livelihoods and will serve as a catalyst for collaborative action on adaptation, call for investments in practical solutions that will deliver holistic outcomes on nature preservation, health care, disaster relief, and recovery efforts.

[1] <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/what-is-the-united-nations-framework-convention-on-climate-change>

[2] <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

[3] <https://www.greenclimate.fund/about>

[4] [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10266659/#:~:text=Volumes%20of%20funding,%20\(see%20Table%202\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10266659/#:~:text=Volumes%20of%20funding,%20(see%20Table%202))

[5] <https://www.cop28.com/en/news/2023/11/COP28-Presidency-hosts-breakthrough-meeting-that-agrees-recommendations>

The first-ever Global Stocktake will be concluded at COP28 and the outputs of the assessments of the implementation of the Paris Agreement will be discussed⁶. This will be a pivotal moment for the Parties to respond to the Global Stocktake and the COP28 Action Agenda is expecting to advocate for an action plan and new decisions that will fast-track the energy transition and reduce emissions to limit the global temperature below 2.0 C by the year 2030. There will also likely be a call on developed countries to reaffirm their commitments to delivering the collective annual sum of USD 100 billion to ensure the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement.

HEALTH AT COP

COP28 is set to address critical health concerns as part of the climate change discussions, marking a historic milestone with its first-ever dedicated “Health Day” on Sunday, 3 December. While the health community has long tried to elevate the importance of health within the Conference of the Parties, this is the first year a COP Presidency has formally included Health as one of the thematic focuses. This is the result of joint advocacy from the health community, the World Health Organization (WHO), countries, and the leadership from the UAE and their longstanding legacy of support for advancing global health goals.

While health is not yet one of the official tracks in the UNFCCC negotiations process, it is expected that the parties will discuss required actions for health system’s responses to climate change, commit to developing evidence-based climate change and health national adaptation plans, and to investing in climate-resilient and sustainable resilient health systems. COP28 is also expected to play a crucial role in aligning climate and health investments and will seek to bridge the financial gap between climate change and health through announcing new international financial mechanisms and commitments from major donors to support climate health interventions, including the development of a resilient health workforce, and address the resurgence of climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria, cholera, and dengue.

The connection between health and climate change is evident, yet it has not been a specific focus of the COP process — until now...we are resolute in our determination to address the challenges posed to health by climate change and encourage ambitious investment in the health sector. Our goal is to build resilient, equitable health systems capable of withstanding the impact of climate change.

- H.E. Dr. Sultan Al Jaber, COP 28 President-Designate

CLIMATE-HEALTH MINISTERIAL

Together with the WHO, the COP28 Presidency will organize the first-ever climate and health ministerial meeting to spotlight the impacts of the climate crisis on global health and well-being. The outcome of the ministerial will be a declaration endorsed by member states and was developed with the COP28 champion country group over the past six months. The champion country group included Kenya, Malawi, India, Brazil, UK, US, Netherlands, Germany, Fiji, Sierra Leone, Egypt, and the UAE. The COP Presidency team also consulted with over 95 countries in September and October via regional consultations and bilateral meetings. The declaration has been formally disseminated among countries, calling for endorsement and continuing support from countries ahead of its formal launch at the ministerial.

Global health advocates can leverage this opportunity to support the declaration’s policy and advocacy messages, encourage and support countries to adapt commitments to their own contexts, continue to build support for and investment in health-centric mitigation and adaptation climate strategies.

[6] <https://unfccc.int/topics/global-stocktake>

IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON HEALTH

It is evident that climate change has a severe impact on health including rising sea-levels, increased air pollution, and extreme weather events such as flooding, which can contribute to the heightened spread of vector-borne diseases.

A recent example of the health consequences of climate change is the September 2023 floods in Libya, which resulted in the deaths of 3,985 people, with more than 9,000 reported as missing⁷. Similarly, the 2022 floods in Pakistan submerged one-third of the country under water, taking over 1,700 lives and leaving over 2.1 million people homeless⁸. Both incidents disrupted health care facilities, storage of medical equipment, increased the spread of vector-borne diseases, resulted in significant job losses, and took a serious toll on people's mental health. Climate change also impacted food systems and exacerbated food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition. WHO estimates there will be 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 due to climate change⁹ and the World Bank estimates that between 32-132 million people will enter poverty by 2030 as a result of climate change¹⁰.

- The global magnitude of climate-sensitive diseases was estimated in 2019 to be 39,503,684 deaths (69.9% of total annual deaths)¹¹.
- By 2050, disease-carrying mosquitoes will likely reach approximately 500 million people. It is predicted that more than 1 billion people will be newly at risk of dengue, Zika, chikungunya and many other diseases by 2080¹².
- By 2050, 250,000 deaths a year attributable to climate change is projected due to heat, undernutrition, malaria, and diarrheal disease¹³.
- In South America, climate change is projected to expand the distributions of malaria vectors to 35–46% of the continent by 2070. In North America, risk is projected to expand in north-central Mexico, with annual dengue incidence in Mexico increasing by up to 40% by 2080. In China, it is projected that dengue exposure would increase from 168 million people in 142 counties to 490 million people in 456 counties by the late 2100s¹⁴.

In addition to Health Day and events convened by the COP28 Presidency on 3 December, health-related events will take place throughout the two weeks of COP. These include events inside the UN 'Blue Zone' the more open 'Green Zone,' and at the UN Global Goals House hosted off-site. The global health community has seized this opportunity presented by the first-ever Health Day to ensure that the links between climate change and health are well articulated and elevated to the attention of climate negotiators.

Addressing climate change's impact of health should include both mitigation strategies, focused on reducing and eliminating greenhouse gas emissions, and adaptation strategies, aimed at strengthening health systems and communities adjusting to the impacts of climate change. COP28 is an opportunity for governments and stakeholders in global health to mobilize to ensure an impactful inaugural Health Day, sending a strong message that there is demand and a need for health to be an integral component of future COPs to accelerate progress towards achieving a healthy planet and healthy populations.

[7] <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/libya/libya-flood-update-flash-update-no3-16-september-2023-5pm-local-time>

[8] <https://www.who.int/emergencies/funding/outbreak-and-crisis-response-appeal/impact-in-2022/pakistan>

[9] <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

[10] <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/34555>

[11] <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-7/#box-7.2>

[12] <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2023/02/03/new-digital-tools-use-climate-data-to-tackle-infectious-disease-outbreaks/#:~:text=By%202050%2C%20it%20is%20predicted,many%20other%20diseases%20by%202080>

[13] <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-7/>

[14] <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-7/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All ministers of health to attend the COP28 Climate-Health Ministerial and demonstrate their commitment to addressing the links between climate and health by endorsing the Ministerial Declaration.
2. To ensure health is included in the statements of all Heads of States and Governments on 1-2 December during the World Leaders' Summit.
3. Build on the commitments made at COP26 and urge all countries to collaborate with the WHO [Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health \(ATACH\)](#) to develop policies, financial frameworks, and promote the integration of climate change and health into national, regional, and global plans. Furthermore, to take steps to operationalize the COP26 [Climate and Health 10 Recommendations](#) that asks governments to prioritize health and equity in the climate and sustainable development agenda.
4. Enhance health surveillance and early warning systems to ensure preparedness for climate related diseases.
5. Call on governments to allocate a greater proportion of their climate financing towards health, particularly strengthening health systems and making them climate resilient and environmentally sustainable. Despite being a priority sector in 54% of countries' NDCs, less than 1% of multilateral climate finance is allocated to health, as reported by WHO and UNEP.
6. Call on developed countries to collectively deliver the USD 100 Billion per year that they committed to deliver for climate action starting the year 2020, and failure to do will be holding the progress of the implementation of the Paris Agreement.
7. Apply adaptation strategies and build climate-resilient health systems in countries and sustainable communities impacted by climate change to help them respond to climate change challenges. This entails strengthening core functions of a health system, including capacity building of health workforce.
8. Urge all governments to revise their national climate commitments under the Paris Agreement and to include health in all policy areas. Achieving health resilience requires coordinated and integrated health policies across all sectors.
9. Call on ministries of health to be involved in developing national climate action plans (NDCs), to ensure that health is integrated into climate mitigation and adaptation strategies.
10. Commit to transition to climate-resilient, low-carbon, sustainable health care systems, in line with the call to action by the World Health Organization.