

Submission for the Ad hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA)

The World Health Organization (WHO) welcomes the opportunity to express suggestions in the framework of the work of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long Term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA) related to health issues.

Climate-sensitive risk factors and illnesses are currently among the most important contributors to the global burden of disease; these include undernutrition (estimated to kill 3.5 million people per year), diarrhoea (2.2 million) and malaria (0.9 million). These and other health outcomes will be increasingly affected by accelerating climate change, through its adverse effects on food production and food security, water availability and the population dynamics of vectors and pathogens.

Shared Vision

As specified in the 1992 UNFCCC text, action on climate change is necessary to avoid adverse impacts on human health and wellbeing, alongside damage to the environment and economic development. A greater appreciation of the human health dimensions of climate change is necessary for both the development of effective policy and the mobilization of public engagement.

Climate change, and climate policies, will profoundly affect some of the most fundamental determinants of health (i.e food, air and water). Comprehensive long-term cooperative actions are needed to formulate clear responses in order to protect and enhance human health and well-being.

Climate strategies, including mitigation, adaptation, finance and technology, should therefore properly address the health consequences of climate change.

Mitigation

As defined in the UNFCCC, climate mitigation efforts should also aim to achieve social benefits. The main benefits identified by the IPCC are for health, and they conclude that these could repay much of the cost of many mitigation interventions. Health co-benefits are also usually immediate, and local.

For example, improving household energy access for poor populations could significantly reduce the large warming contribution of black carbon, and avoid 1.5 million premature deaths each year from indoor air pollution. Other important sectors are power generation (reduced local air pollution), and transport (reduced ambient air pollution, traffic-related injury and death, and obesity rates).

Parties are encouraged to prioritize and support mitigation strategies that also improve health.

Adaptation

Strengthening of public health services needs to be a central component of adaptation. Increased investment in health systems is already necessary in order to meet the health-related Millennium Development Goals, whose achievement will be further compromised by the impact of climate change.

Additional adaptation policies and forward planning will be required to strengthen public health systems to cope with the threats posed by climate change and enhance capacity to deal with public health emergencies.

This approach will need to encompass interventions within the formal health sector, such as control of neglected tropical diseases and provision of primary health care, and actions to improve the environmental and social determinants of health, from provision of clean water and sanitation, to enhancing the welfare of women.

A common theme must be ensuring health equity and giving priority to protecting the health security of particularly vulnerable groups.

Finance & Technology

Financial Mechanisms to support climate change action should be accessible by the health sector, both to support actions that provide opportunities for improving health while reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, and to support programmes that help protect public health from climate change.