

Climate Change and the Right of Everyone to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Physical and Mental Health (A/HRC/32/23)



Summary:

Pursuant to Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution 29/15, OHCHR submitted an analytical study on the relationship between climate change and the right to health to the thirty-second session of the Council. Inputs from States, civil society organizations, international organizations and national human rights institutions were summarized in a conference room paper prepared in advance of the HRC panel discussion on climate change and the right to health in March 2016. The panel discussion, the written submissions, and independent research informed the analytical study.

The study examines the impacts of climate change on the right to health; the relevant human rights obligations and responsibilities of actors; and the benefits of a rights-based approach to addressing climate change. It concludes with recommendations for fulfilling human rights obligations related to health in the context of climate change.

Key Findings

Climate change is a threat multiplier. Its negative impacts are disproportionately borne by persons and communities already in disadvantaged situations owing to geography, poverty, gender, age, disability, or cultural or ethnic background, among others. Climate change contributes, inter alia, to the increasing frequency of extreme weather events and natural disasters, rising sea levels, floods, heatwaves, drought, the spread of tropical and vector-borne diseases, ecosystem damage and associated displacement of persons all of which have far-reaching implications for health beyond even those listed below.

- **Premature death:** At its most extreme, **climate change kills**. One recent study linked 400,000 deaths a year to climate change.
- **Temperature:** Increases in the frequency and intensity of heat waves will increase heat-related deaths among persons aged over 65 years resulting in 100,000 additional deaths per year as of 2050. Heat waves also contribute to increased incidence of cardiovascular and respiratory disease.
- **Air Pollution:** Climate change can exacerbate some forms of air pollution, and the sources of greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants are often the same. Respectively, household air pollution and ambient air pollution are estimated to cause nearly 4.3 million deaths and 3.7 million deaths per year.
- **Water:** It is estimated that a 2°C increase in average global temperature may result in 1 to 2 billion people lacking an adequate supply of water.
- **Extreme Weather:** Climate change contributes to the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters and their associated health impacts which include injury, disability, death and infectious disease transmission. Between 2005 and 2015, disasters affected more than 1.5 billion people. Climate or weather-related disasters displaced an estimated 22.5 million people over each of the past 7 years.
- **Disease:** Climate change has multiple impacts on transmission of diseases. Natural disasters, for example, destroy water and sanitation infrastructure contributing to outbreaks of water and insect-borne diseases. Warming also expands the geographical range of disease vectors like the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that transmits zika, dengue and chikungunya, among other diseases.
- **Nutrition:** Climate change affects nutrition through changes in crop yields, loss of livelihoods, increases in poverty, and reduced access to food, water and sanitation. It is estimated that a 2°C increase in average global temperature would put between 100 and 400 million more people at risk of hunger and could result in 3 million additional deaths from malnutrition each year.
- **Mental Health:** Climate impacts on mental health stem from immediate physical effects and more gradual effects on the environment, human systems, and infrastructure. People who experience losses, or are exposed to life-threatening situations, experience higher risks of developing anxiety-related conditions, including PTSD and depression.

States have an affirmative obligation to address the human rights impacts of climate change

The Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Declaration on the Right to Development all make clear that the human rights obligations of States require both individual action and international cooperation. Under these instruments, States, acting individually and collectively, are obligated to mobilize and allocate the maximum available resources for the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as for the advancement of civil and political rights and the right to development. Failure to adopt adequate measures to prevent ongoing and foreseeable future human rights harm caused by climate change breaches this obligation. **States must:**

- take measures to mitigate climate change and prevent its negative human rights impacts;
- ensure that all persons, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have adequate capacity to adapt to changing climactic conditions;
- regulate the private sector in order to mitigate its contribution to climate change and ensure respect for human rights.

Key Recommendations

To fulfil the right to health, governments, civil society, the private sector, international partners and individuals must collaborate to protect the environment and achieve sustainable development that meets the needs of present and future generations. Immediate action should be taken to address the impacts of climate change on enjoyment of the right to health. States should, inter alia:

- Mitigate climate change to the greatest extent possible and achieve the 1.5°C target laid out in the Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
- Ensure that all persons, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have the capacity to adapt to changing climactic conditions and that all measures to mitigate climate change respect human rights.
- Take measures to fulfil their minimum core obligations with regard to the right to health, including through universal health coverage and social protection floors.
- Integrate policies on health and human rights in their national action plans for climate mitigation and adaptation and in other climate policies and actions at all levels.
- Develop sustainable and resilient health systems and infrastructure, including for water and sanitation.
- Improve emergency response capabilities and early-warning systems including through increased transparency.
- Integrate climate change and migrants' health into their development, health and disaster risk reduction, and management policies.
- Ensure participation of persons and groups vulnerable to climate change in relevant policy-making, including processes and mechanisms relating to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
- Develop and monitor relevant human rights indicators in the context of climate change.
- Prioritize climate adaptation and mitigation measures that lead to direct reductions in the burden of ill-health, enhance community resilience, alleviate poverty and reduce inequality.
- Cooperate based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibility to ensure adequate funding of, and research into, mitigation and adaptation measures that will help the poorest countries and those persons, groups and peoples most at risk.