



## Director-General's Office

# WHO Director-General addresses Human Rights Council on climate change

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Members of the Human Rights Council, distinguished speakers and guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the Human Rights Council for hosting this panel discussion on climate change and the right to health.

For public health, climate change is the defining issue for the 21st century. The impact of climate change is universal, unpredictable, sometimes contested, and most appealingly photogenic when a stranded polar bear is in the picture.

But human beings are unquestionably the most important species threatened by climate change. Climate and weather variables affect the air people breathe, the water they drink, the food they eat, and the chances that they will get infected by a disease.

In my view, the health effects of climate change are what matters most. They are right before our eyes, well-known, measurable, scientifically documented, and daunting.

WHO estimates that, each year, more than 7 million deaths worldwide can be attributed to air pollution. Climate change is also causing tens of thousands of yearly deaths from other causes.

Records for extreme weather events are being broken a record number of times. Droughts and floods, storm surges, heatwaves, and wildfires claim human lives and livelihoods.

According to the World Meteorological Organization, 2015 was the hottest year since records began in 1880. This year is predicted to be even hotter.

Droughts threaten already perilous food supplies, especially in poor countries where subsistence farming is rain-fed. The scale of this threat is immense.

Agriculture, including smallholder farming, employs around 60% of the workforce in sub-Saharan Africa and accounts for a third of its gross domestic product. In some countries, more than 70% of the population depends on subsistence farming for a livelihood.

Outbreaks of cholera thrive under conditions of too much or too little water. Insects and other carriers of disease are exquisitely sensitive to variations in heat, humidity, and rainfall. Climate change has already given dengue a vastly expanded geographical range and may do the same for malaria.

Experts predict that, by 2050, climate change will be causing an additional 250,000 deaths each year just from malaria, diarrhoeal disease, heat stress, and undernutrition.

A multitude of factors influence the dynamics of outbreaks of emerging and re-emerging diseases. For a mosquito-borne disease, like Zika, climate variables, including the El Niño weather pattern, clearly play a role in fuelling international spread.

Already, more than half of the world's population lives in an area where the *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, the principal vector for Zika, dengue, and chikungunya, are present.

Warming temperatures and more rainfall could expand that geographical range even further. These mosquitoes love heat and water left standing in urban containers and trash.

Climate also influences the emergence of new diseases. About 75% of all new human pathogens originate in wild or domestic animals. Climate variables, including those that influence the availability of food and water, have a direct impact on wild animal populations, their concentrations, and their incursion into areas inhabited by humans.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All these consequences for health make the first global climate change agreement, reached in Paris last December, not just an environmental treaty. It is a health treaty as well. Much is at stake.

Human rights obligations, standards, and principles have the power to shape policies for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

A human rights approach provides an entry point for holding countries accountable for their international obligations on climate change. This approach also provides the ethical reference point which underscores why we need to take action on climate change.

Much of the continuing debate about the climate is talk about money. What will mitigation and adaptation measures cost? Can the world afford

them? Who will pay?

The focus of this panel on human rights, and specifically the right to health, offers a different perspective. It puts people, their health, their lives, and their livelihoods, at the centre, not money.

Holding countries accountable for their climate-related policies is also a matter of fairness. The countries that have historically contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions are being hit the hardest.

As is so often the case, one of the biggest barriers that stand in the way of realizing the right to health is poverty. Poverty is sexist. It burdens women the most.

We need fairness. We need justice. And we need global solidarity. All countries need to work together to cut carbon emissions. But let's look at the reality.

The poorest households in the world are forced to rely on the most polluting energy sources just for everyday cooking and heating. Use of these energy sources, which cause heavy indoor air pollution, is associated with more than 3.5 million deaths each year.

Half of all health facilities in some African countries do not have reliable access to electricity and clean running water. This was a hazard that came under the spotlight during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

The Paris agreement, with its central reference to human rights, including the right to health, is a welcome step forward. However, the agreement is largely voluntary and subject to interpretation.

What we need now is an agenda for action that doubles as a results-based framework for accountability. Accountability means counting. WHO keeps health statistics documenting both the direct and indirect consequences of climate change.

To define an action agenda, WHO will host a second global conference on health and climate this year, hopefully in July.

To support accountable action, WHO and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change will jointly roll out climate and health profiles for individual countries. These profiles focus on the health risks and opportunities for the most vulnerable populations. They also track compliance with the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions in terms of their impact on health.

The declaration to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development describes climate change as "one of the greatest challenges of our time." As noted, "its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development."

Without a strong agenda for action on climate change, most of the 17 goals will be utopian. The hard-won gains for health since the start of this

century can easily be swept away by the tidal wave of health threats unleashed by climate change.

A ruined planet cannot sustain human lives in good health.

Thank you.

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