When climate change effects hang heavily in the air

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It’s time to promote the idea of public environmental health

Climate change is a global challenge that does not respect national borders. Everyone is affected by climate change, but some are more vulnerable than the others. Children, elderly people, and those with pre-existing infirmities or medical conditions are worse affected.

A World Health Organisation assessment concluded that climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 — 38,000 due to heat exposure in elderly people, 48,000 due to diarrhoea, 60,000 due to malaria and 95,000 due to childhood malnutrition.

Not surprising then, that the importance of climate change is recognised in all international forums such as the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio 2012) and the synthesis report by the UN Secretary General in December 2014.

This has been further reaffirmed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In fact, entry 13 of SDG calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impact. And the main suggested actions relate to strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity; integrating climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning, and increasing awareness on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.

The significance of such action increases since climate change affects health directly and indirectly — extreme high air temperatures contribute to increased deaths from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, particularly in elderly populations.

Weather related natural disasters, rising sea levels and increasingly extreme weather conditions destroy homes, health facilities and essential services leading to a range of health effects, including higher incidence of mental disorders and communicable diseases. Variable rainfall patterns affect food production and supply of fresh water leading to risk of water-borne diseases as also change in vector breeding patterns.

India impact

Information on the impact of climate change on health in India is rather limited although there is some data on malaria burden. There is evidence of increasing malaria prevalence throughout India (NVBDCP, 2007). This stems partially from economic activities and in part from climate change; recent models predict the spread of malaria into new regions in the 2050s and 2080s.

Another noticeable trend is that the Indian annual mean temperature showed significant warming of 0.51 degree C per 100 year, during 1901–2007, mainly due to accelerated warming observed in the recent period, 1998–2007.
Globally, there have been numerous efforts to address the adverse impact of climate change. In 2015, the WHO Executive Board endorsed a new action plan on climate change and health. The historic COP 21 has succeeded in including “Health” in the Preamble of the Paris Agreement, inviting parties to give due consideration to the right to health while dealing with climate change.

In 2008, India formulated its first National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), outlining the existing and future policies and programmes for addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation. The national environment and health strategy and action plan are being developed by a group of experts.

Climate change and its effect on health are clearly recognised and the two are inexorably linked. All the stakeholders should come together to mitigate the impact of climate change and more importantly seize the moment for a sustainable future.

There is also the need to strengthen health infrastructure to make them climate resilient so that services are not affected due to disasters. As part of the health sector ecosystem, we also need to play a key role in reducing our own ecological footprint as we promote public environmental health.

(The writer is the World Health Organisation’s Representative to India. Views expressed are personal.)

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