

“Taking into account Health to enhance mitigation ambition”

WHO inputs to the Co-chairs of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP)

The following submission has been prepared by the WHO Department of Public Health and Environment. The summary of evidence and proposals for consideration draw heavily on the report “Our Planet, Our Health, Our Future: Human Health and the Rio conventions” jointly produced by WHO and the Secretariats of the UNFCCC, CBD and UNCCD¹.

1. Framing health and climate change

The health impacts of climate change act as a tangible indicator of global progress on climate change efforts. In this regard, health is a more readily accessible concept than, for example, either carbon dioxide emissions or sustainable development. Health provides a strong link between climate change and sustainable development. Together with the health co-benefits of climate change mitigation, this forms a positive message around climate change mitigation and adaptation.

It can serve as an important reminder to governments and civil society alike that there are significant health-care savings to be had from mitigation efforts, and that the ultimate objective of the UNFCCC is not only to avoid the worst impacts of climate change but also to create a healthier sustainable future. Within the UNFCCC negotiations themselves, this aim could be promoted by recalling the original article 1 definition of “adverse effects”, and adopting health indicators as an additional marker of global progress to enhance public understanding and political accountability.

This contribution outlines the position of health as a central justification for international action on climate change. It summarizes the continually strengthening evidence for the links between human health and climate change. It further considers opportunities to improve policy linkages within the implementation of the UNFCCC and related mechanisms in order to promote both climate and health goals.

2. Mitigation of climate change and its co-benefits for health

If designed wisely, policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions have the potential to improve public health substantially, reducing the global burden of a number of diseases, including heart disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, mental illness, lung disease and road deaths and injuries. These ancillary benefits (co-benefits) of mitigation highlight that what is good for the environment is often also good for health. However, it is possible for this pattern to be reversed, and some mitigation policies have the potential to harm human health.

There are significant cost savings to be made as a result of improved public health, which has important implications for the cost and viability of mitigation policies. Additionally, a health perspective provides a number of practical applications in its ability to identify the potential negative health impacts of well-meaning response measures and assist in the prioritization of climate change mitigation programmes.

2.1 Potential health gains through mitigation in key sectors

The co-benefits of mitigation to health are often looked at from a sectoral approach, and provide a catalytic argument for the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions. The potential for health co-benefits has been described in recent years in a series of papers examining health implications of case

¹ For more information please refer to the chapter 2 of the WHO report “Human health and the Rio Conventions”

<http://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/reports/healthintherioconventions/en/index.html>

studies of mitigation policies in major sectors, and a WHO series, Health in the Green Economy, which reviews the health impacts and benefits of the mitigation policies assessed in the fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Key sectors where such policies are of particular importance include household energy, transport, food and agriculture, and electricity generation.

2.2 Economic gains from health co-benefits

Early evidence on economic valuation of the health co-benefits of climate change policy suggests the potential for very large gains for national economies. Valuation studies to date have mainly considered benefits through air pollution, and conclude that even considering only this mechanism, improvements in health could largely cover the economic costs of the mitigation measures.

For example, a recent study in the European Union estimated the health benefits of reaching defined emission reductions targets through potential reductions in chronic respiratory and cardiovascular disease (and resultant loss of productivity) and improvements in life expectancy. It was estimated that reaching the 20% emission reduction target by 2020 would save almost €52 billion in reduced medical bills and avoided ill-health. It was further expected that a shift in European Union emission reduction targets from 20% to 30% by 2020 would result in 140 000 additional life-years and 13 million fewer non-productive days due to chronic illness. This would add up to an additional €30.5 billion, almost two thirds of the cost of the additional mitigation efforts (€46 billion). Additional savings may be found in increased productivity resulting from healthier environments and a healthier workforce. Including health and economic co-benefits gives a more comprehensive and realistic assessment of the implications of mitigation policies, and generally presents a stronger case for more sustainable choices. Consideration of the health co-benefits of climate change mitigation brings together the social, economic and environmental dimensions of climate policy, and provides an opportunity for Parties under the UNFCCC to promote a more integrated vision of sustainable development.

3 Opportunities for better linkage of climate and health goals

The health co-benefits of climate change mitigation provide one of the strongest overlaps and catalysts between mitigation and adaptation negotiations.

The UNFCCC provides a number of important opportunities for the public health community to engage with climate change at local, national and international levels. However, since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit the representation of health within the UNFCCC has been relatively weak.

Progress towards the UNFCCC goals, and overall sustainable development, could be enhanced by better utilizing the capacities of the health community.

3.1 Linking health to mitigation and adaptation efforts

The project based flexibility mechanisms under the Kyoto Protocol such as the CDM and JI provide an excellent opportunity for accelerating investment in climate change mitigation and assisting developing countries in sustainable development co-benefits, in particular health. The design and regulations of these mechanisms for sectors that offer significant health and economic co-benefits, such as the transport, housing, health infrastructure and mining sectors – could better promote health focussed sustainable development. In doing so, it is essential that regulations governing these projects facilitate the declaration, assessment, monitoring and verification of all co-benefits in particular those related to health and safety. Combined with a strong demand for offsets from an international carbon market, the continued use of flexible mechanisms like the CDM can facilitate co-benefits such as energy security, which is essential for robust and autonomous health care facilities in rural and low-income areas, benefiting both the environment and the economy of the host country.

Ensuring that the adverse effects of climate change on public health and social systems are considered within the NAPs is also a critical step to enable LDCs to adequately plan and prepare for the destabilizing effects of climate change on health and health systems. A number of appropriate responses will help to remedy these imbalances. In particular, the integration of adaptation measures with efforts to strengthen health systems and stronger engagement with the health sector at all levels in strategic planning and implementation would prove beneficial. Technical and policy support could be provided to the least developed countries through health agencies to help strengthen response measures.

The Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC has agreed that adaptation policies should be in part assessed and prioritized such that potential negative impacts on human health are minimized.

3.2 Health impact assessments

Article 4.1(f) of the Convention affirms a commitment from Parties to the Convention to ensuring that climate change policies are designed in a way that minimizes their adverse effects on public health. While there is the potential for major co-benefits between environmental and social development, they will not be unlocked without the design of integrated policies that promote health gains and manage health risks, alongside the drive to reduce environmental impact. Mandated by resolution WHA61.19 of the World Health Assembly and an action plan endorsed by its Executive Board, WHO has developed a number of relevant tools, ranging from disaster preparedness and risk reduction to climate change-specific health impact assessment guides. Within the UNFCCC, these can be used for:

- assessment of global progress on tackling the issue of climate change;
- determining whether or not implementation strategies are appropriate;
- prioritization and evaluation of mitigation and adaptation programmes.

Use of these tools can help ensure that UNFCCC policies, designed to benefit the environment and stabilize global emissions, are not simultaneously detrimental to health.