

Message from the Regional Director



Climate change is here, and it is here to stay. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change IPCC, winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize, has provided the scientific evidence. Greenhouse gas emissions – mainly man made – have already increased the temperature of the atmosphere with no parallel in the pre-industrial period.

The direct effects of global warming are being felt today everywhere. The ice shelves in Antarctica and the glaciers in the Himalayas are rapidly melting. The frequency and intensity of tropical storms are increasing; rising in sea levels are being observed and rainfall patterns have been disturbed.

While more and more attention is being given to the impacts of climate change on natural ecosystems and biodiversity, it is paramount that we recognize the affects on human health. Indeed, climate change already contributes to the global burden of disease and is responsible for an estimated 160 000 deaths annually; this contribution is expected to grow in the future.

The IPCC report highlighted a wide range of implications for human health. Climate change can cause death and disease through extreme weather events such as heatwaves, floods and droughts. At the same time, meeting increasing energy demands by greater use of fossil fuels will add to air pollution and will worsen a number of respiratory disorders.

Scarcity of water and food – mainly due to receding glaciers and irregular rains, but also to sea water intrusion in coastal areas – could increase malnutrition. In addition, climate sensitive diseases such as malaria and dengue, but also cholera and other water-borne diseases may thrive. Finally, a majority of the affected may see migration as their only solution to cope, and thus the loss of homes and livelihoods will increase psychosocial stress, affecting mental health.

In light of this scenario, it is vital for the health sector to prepare for the challenges posed by climate change. Effective action to protect human health from climate change can be achieved with stronger and well-coordinated national health systems that give priority to climate-sensitive diseases – notably at the primary care level. Key preventive public health actions will need to aim both: to improve health today and to reduce vulnerability to climate change in the future. Individuals, communities, the corporate sector and national authorities need to make the behavioural and policy changes that will bring immediate health benefits and also reduce the impact on human health from global climate change.

This challenge is possibly the biggest that humanity has ever had to confront. The first step is to raise awareness and public understanding of the health consequences of climate change and that is the objective of World Health Day 2008 and its theme of “Protecting Health from Climate Change”.

This World Health Day docket contains fact sheets, posters and more materials that should spark commitment and change among governments, international organizations, donors, civil society, businesses and communities (especially among young people) to collaborate in putting health at the heart of the climate change agenda. Above all, it will remind us that we need to act now!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samlee Plianbangchang". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Samlee Plianbangchang, MD., Dr. P.H.
Regional Director