

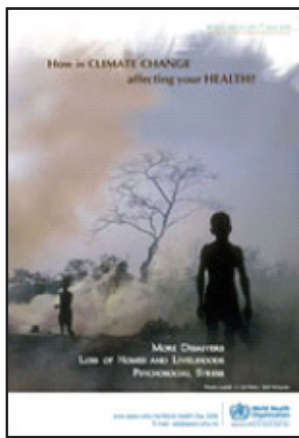


Highlights

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Focus of the month

Climate change and health: empowering local communities for resilience



Climate change is on everyone's lips. To some, it may be a buzzword, to others a curiosity, and for still others, a concern of intense dimensions. Ultimately, the concern must prevail, for in the long run, we are talking about our very existence on planet Earth. The

story behind the news is about the survival of human beings on this planet. How we plunder – in ignorance or in ignominy – the vast blessings of mother earth. But the need to have more could ultimately lead to our own impoverishment or even destruction.

Conceived for decades as purely a meteorological event, the global warming issue provided a lobbying platform for environmentalists, whose actions focused on saving wildlife and habitats. Later, the increasing focus on the human aspect of climate change brought to the fore the issue of human health. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) attests to the centrality of the health concerns in its recent reports. WHO's involvement has been significant, and we will continue to explain the climate change and health linkages and advocate for a cogent health sector response.

Linking climate change effects to health has its challenges. Even in the everyday situation, those who are not sick take health for granted.

So the "prevention is better than cure" message is even harder to communicate on an issue such as climate change and health which is qualitatively very different from our daily health concerns. The causal link here is more convoluted, for instance, the link between contaminated water and diarrhoeal disease. With global warming, floods will contaminate drinking water that will in turn cause diarrhoeal disease. Drought will lead to agricultural crop failure, resulting in food scarcity and malnutrition. But the message must be given that climate change effects relate to ecosystem changes threatening the core of our biological existences and will not present themselves as direct and localized effects. Instead climate change can have cascading detrimental effects on myriad environmental factors. These are complex phenomena that have no simple, direct or linear links to each other. These inherent uncertainties restrict a truly



confident prediction or extrapolation of effects over the long-term. The uncertainty about when the "tipping point" may be reached, beyond which there may be no hope of getting back on track, is one of the most disturbing aspects of climate change.

Huge efforts of the health sector and health advocates will be needed to convey this connection of climate change and health and still more to incite action. We must advocate and act with a full awareness of the range of consequences of global warming – heat stress, extreme weather events, infectious diseases, declining food yields, hunger etc. – and



awareness also of the setbacks these may pose for the achievement of our local, regional and global health goals.

The health sector has to be alert on this issue. But the shortcomings of the health sector are also evident – in the types of expertise, resources and programme, which focus predominantly on the clinical rather than the public health dimension. In many of our countries, the health sector will have to learn to look beyond the individual, towards sustaining the health of whole communities. Preparing to empower local action, both on mitigation and adaptation, is necessary, because this is where the first action will need to be taken when disasters happen. By themselves, communities cannot take these steps. Huge investments

will be needed and advocacy must be undertaken by those who have a big voice. It is big government, and not the small individual, who can deliver the message loudly and broadly. We will need empowered thinking and skills of local communities to increase their resilience to withstand climate change effects, both on health and other areas. The health sector must act very creatively, looking not just at quick fixes, but to the root causes and long-term solutions.

Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf¹

¹ Director, Department of Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments, WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, New Delhi

SDE news

TWG meeting aligns under 3-R concept



The first meeting of the Technical Working Group (TWG) on solid and hazardous wastes, was held in Singapore on 28-29 February 2008. Sponsored by the Central Environment Authority of the Ministry of Environment of Singapore and resourced by the Ministry of Environment, Japan, the meeting reviewed the TWG members' progress in taking forward the Plan of Action endorsed by the First Regional Ministers Forum held in Bangkok last year². Representatives from China, Japan, Indonesia, Lao PDR,

Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, WHO, UNEP, ADB, AIT, Pacific Basin Consortium and several NGOs participated.

The work of this TWG on solid and hazardous waste is to make policy-makers more aware of the issues of managing such hazards and help address the challenges. TWGs would do this by strengthening data, information and knowledge-sharing among countries. The meeting discussed municipal and medical waste management good practices in participating countries. The 3-R concept (reduce, recycle and reuse) helps to align all waste management programmes under a common policy framework of environmentally friendly management, and seeks ways to minimize open dumping in landfills or open burning.

The meeting decided on the TWG's future programmes to include compiling and analysing data from countries on the status of solid and hazardous waste management; producing a draft report on medical waste management in countries; compiling good practices evidence from countries, and the gap analysis for future remedial action; training programme on adopting lessons from best practice situations and skills development for programme management. WHO SEARO's Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf, Director, Department of Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments participated on behalf of the Forum Secretariat. He presented on the SEA situation on health care waste. For details, contact Dr A Sattar Yoosuf at yoosufa@searo.who.int.

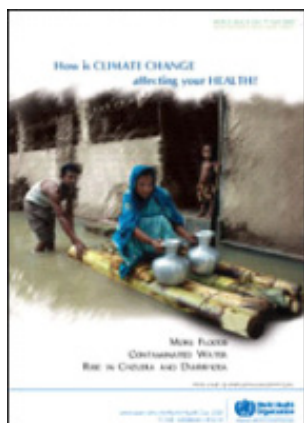
² The first Ministerial Regional Forum on Environment and Health in South-East and East Asia was held in Bangkok, Thailand on 9 August 2007, where a Bangkok Declaration and a Plan of Action for an Environment and Health Initiative were endorsed. Six Technical Working Groups (TWGs) on six key environmental concerns, were also constituted to follow up on this Plan. These TWGs are on air quality; water supply, hygiene and sanitation; solid and hazardous waste; toxic chemicals and hazardous substances; climate change, ozone depletion and ecosystem changes and; contingency planning, preparedness and response in environmental health emergencies.

World Water Day, 22 March 2008

World Water Day 2008 was celebrated on 22 March 2008 with the theme "Sanitation Matters!" in support of the ongoing International Year of Sanitation. World Water Day is an occasion to commit and rededicate ourselves to

improving the quality of our drinking water and promote behavioral change towards better sanitation. This year, SEARO provided countries with advocacy guides and information kits that included a message from the Regional Director, and various cases of sanitation best practices from the Region. All SEA countries celebrated the day, committing to accelerate sanitation coverage to meet the MDGs. SEARO also marked the day with an awareness and orientation session for its staff. Further details are available at the link http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section23/Section1000_14260.htm.

World Health Day focus is on Climate Change and Health



In 1948, the First World Health Assembly called for the creation of a "World Health Day" to mark the founding of the World Health Organization. Since 1950, World Health Day (WHD) has been celebrated on the 7th of April. Each year a theme is selected that highlights a priority area of concern for WHO. This day gives a worldwide opportunity to focus on key public health

issues that affect the international community. World Health Day also launches longer-term advocacy programmes that continue well beyond 7 April.

This year's WHD theme was "PROTECTING HEALTH FROM CLIMATE CHANGE," with the goal of raising awareness and public understanding of the health consequences of climate change and sparking the commitment of governments, international organizations, donors, civil society, businesses and communities to collaborate to put health at the center of the climate change agenda. The health impacts of climate change can be tackled by strengthening our actions on primary health care in our communities, addressing the Millennium Development Goals, being vigilant to the social determinants of health, and health system strengthening. WHO will promote front-line defenses by identifying key preventive public health actions both to improve community health today and to reduce vulnerability in the future. It will emphasize also the call on all stakeholders for policy changes in such areas as clean energy and sustainable transport systems to bring immediate health benefits.



SEARO's action on WHD involved a WHO Calendar for 2008 on the theme of climate change (soft copy available at the link http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section260/Section2468_13924.htm); lectures on climate change and health by subject experts³ for sensitizing WHO staff members on the health

impact of climate change; preparing an advocacy docket containing WHO fact sheets and a message from the Regional Director (details available at the links (http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section260/Section2468_13927.htm; http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section260/Section2468_13932.htm); WHO souvenirs displaying the WHD message; WHD posters (soft versions available at the link http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section260/Section2468_13928.htm); a toolkit for event organizers {soft copy available at the link (http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section260/Section2468_13925.htm); release of a Regional Health Forum issue containing articles on the WHD theme from well-known health experts; a pictorial version of WHO's Sixtieth anniversary publication; launch of a website dedicated to WHD (<http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section260/Section2468.htm>; <http://www.who.int/world-health-day/en/index.html>); school booklets for teachers and students (soft copy available at the link http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section260/Section2468_13925.htm); and a proposed greening programme for SEARO, to assess the carbon footprint of the SEARO building⁴. A baseline study identified the key contributors to the SEARO carbon footprint and the key elements that shape workplace safety and health.

More information is available from Mr Alexander Hildebrand (hildebranda@searo.who.int).

³ Presentations by Dr Andy Reisinger (member of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize Co-Winner Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), lead author of the Fourth Assessment Report and currently Head, Technical Support Unit, IPCC Synthesis Report at the Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) in India); Dr Terry Cannon (Reader, Development Studies and Research Fellow of the Natural Resources Institute, School of Humanities, University of Greenwich, London); Dr Anthony McMichael (Director of National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, ANU College of Medicine and Health Sciences, the Australian National University).

⁴ Taking into account UN Secretary General's commitment of rendering all United Nations carbon neutral, the Regional Director decided, as a first step, to assess the carbon footprint and environmental performance of the SEARO premises.

EH NEWS

WHO photo exhibition: public health over the past 60 years

To commemorate the 60th anniversary of WHO, a photo exhibition with photographs spanning the 60 years of WHO will be exhibited around the world in 2008. The exhibit, based on the anniversary theme of "Our health, our future", tells the story of WHO and public health over the last 60 years. It features key public health milestones including the development of the first successful polio vaccine, the

eradication of smallpox, primary health care, tobacco control and the revision of the International Health Regulations.

The exhibit opened on 21 January 2008 at the WHO Executive Board's 122nd session. It was displayed at United Nations headquarters in New York to coincide with World Health Day on 7 April. It will return to Geneva for the World Health Assembly in May and travel to the regions during August and September.

Photos along with the milestones available at the link <http://www.who.int/features/history/en/index.html>.

Visits and missions

Annual Scientific Sessions of Sri Lanka Medical Association

The Sri Lanka Medical Association organized its annual scientific session on 19-22 March 2008. This session included a symposium on hospital waste management. The

Sri Lanka Medical Association is the oldest such association in Australasia and has members from all disciplines of medicine in Sri Lanka. Mr Alexander Hildebrand, Environmental Health Adviser, WHO SEARO, participated in the session as a WHO resource person and presented on sound management of health care waste. For details, contact Mr Alexander Hildebrand at hildebranda@searo.who.int.

Publications and Learning Materials

Climate change and health: preparing for unprecedented challenges

Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, at the 2007 David E. Barnes Global Health Lecture, Bethesda, Maryland, USA on 10 December 2007, stressed the need for preparing for the unprecedented challenge of climate change impacts on health. The speech is available at the link http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2007/20071211_maryland/en/print.html

The impact of climate change on human health

The Statement by Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, given on World Health Day, 7 April 2008. Detailed message available at the link <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2008/s05/en/index.html>

Essential environmental health standards in health care

Health-care associated infections contribute to morbidity and mortality, and to a loss of health-sector and household resources worldwide. The development and implementation of national policies, guidelines on safe practices, training and promotion of effective messages



in a context of healthy medical facilities will decrease the number of infections associated with health-care settings. Health-care settings include hospitals, health centres, clinics, dental surgeries and general practitioner facilities. This document deals specifically with essential environmental health standards

required for health-care settings in medium- and low-resource countries for the purpose of assessing prevailing situations and planning the improvements for developing and reaching essential safety standards as a first goal; for supporting the development and application of national policies. These guidelines have been written for use by health managers and planners, architects, urban planners, water and sanitation staff, clinical and nursing staff, other health-care providers and health promoters. For details, visit the link http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/hygiene/settings/ehs_health_%20care.pdf.

Flowing away: water and health opportunities

This article by Dr Jamie Bertram talks about how health institutions have become distanced from water and sanitation since the 1970s, despite long-standing evidence that water, sanitation and hygiene are fundamental to health. For the detailed article, click the website <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/1/07-049619.pdf>

Previous issues of Environmental Health Update are available at
http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section23_12688.htm

TIPS for Green Behaviour

We can halve our emissions by moving our air conditioner thermostat up by 5°degrees Celsius in summer. Almost half of the energy we use in our homes goes to cooling. Maintaining the filters on our air conditioners by cleaning them regularly can save pounds of carbon dioxide a year. Replacing the bulbs we use most with compact fluorescent lamps or CFL bulbs is another way of saving energy. They cost more than ordinary lamps but we end up saving money because they use only about one-quarter of the electricity to provide the same light. And they last four times longer than normal light bulbs.

Upcoming Events

- FAO/WHO consultation on development of a training manual on development and use of pesticide specifications, WHO/HQ, Geneva, 7-9 May 2008
- International Workshop on Children's Environmental Health Indicators: Five Years after the Global Commitment at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Hammamet, Tunisia, 10-11 April 2008 (organizer – Director, PHE, WHO-HQ) (http://www.who.int/ceh/cehi_workshop_tunisia2008/en/index.html)
- The Third Global Conference of the Alliance for Healthy Cities in Ichikawa, Japan, 23-26 October 2008 (www.city.ichikawa.chiba.jp/afhc2008/english/)

SDE Focal Points

Country Offices

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