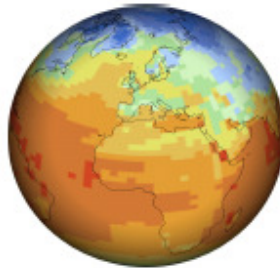


Health Protection from Climate Change

Briefing at the 60th World Health Assembly

Monday 21st May 2007



Summary:

Senior staff from WHO HQ and regional offices, along with representatives of member states and partner organizations, raised concerns over health impacts from climate change. The latest evidence shows that climate change is already impacting on health, through heatwaves and changing distributions of vector-borne diseases; and will continue to increase a wide range of risks, from flooding, to diarrhoea to malnutrition. Although all populations are at risk from the health effects of climate change, some are particularly vulnerable, such as those in small island states, in highland regions, and in rapidly urbanizing populations. The risks are particularly great for poor populations in Africa, who already have the largest burdens of diseases that are sensitive to climate change, and the least capacity to adapt. These populations have also made the least contribution to the causes of climate change.

WHO put forward their strategic approach to this issue. This emphasizes the importance of strong health systems as the front-line defense from the impacts of climate change, and identifies key preventive public health interventions that will improve health now as well as reducing climate vulnerability in the future. It also calls upon individuals, communities and member states to make the behaviour and policy changes, such as cleaner energy and more sustainable transport systems, that will bring immediate health benefits, as well as reducing our impact on the global climate.

Individual presentations:

Ms. Susanne Weber-Mosdorf (Assistant Director -General, Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments, WHO-HQ), chaired the meeting. She highlighted that climate change is now a concern for health, wellbeing and security, rather than simply being an environmental or development issue. Ms. Weber-Mosdorf pointed out that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is making this a priority for his term in office, and highlighted the appointment of former WHO Director General Dr Brundtland, as a special envoy on the issue, representing the link between the health, environment and sustainable development agendas.

Dr Bettina Menne (WHO-Euro) summarized the recent review of evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The presentation stressed that climate change is already increasing health risks through extreme weather events and changing patterns of vector-borne disease, and that continuing climate changes will further exacerbate risks from malnutrition, diarrhoea, cardiorespiratory disease associated with extreme heat and air pollution, vector-borne diseases, and indirectly through impacts on socioeconomic development. The IPCC report also emphasized that many of the policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions would bring significant direct benefits to health, for example through reduced air pollution.

Dr Diarmid Campbell-Lendrum (WHO-HQ) explained how WHO has gradually developed its programme from describing the risks from climate change, to highlighting vulnerability, and now to proposing responses. He also stressed how WHO is supporting an adaptation strategy that is based on strengthening existing health sector functions, and that concentrates on the most vulnerable populations, especially in Africa, small islands, urban areas, highlands, and water-stressed regions.

Dr Shigero Omi (Director, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific) stated that climate change has now been added to the traditional priorities for health protection within the region. He emphasized the particular vulnerability of small island states, and the importance of engaging the major developing countries within the Western Pacific. Dr. Omi stressed the need for a change of mind-set, recognizing the importance of life styles that are both healthy and environmentally friendly, and making clear that wise individual decisions and technological investments, can bring direct health benefits at the same time as helping to protect the global environment.

Dr. Poonam Singh (Deputy Director, WHO Office for South East Asia) highlighted that the region already suffers disproportionately from weather-related natural disasters, and that climate change is likely to increase these risks, as well as those related to the quality and quantity of water, vector-borne diseases and malnutrition. Dr. Poonam Singh listed a series of past and upcoming technical and high-level political meetings that will continue to raise the profile of climate change as a health issue within the region, and called for the necessary support to implement health protection from climate change for the most vulnerable communities.

Dr. Tammam Aloudat (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) made clear that the IFRC sees climate change as a significant threat to humanitarian assistance, through increasing impacts of natural disasters, and of disease epidemics. He stressed the importance of organizations such as IFRC, who are able to mobilize mass memberships, as an important operational partner in helping to protect health from climate change.

Dr. James Nyikal (Director of Medical Services, Kenyan Ministry of Health) highlighted the very wide range of ways in which climate change can increase health risks and the challenges and costs of disease control in the African continent, through increasing risks of drought, flooding, malnutrition, water borne and vector-borne disease. He also made clear that with well-planned and well-supported health sector interventions, it is possible to counter these threats. Dr. Nyiko highlighted the new project that Kenya is designing with the support of WHO, UNDP and the Global Environment Facility, to strengthen and expand programmes to control highland malaria epidemics, which are favoured by temperature increases.

Dr. Maria Neira (Director, Public Health and Environment, WHO HQ) summarized the WHO strategic approach to climate change. The main components of this approach are; gathering evidence that is directly linked to interventions; strengthening key interventions within a general preventive approach to health; guiding policies and investments that improve health as they reduce climate impacts; using health as the core argument to support behaviour change by individuals, communities and the private sector; and implementing the monitoring and evaluation programmes to ensure that these actions are effective. Dr. Neira called for a pro-active movement to put health at the core of climate protection and sustainable development.

Remarks from the floor stressed the importance of climate change as a dominant theme in international relations and development, that is likely to further increase in future decades, and highlighted the importance of efforts at the community and individual level in meeting the climate change and health challenge.

Meeting summary prepared by:

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