

## The 2014 WHO conference on health and climate

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As discussed elsewhere in this issue of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, human health and climate change are inextricably linked.<sup>1–3</sup> This month, the World Health Organization (WHO) will, for the first time, bring together high-level government representatives, development partners and technical experts in a global conference on climate and health. What does the conference plan to achieve, how can it empower countries to protect health from climate risks and gain the health benefits of addressing climate change, and why is it needed now?

The first aim is to provide the evidence for health actors to engage on this issue. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's March 2014 report<sup>4</sup> updated the evidence on the health risks of climate change. It concluded that climate change acts mainly by exacerbating existing health problems but also affects water, food and nutrition security, and that the most vulnerable populations are those that are already most affected by climate-related diseases. It highlighted the possibility of high-end climate scenarios – including warming by 4–7 °C over much of the globe by 2100 – that would lead to some critical thresholds being crossed. Such warming might make outdoor physical activity in the hottest parts of the year dangerous in many locations. Some human habitats may be lost altogether as low-lying countries are submerged by rising seas. Climate change is a threat to a bottom line of sustainable development – human health.

New studies and practical experience can help guide an appropriate response. There is evidence that poverty alleviation and preventive health programmes can decrease vulnerability and override some of the risks presented by climate change. Evidence also shows that actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution can result in large health gains. Air pollution is estimated

to cause one in every eight deaths,<sup>5</sup> so reduction of emissions of black carbon and other short-lived pollutants may not only slow warming but also avert almost 2.5 million deaths annually.<sup>6</sup> The deaths and disease thus prevented could offset much of the cost of greenhouse-gas mitigation.<sup>7</sup> In developing more socially beneficial, cost-effective and widely supported policies for the mitigation of climate change, the arguments, evidence and voices of the health community are critical.

This WHO conference will explore ways of building health resilience to climate risks, for example through improving health, water and sanitation services. Participants will also deliberate how best to ensure that more sustainable and low-carbon development choices result in improved urban environments and health-care provision. It will showcase programmes implemented around the world and the international initiatives supported by the United Nations (UN) system – such as the Global Framework for Climate Services.

The conference is intended to be one important step in addressing what may be the defining issue for public health during this century.<sup>8</sup> The core international processes for health need to be closely connected with those for climate change. The conference will therefore build on the link between climate and health that was selected as the theme of the general discussion at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2014. The outcomes will inform future WHA discussions on the renewal of WHO's work on air pollution, climate change and health.

While health actors can do much within their own ministries or facilities, a truly effective public health response will depend on actions taken across government and by other partners. The conference is therefore timed and designed to ensure that the health sector contributes fully to any international

agreements on climate change that might arise from deliberations at the Climate Summit – organized by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon – to be held in September 2014 in New York and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's Conference of the Parties to be held in Paris in December 2015.

In recent years, many countries have made important progress in protecting the health of their populations from climate change. It is hoped that this conference will encourage and support more countries to do the same. ■

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