

7 April 2008

## 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!



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### PROTECTING HEALTH FROM CLIMATE CHANGE

World Health Day is a significant worldwide event of the World Health Organization. Since 1950, it has been held each year on 7 April to raise awareness of key global health issues. This year's theme is Protecting Health from Climate Change.

The theme “Protecting Health from Climate Change” puts health at centre stage: it was selected in recognition that climate change is posing ever growing threats to global public health security. Through increased collaboration, the global community will be better prepared to cope with climate-related health challenges worldwide and in regions, countries and communities. Examples of such actions are strengthening surveillance and control of infectious diseases, ensuring safer use of diminishing water supplies, and coordinating health action in emergencies.

Source: World Health Organization (<http://www.who.int/world-health-day/toolkit/en/>)

## KEY MESSAGES FOR WORLD HEALTH DAY 2008

### 1. Health is one of the areas most affected by climate change – and it is being affected now

The science is clear. The earth is warming, the warming is accelerating, and human actions are responsible. If current warming trends remain uncontrolled, humanity will face more injury, disease and death related to natural disasters and heatwaves; higher rates of foodborne, waterborne, and vector-borne illness; and more premature deaths and disease related to air pollution. Moreover, in many parts of the world, large populations will be displaced by rising sea level and affected by drought and famine. As glaciers melt, the hydrological cycle shifts and the productivity of arable land changes. We are beginning to be able to measure some of these effects on health even now.

### 2. The health impacts of climate change will hit the poor hardest

The physical effects of climate change will vary in different geographical locations. The human health impacts from climate change are further modified by such conditions as level of development, poverty and education, public health infrastructure, land use practices and political structure. Initially, developing countries will be hit the hardest. Countries with high levels of poverty and malnutrition, weak health infrastructures and/or political unrest will be the least able to cope. Moreover, if we fail to address climate change and its effects on health, we risk jeopardizing even further our ability to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

### 3. Traditional public health tools are important components of effective response to climate change

Clean water and sanitation; safe and adequate food; immunization; disease surveillance and response; safe and effective disease vector control; and disaster preparedness are all critical components of public health practices that are also adaptations to climate change. These programmes need to be strengthened globally with special concentration of effort in high-risk locations and populations in order to prevent climate-related injury, disease and death.

### 4. Cross-sector, interdisciplinary partnerships are necessary to meet this global health threat

Climate change is wide ranging, and effective adaptation will require the building of partnerships to leverage the expertise of government agencies, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, industry and professional groups and local communities. Decisions affecting urban planning, transport, energy supply, food production, land use and water resources affect both climate and health. Collaboration across all these sectors is needed to find the innovative and effective solutions that will stabilize climate and protect health.

### 5. Action must begin now to protect health by applying both adaptation and mitigation

Scientific uncertainty persists about the possibility and timing of abrupt and catastrophic climate change if temperatures continue to rise. This makes it urgent for action to begin now to stabilize the climate through strong and effective mitigation undertaken simultaneously with adaptation activities to prevent increases in foreseeable climate-related illnesses. Full participation of the health sector in national and international processes for mitigation and adaptation to climate change is essential.

Source: World Health Organization ([http://www.who.int/world-health-day/key\\_messages/en/](http://www.who.int/world-health-day/key_messages/en/))

## Important excerpt in the RD's message

**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.

**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.

**Climate sensitive diseases** such as malaria and dengue, but also cholera and other water-borne diseases may thrive.

**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.

**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”.