

# Easy Digest:

## The Links between Climate Change & Health



IMPATIENCE EARTH

## Summary

- The climate crisis is already having a large-scale impact on people's physical and mental health around the world, affecting more critically those with the least resources to respond.
- The major causes of climate change – burning fossil fuels and clearing land for food production – are also key drivers of poor health and premature deaths.
- As climate change worsens, so will the impacts, with undernutrition a particular threat to children.
- The healthcare sector also contributes to climate change, but far more so in rich, industrialized nations.
- It is possible to make healthcare more resilient to climate change, but action is lacking. Philanthropy has a role to play in catalyzing the closure of the climate-health action gap.

## How Climate Change Impacts Health

Climate change affects the social and environmental conditions that are critical to good health like clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter. The WHO estimates that between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress. The Wellcome Trust, one of the largest funders of healthcare in the world, has set out five key impacts of climate change on health:

- **Injury and heat stress:** Global warming is driving more extremes of weather. The World Meteorological Organization's research found that droughts, floods and heatwaves have increased fivefold over the last 50 years, leading directly to the deaths of more than two million people. They cited climate change as a major driver for this increase. Meanwhile, other researchers found that one third of heat-related deaths are now attributable to climate change. [1]

- **Infectious diseases:** Flooding, hotter climates and other environmental changes have created the conditions for increases in infectious diseases, such as malaria and cholera.[2]
- **Food insecurity and undernutrition:** More people are not able to feed themselves adequately because changes in weather patterns are pushing down crop yields and harming livestock. This has a knock-on effect across whole populations. Women and children are on the frontline. The UN's World Food Programme states that most child deaths expected to occur as a result of climate change will be driven by undernutrition.[3]
- **Respiratory disease:** Hotter temperatures and changing weather patterns can create conditions for people to suffer from more respiratory diseases, such as asthma. There are several ways this happens: hotter drier climates are causing longer and more wildfires; heat in urban areas create the conditions for more low-level ozone; new weather patterns can hold pollution from cars and factories at ground level, worsening air quality for longer. The WHO highlights that reducing emissions of greenhouse gases through better transport, food and energy-use choices can result in improved health, particularly through reduced air pollution.
- **Mental health:** The stress of climate impacts (like more extreme weather making it harder to work and driving people to migrate to safer places) is a driver for mental illness. Concern about the lack of action on climate change is also driving up people's anxiety. In a 2021 survey, 59% of youth and young adults said they were 'very' or 'extremely' worried about climate change and more than 45% said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning. These impacts on mental health are difficult to measure, often intertwined with many other more apparent causes that mask the impact of climate change.



The impacts that climate change has on our health could get a lot worse, especially in the most vulnerable parts of the world and for the most vulnerable people. For example, the melting away of mountain glaciers in Asia could see 800 million people that rely on them lose access to freshwater leading to famines and having a devastating impact on the people's health. Smallholder farmers, who make up 60% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa, will struggle even more to afford livelihoods and healthcare.[4] In contexts such as these, strong health infrastructure is important and areas with weaker health infrastructure – mostly in developing countries – will be the least able to cope.

## The Pursuit of Health Affects Climate Change

- **Healthcare systems, especially in the Global North, are a significant cause of climate change.** Globally, healthcare sectors are responsible for 4.4% of greenhouse gas emissions and would be the fifth-largest greenhouse gas emitter on the planet if it were a country.[5] However, there are great disparities between Global North and Global South countries; the United States' healthcare system emits 57 times more per person than India's. There are initiatives to reduce the climate impacts of healthcare with many measures also reducing the costs of providing care.[6] As Low and Middle-Income countries continue to build quality health care systems, support should be given to build systems that center these critical factors.
- **A lack of affordable healthcare can also cause climate change.** When a community struggles to afford healthcare, they can be forced to harvest natural resources at unsustainable rates to sell and earn an income to afford the care they need. For example, research showed that a lack of access to healthcare is a major driver of ecosystem destruction in Indonesian Borneo.[7] Therefore, providing healthcare access can help prevent deforestation. Stanford University studied the work of the Indonesian NGO that provided new clinics to rainforest communities in the region and incentives to protect forests. This led to a 70% drop in the rate of deforestation and improved healthcare and facilitated a 67% drop in infant mortality rates.



# Conclusion

Ultimately, human health is intertwined with that of our whole planet. The extractive, fossil-fueled economy that centers progress on economic growth has caused great harm to both. Hard-won development gains stand to be lost.

## What does this mean for climate philanthropy?

- **Understand that acting on climate change is intrinsically linked to action on health.** Research by Harvard University shows that stopping the burning of fossil fuels – also the leading cause of climate change – would prevent the 1-in-5 premature deaths that are caused by associated air pollutants.[8]
- **Philanthropy associated with promoting a shift in diets also targets health and climate change.** The clearance of land to rear cattle for the meat industry is another leading cause of climate change. People clearing and occupying wild habitats also drive the extinction of plant species that could be the source of new medicines. A climate-health win-win would be to remove this pressure on natural habitats by supporting the shift in diets from red meat and dairy to plant-based alternatives.
- **Resources are needed to help countries prepare for the health fallouts of climate change.** For example better disaster preparedness, more weather-resilient healthcare infrastructure, the rollout of disease prevention and public education.[9] The UN says that an increase of 5 -10 times in international funding is needed to support countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change.
- **Funders can act on both health and climate change in tandem**, whether that is through reviewing investments and operations, tackling air pollution, supporting the healthcare sector to decarbonise, or helping communities to make their healthcare infrastructure more resilient to climate impacts.

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# References

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