

Message

By
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At

World Health Day, 2008

WHO/SEARO, New Delhi, India
7 April 2008

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Colleagues and friends, ladies and gentlemen,

Today, the 7th of April is the World Health Day. Today is also the 60th anniversary of the World Health Organization, which is the Specialized Agency in Health of the United Nations System. It is our Organization, it is our home.

During the past 60 years, there have been many changes in the international health arena within which the World Health Organization has been pursuing its mission. And during these years there have been a multitude of health challenges that the Organization has faced in its collaboration with Member States. Very important among the several formidable health challenges today is the challenge of climate change. It is a challenge that calls for WHO's urgent action in contributing to the protection of human health around the world from climate change. Therefore, "Protecting Health from the Climate Change" has been selected as the theme for this year's World Health Day. This is to highlight the worrying relationship between climate change and human well-being.

Scientific evidence that is now available shows that global warming due to climate change is real and happening. And that climate change is linked directly to human activities that produce greenhouse gases. It is now universally acknowledged that climate change will continue for a long time with serious health implications. Warming of the climatic system is unquestionable. It is really occurring. Air and ocean temperatures are increasing. There is widespread melting of snow and ice. The global average sea level is rising.

Anthropogenic warming could lead to significant impacts on the global ecosystem that are abrupt or irreversible. This would depend on the rate and magnitude of climate change. Warmer temperatures will lead to more frequent and more intense cyclones. Warmer temperatures will also lead to unusual patterns of rains and floods. But, in some places there will be droughts. The consequences of climate change will affect water availability and food production. Coastal areas will be at greatest risk of flooding from increasing sea levels. And this will lead to land loss – this will be a very important loss to the inhabitants in many parts of the world. These consequences of climate change will trigger major population displacements. In Bangladesh, one of the most vulnerable countries, a rise in the sea level of 1.5 metres, which could be possible due to climate change, would submerge 22,000 square kilometres of land, and displace 17 million poor people. And, indeed, these will cause economic difficulty, social conflicts and political unrest. The effects from climate change will impact on all countries in the South-East Asia (SEA) Region. Rapid glacier melting in the Himalayas will increase flooding and rock avalanches.

Water and food scarcity, particularly in the large river basins, will be the long term effects.

Climate change is projected to have many serious health effects in the coming decades. If the increase in greenhouse emissions continues at the current pace, air quality will suffer greatly. And respiratory illnesses will be exacerbated. Heat waves will be harsher and of longer duration. The accumulation of heat-trapping greenhouse gases will cause temperatures to continue rising. By the end of this century, the global average temperature may increase by 6.4 degrees Celsius. This phenomenon will lead to dramatic and permanent changes to the overall spectrum of our planet. Lack of safe water due to disappearance of snow and glaciers will trigger water-borne diseases. Higher temperature will allow many disease vectors to thrive. Globally, people in the greatest danger include the very young, the elderly and the medically weak. Low-income countries will have difficulty in adapting to climate change. The effects of climate change will seriously undermine health and well-being of populations in those countries. The effects of climate change impact not only the physical health, but also the mental and social health and well-being of people.

Countries in the South-East Asia Region bear a high burden of diseases that are climate sensitive. And these countries generally have a weak public health capacity to respond to the health effects of climate change. Therefore, they are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Climate change is here, and it poses enormous challenges to all of us. It is a part of the other equally complex shifts in the global conditions that profoundly affect human well-being. Changes in the global economy compounded by climate change have affected people in many unanticipated ways; the effects are both health and non-health. However, countries may not need to create any new health programmes to address the effects of climate change. What is needed is an urgent strengthening of their existing public health systems and public health programmes; this must be done with close involvement of other sectors. Key preventive public health actions will need to be highlighted, aiming towards improving health today, and reducing the vulnerability to climate change. To bring about health benefits from these preventive actions, in both the short and long terms, it is imperative for all governments to make policy changes. And for all people to effect changes in their behaviours and lifestyles. If climate-sensitive health problems are given adequate attention, effective actions to protect health from climate change will be taken timely.

The climate change scenario is challenging indeed. To slow down the changing process and get ready for the inevitable, we have to act now as a community, and as an institution, and as an individual. While trying to protect human health from the effects of climate change, we have also to contribute to reducing greenhouse gases. Many things can be done individually and collectively to help reduce greenhouse emissions. We know what should be done. Let us take action now!

And, even more important, as far as health is concerned, let us do whatever we can individually and collectively to reduce the vulnerability and threat to health due to climate change.

Thank you.