



Putting health at the centre of the climate change discussion

At a glance

- Pacific Island Countries and areas (PICs) are amongst the most vulnerable to climate change and are at the front lines of acute to long-term risks. Climate change threatens lives and livelihoods, fragile healthcare facilities – which are often located in coastal or low-lying areas – and, ultimately, some PICs' very existence.
- The priorities laid out in key vision papers and strategies, such as *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region* and the *Pacific Islands Action Plan on Climate Change and Health*, coalesce around four pillars of work: (1) advocacy to stimulate cross-sectoral action to address the health impacts of climate and environmental change; (2) building resilience into health systems to withstand the impacts of climate change and environmental threats; (3) monitoring the impact of climate change and the environment on health to inform decision-making, guide advocacy and drive action; and, (4) applying a climate change and environment lens to all areas of the health sector's work.
- With the aim of protecting populations in the Pacific from the health impacts of climate change, the Heads of Health are invited to consider the following recommendations:
 - Develop or strengthen plans to address the health impacts of climate change.
 - Support advocacy on the need for inter-sectoral and international action to address the health impacts of climate change, including at national and international fora such as COP meetings.
 - Strengthen the climate resilience of healthcare facilities, making progress towards the following 5-year targets:
 - 100% of healthcare facilities have access to basic water, sanitation, hygiene and medical waste management
 - 100% of healthcare facilities have access to electricity
 - Health infrastructure has been assessed and strengthened to withstand climate shocks and other health emergencies, including pandemics
- Identify opportunities to reduce the health sector's environmental impact (e.g. reduce the health sector's carbon footprint and waste).
- Gather and share data and evidence on the health impacts of climate change and the co-benefits of action taken by colleagues outside the health sector.
- Contribute to the digital arm of the CCE platform, sharing information, evidence, and good practices with other countries and partners.

Future vision

The islands, populations and ecosystems of the Pacific region are on the front line of acute to long-term risks of climate change -- from more extreme heatwaves, floods, storms and drought -- to increased risks of communicable and non-communicable diseases, including the emerging issue of the mental health impacts of climate change.

Additionally, sea-level rise threatens fragile healthcare facilities, which are often located in coastal or low-lying areas, the lives and livelihoods of people, and, ultimately, the very existence of some island nations.

The vision for the Pacific islands is therefore to ensure that, by 2031, countries and communities have the capacity to anticipate and respond to the health consequences of the changing climate.

To make this vision a reality, the health sector must take a leading role in catalyzing cross-sectoral action to enable health authorities and partners to work together create a healthier and greener future, working simultaneously to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic while also addressing climate change's impacts. An integrated, whole-of-society approach with health at the centre of all climate change policies and development plans will be needed. "Putting health at the centre of the climate change discussion" means that the whole of government must make this a priority at national, regional and international levels.

Recent progress

Establishing the technical advisory group on climate change, the environment and health

At the 13th PHMM in French Polynesia in August 2019, the Regional Director of WHO in the Western Pacific announced the establishment of a WHO regional platform on climate change, the environment and health (CCE Platform). At the 20th Regional Committee Meeting in October 2019, Member States of the WHO Western Pacific Region adopted *For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region*,¹ which highlights climate change, the environment and health as a thematic priority for WHO's work with countries and partners in the Region in the coming years (RC70/INF/1).

To support the implementation of the thematic priority, a technical advisory group (TAG) on climate change, environment and health (CCE-TAG) was established in April 2020. Sixteen experts from diverse backgrounds have been appointed as TAG members, in recognition of the need for a cross-cutting multidisciplinary approach to address environmental health issues. Five of these CCE TAG members are from the Pacific, acknowledging the importance of climate change and environmental issue facing PICs.

The TAG met virtually for the first time from 23 to 25 June 2020 and then a follow-up meeting in September 2020, joined by representatives from six Member States – two are from PICs. The CCE TAG identified the following pillars of work required to address the health impacts of climate change:

¹ [For the Future: Towards the Healthiest and Safest Region](#)

- 1 advocacy to raise the profile of the climate change, environment and health priority and to articulate the health co-benefits of actions and policies from non-health sectors;
- 2 building resilience into health systems to withstand the impacts of climate change and environmental threats;
- 3 monitoring the impact of climate change and the environment on health to provide timely, accurate and strategic information to inform decision-making, guide advocacy, drive action and track the impacts and successes of interventions; and,
- 4 applying a climate change and environment lens to WHO work.

These pillars align with the priorities laid out in key vision papers and strategies such as the *Pacific Islands Action Plan on Climate Change and Health*, launched by Pacific health leaders at the World Health Assembly in May 2018, and *For the Future*.

Developing the narrative on the health co-benefits of climate change mitigation and adaptation

Work has progressed on building the evidence-base and developing the narrative required to inspire those beyond the health sector to articulate the many benefits of the action they take to mitigate or adapt to climate and environmental change, including the ways that it benefits human health. PICs are also encouraged to build similar narratives to facilitate policy-level dialogues with other sectors.

Creating the digital arm of the CCE Platform

Substantial exploratory work has been completed towards the development of the digital arm of the CCE platform, including a review of 125 existing web platforms on climate change and health. The digital arm of the platform aims to serve as a central hub connecting PICs and partners with easy access to the latest guidance and best practices and tools in the Region and beyond. Once established, PICs will be encouraged to use the digital arm of the platform to share information, evidence, and good practices to promote cross-country learning and accelerate progress

Building climate resilient and environmentally sustainable healthcare facilities

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the fragility of health systems. The lack of basic water and hygiene in healthcare facilities in some countries, for example, has compromised their ability to combat the virus. Health systems across the Pacific will need to be more resilient if they are to withstand the increasing threats related to climate change.

WHO is working with PICs in developing guidance on climate resilient and environmentally sustainable healthcare facilities in the Pacific, which focuses on three features: (1) resilient, sustainable and safe water, sanitation and hygiene and waste management; (2) resilient energy for continuous and reliable health services to the populations; (3) resilient infrastructure - adaptation of healthcare infrastructures to cope and withstand climate change shocks and stresses.

Progress has been made by some countries in PICs. In March 2021, Fiji launched its national Guidelines for Climate Resilient and Environmentally Sustainable Health Care Facilities (CRESHCF).

WHO is also collecting baseline information on access to basic WASH, healthcare waste management and electricity in Pacific healthcare facilities. An energy audit has been initiated in selected PICs aiming to understand the intensity of electricity usage in major healthcare facilities with the aim of building sustainable energy supply systems.

With the support of Australia, the European Union, and other international partners, Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, Tonga, and Vanuatu are installing climate-friendly non-burning systems for healthcare waste management. These systems are strengthening healthcare waste management to meet immediate needs during the pandemic while also reducing the health system's longer-term environmental impact.

Building evidence on climate change's impacts on health

There is an underlying need for stronger scientific evidence on the health impacts of climate change. Local evidence facilitates the prioritization of local actions, including adaptation measures. The data required includes a better understanding of the spread of climate-sensitive diseases such as dengue, typhoid and leptospirosis; evidence on the impacts of climate change and variability on food and water security; and the impact of increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events on health.

With funding support from the governments of Australia and France, WHO and SPC have developed a "Manual on surveillance and control of Aedes vectors in the Pacific" which is supporting countries to better capture data on the increasing spread of these disease-carrying mosquitoes. SPC is also working collaboratively with WHO on the development of eight modules for entomology training in the region.

WHO and the Government of Korea (through the Korean International Cooperation Agency, KOICA), are working closely with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services of Fiji in undertaking an assessment of the country's healthcare facilities to identify their vulnerabilities to climate change impacts such as sea-level rise, flooding and cyclones. The objective is to build back better facilities.

Advocating for global action to tackle the health impacts of climate change

Senior government leadership from across the Pacific has been actively involved in advocating for international and intersectoral action to address the health impacts of climate change.

At the WHO-organized Race to Zero dialogue, for example, Fiji's Prime Minister delivered a keynote speech on the need to mainstream health into the climate change agenda.

Similarly, three Pacific Heads of State – from Fiji, Kiribati and Tonga – took the virtual stage at the SIDS Summit for Health: For a Healthy and Resilient Future in Small Island Developing States, hosted by the WHO Director-General on 28-29 June 2021. It was the first global gathering of SIDS leaders focused exclusively on health. Ministers of Health from Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and the Minister of Pacific Peoples and Associate Minister for Health, New Zealand, participated in the Ministerial Forum on Climate Change and Health. In keeping with the 2014 Samoa Pathway, the Summit is part of WHO strategic actions to apply a "SIDS lens" across its programme of work to fulfill commitments made in

regional and global SIDS initiatives, and to strengthen technical capacity, resilient facilities, health workforces, supply platforms, and evidence generation and use.

Meanwhile, Fiji's Minister of Health and Medical Services officially launched the Climate Resilient Health System in partnership with Spain at the 12th Petersburg Climate Dialogue on May 6. The Climate Resilient Health Systems Initiative will support the goals of the Adaptation Action Coalition by addressing the health impacts of climate change while strengthening health resilience. The initiative has a clear vision: to ensure that by 2030 all health systems worldwide have strengthened resilience against climate impacts.

Promoting the health agenda ahead of the COP26 Meeting in November 2021

To advocate for stronger integration of health in the COP26 discussion, the COP26 Presidency (the Government of UK and Ireland) and WHO are proposing a health agenda at COP26 to be held on in Glasgow, Scotland. The agenda focuses on three areas namely:

- 1) Building climate-resilient health systems;
- 2) Health leadership in emissions reduction;
- 3) A joint campaign to bring together the voice of health workers to advocate for climate action.

A special report on climate change and health will be launched which will share Regional and Member State experiences, good examples and knowledge on climate change and health.

At the Fifty-First Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Retreat², held virtually on 6 August 2021 under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister of Fiji, Pacific leaders re-affirmed their commitment to high-level political participation at COP26. The leaders present agreed that they would use COP26 to: (a) reaffirm that climate change is the single greatest threat facing the Blue Pacific and recommit to the goals of the Paris Agreement; (b) reiterate that COVID-19 must not delay global climate action but should promote recovery investments that are climate-smart and in line with a low emissions development pathway; and (c) welcome accelerating efforts to cut green-house gas emissions and keep the 1.5 degree Celsius goal of the Paris Agreement within reach.

To the health sectors, these commitments will further support the Healthy Island vision of the Yanuca Declaration endorsed by the Pacific Health Leaders in 1995.

Why urgent action is needed now

On 9th August 2021, UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, issued "a code red for humanity", noting the devastating findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6)³, including that "many changes due to past and future greenhouse gas emissions are irreversible". The report further found that, "Global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least the mid-century under all emissions scenarios considered."

² Attended by the Heads of State, Government, and Territories of Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Solomon Islands was represented at Ministerial level, and French Polynesia and Tonga by Special Envoys.

³ [AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis — IPCC](#)

Pacific island nations are already being battered by king tides, catastrophic cyclones, increasing salinity and sustained droughts. These crises are expected to increase in frequency and severity as the world gets even warmer, leading to greater food and water insecurity, and threatening lives and livelihoods.

Rising sea levels are also continuing to erode low-lying islands and atolls, destroying homes and health facilities, and threatening the very existence of some island nations. In addition to the increasing burden of climate-sensitive communicable and noncommunicable diseases, climate change is causing greater psychosocial impacts as people face being displaced from their homes and the disruption of their cultures and communities.

So, while Pacific island countries continue to advocate for the international, intersectoral efforts required to curb greenhouse gas emissions, urgent action is also required to prepare to protect people from the future impacts of climate change and to increase the resilience of health facilities so that they can continue to provide life-saving care as seas and temperatures rise.

COVID-19 has temporarily diverted attention from the climate change agenda, but it has also illustrated the centrality of health and the fragility of health systems. This has led to a greater understanding of the urgent need to ensure health systems are resilient and ready to meet the challenge of increasingly complex health emergencies – whether caused by pandemic-prone pathogens or climate-fuelled disasters.

The current influx of political and financial support for strengthening health systems in the face of the pandemic could be harnessed to also ensure that healthcare facilities are not only better able to protect communities from the threat of COVID-19, but will also have a reduced environmental impact and be able to continue serving patients in the face of a changing climate. This is the right moment to build better healthcare facilities in the Pacific, with better WASH facilities, reliable and sustainable electricity supplies and more robust infrastructure. Inter-sectoral collaboration is urgently needed to build a better and stronger workforce as well.

The following are examples of interventions that could be carried out in healthcare facilities to ensure they could provide better care during the pandemic while also increasing their climate resilience and/or environmental sustainability:

- Expanding access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene
- Installing solar panels or other feasible green energy systems to increase the availability of green energy
- Introducing non-burning equipment for medical waste management
- Building or retrofitting infrastructure to withstand climate shocks and extreme weather events

As world leaders prepare to go to COP26, where health will be a priority agenda item, the countries of the Pacific have an opportunity to capitalize on the current wave of support for health and inspire the intersectoral action required for a green and healthy pandemic recovery.

Recommendations to be considered by the Heads of Health

Recommendations for governments

Pacific Heads of Health are invited to:

- Develop or strengthen plans to address the health impacts of climate change.
- Support advocacy on the need for inter-sectoral and international action to address the health impacts of climate change, including at national and international fora such as COP meetings.
- Strengthen the climate resilience of healthcare facilities, making progress towards the following 5-year targets:
 - 100% of healthcare facilities have access to basic water, sanitation, hygiene and medical waste management
 - 100% of healthcare facilities have access to electricity
 - Health infrastructure has been assessed and strengthened to withstand climate shocks and health emergencies
- Identify opportunities to reduce the health sector's environmental impact (e.g. reduce the health sector's carbon footprint and waste).
- Gather and share data and evidence on the health impacts of climate change and the co-benefits of action taken by colleagues outside the health sector.
- Contribute to the digital arm of the CCE platform, sharing information, evidence, and good practices with other countries and partners.

Recommendations for development partners

Development partners are invited to:

- Support countries' efforts to develop or strengthen plans to address the health impacts of climate change, focusing on developmental effectiveness and identifying opportunities to optimize available resources to tackle both COVID-19 and climate change at the same time.
- Support the efforts of Pacific leaders to inspire those beyond the health sector to play their part in addressing the health impacts of climate change, including through the development of communications and advocacy tools.
- Produce and share regional guidance on climate resilient and environmentally sustainable health care facilities, and support countries in its implementation.
- Monitor the health impacts of climate change and gather and share evidence to inform decision-making, guide advocacy, drive action and track the impacts and successes of interventions.
- Facilitate cross-country sharing of ideas and best practices, including through the digital arm of the CCE platform.