

Civil Society Call To Action

WHO Health and Climate Conference, Geneva, August 29, 2014

We congratulate the World Health Organization on their vision and leadership in convening this week's Health and Climate Summit, an historic event which has brought together policy makers, health professionals, academics and civil society representatives from around the world.

Climate change poses an urgent threat to human health, and the impacts are already being felt around the world. Without transformative system change, they will become dramatically worse, particularly in the poorest regions - which have contributed least to the causes of climate change.

The health sector everywhere needs to play a central role in addressing climate change—the greatest health threat of the 21st century. We must reduce healthcare's climate footprint, make our health systems more resilient, and most importantly advocate for a fundamental shift in energy, transport and agriculture policies. Our task is to end our dependency on fossil fuels, a move that can help tackle both climate change and the rise in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, stroke, and asthma.

As Christiana Figueres, Chair of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, said during this meeting, “climate change is not the equivalent of a disease: it is a symptom. The cause is our unbridled dependence on fossil fuels”. We know that we cannot safely burn the majority of the world's proven fossil fuel reserves; if we do, the health impacts will be immense. A transition to renewable energy both reduces greenhouse gas emissions and offers substantial short-term health benefits, saving billions of dollars in healthcare costs, particularly by reducing air pollution.

Just as the health sector has divested from tobacco, it now needs to act on this even greater threat. We consider the transfer of financial resources away from fossil fuels and towards clean, healthy, renewable energy through a “divest-invest” framework to be one of the most important steps we need to take. This entails the phasing out of investments in, and subsidies for, fossil fuels, which harm health, alongside a dramatic increase in investment in healthy and sustainable alternatives. The health sector can make an important contribution to this profound shift.

The health sector – the WHO, health ministries, local authorities, health care providers, professional bodies, and non-governmental organizations - must mobilize to lead the transformation to a low-carbon, healthy and climate-resilient society.

We call on all health leaders to:

- Declare climate change a global public health emergency, and take urgent measures to address it.
- Advocate for all governments to adopt an international climate agreement in 2015 which is both fair and sufficiently ambitious to protect health, and for developed countries to fulfill their obligations under the UNFCCC to provide the most vulnerable countries with the resources to respond to climate change.
- Lead by example, making sustainability core business for the health sector, including by implementing low-carbon healthcare and public health policies.
- Support broad, transformative societal change to transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable healthy energy through a divest-invest approach, and by ending subsidies for fossil fuels.

In the words of WHO Director General, Dr. Margaret Chan, “climate change is the defining issue of the 21st Century.” As representatives of the health sector, we share a responsibility to confront this, the greatest health threat we face, and to transform it into a health opportunity for all.

This statement was coordinated by the Global Climate and Health Alliance, together with many of its members. The signatory organisations, represented at the 2014 WHO Conference on Health and Climate, include:

Arnhold Global Health Institute of Mount Sinai, New York USA
Centre for Frugal Medical Technology for Developing Countries
Climate and Health Alliance, Australia
Climate and Health Council, UK
Health and Environment Alliance
Health Care Without Harm
H-Earth - Health-EARTH
Healthy Planet UK
International Federation of Medical Students' Association (IFMSA)
Medsin
OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council
Public Health Institute
The Mobilizing Action Toward Climate Change and Health (MATCCH) Initiative
US Climate and Health Alliance