Humanitarian Day at the United Nations Climate Change Conference
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Talking points for Dr Eric Laroche
Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises
World Health Organization

The Challenge
It is not a matter of IF climate change will affect health, it is a matter of how much greater will it impact on the health of people, particularly the world's poorest, if we don't do anything to fix the problem.

The reality is that today climate change is affecting the health of millions of people around the world - more so in countries already affected by war, disasters and chronic crisis.

Burkina Faso rarely ever saw flood waters, but heavy rains in September swamped its capital city and shut down its major hospital. Flood waters still fill the streets of Manila, putting millions of people at risk from disease outbreaks. Even closer to home in Europe, we have seen how heat waves, such as the 2003 summer in France, killed thousands of people and put enormous pressure on health systems.

The harmful effects of climate change are likely to make matters worse when it comes to people, mainly the world's most vulnerable, suffering further ill health. 900 000 people already die every year from malaria, a disease that threatens to expand its deadly reach due to climate change. Diarrhoea kills on average 1.8 million people annually, and increased flooding caused by climate change, mixed with population displacement and disruption to safe water and sanitation, could only make this worse. Already, 3.5 million people - so many of them children - die every year from malnutrition, and we are only left to ponder how many more of the world's future generations will succumb if drought, rising temperatures and crop failure expands.

The Response
There is much we can do already to protect the health of the world's people - particularly the poorest - from climate change. First, we need a strong agreement to be reached here in Copenhagen that will protect us from the worst humanitarian consequences of climate change. Countries must do more to prepare for disasters and implement measures that reduce the risk of floods, cyclones, drought and other hazardous climatic events to save lives and protect public and social health and wellbeing in all respects.

Background
Overview
Climate change is a matter of life and death. Around the world, the health of millions of being is already being confronted by this stark reality. This is especially the case for the men, women and children whose daily lives are battered by war, natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies.
The public health risks posed by climate change are making matters worse for these people.

- 900,000 people die every year from malaria, a disease that threatens to expand its deadly reach due to climate change.
- Diarrhoea kills on average 1.8 million people every year, and the flooding, displacement and disruption to safe water and sanitation could only make this worse.
- Already, 3.5 million people - so many of them children - die every year from malnutrition, and we are only left to ponder how many more of the world's future generations will succumb if drought, rising temperatures and crop failure expands.

In humanitarian settings, health infrastructure is often weak and at the mercies of the harmful impacts of climate change, such as cyclones and typhoons. Low-income countries and areas where under-nutrition is widespread and health services and other infrastructures are weak will have most difficulty adapting to climate change and related health hazards.

Although climate change is a global phenomenon, its consequences will not be evenly distributed. Scientists agree that developing countries and small island nations will be the first and hardest hit. The populations considered to be at greatest risk are those living in small-island developing states, mountainous regions, water-stressed areas, megacities and coastal areas in developing countries (particularly the large urban agglomerations in delta regions in Asia), and also poor people and those unprotected by health services.

A major concern is some African countries have a high burden of climate-sensitive diseases and poor public health capacity to respond.

In short, climate change can affect problems that are already huge, largely concentrated in the developing world, and difficult to combat.

**How do we respond?**

Funding is crucial to help countries adapt to the impacts of climate change. But money is not the only answer. Governments can plan for the worst and reduce risks by making their hospitals and healthcare services safer and more robust. They can prepare their staff and communities before emergencies happen.

We must build systems to manage these humanitarian impacts. We need to invest in adaptation in countries, to make hospitals and clinics more able to withstand natural disasters, to train people to be ready for disasters, to make communities ready to respond so they can save themselves before the flood waters hit.

The dangers that climate change pose are clear and deadly. Knowing what our enemy looks like and what it can do will help us fight back against it to protect our health. We will all keep working together to make the most of this opportunity and protect the health of our future generations from climate change.

Health emergency systems at community, national and international levels need to be strengthened to cope with the health threats posed by climate change, in particular in emergencies related to extreme events and sea level rise.

WHO and its partners are devising a research agenda to get better estimates of the scale and nature of health vulnerability and to identify strategies and tools for health protection. WHO recognizes the urgent need to support countries in devising ways to cope. Better systems for surveillance and forecasting, and stronger basic health services, can offer health protection.
Citizens, too, need to be fully informed of the health issues. In the end, it is their concerns that spur policymakers to take the right actions, urgently.

What are some of the other health impacts of climate change?

Disease

- Changing temperatures and patterns of rainfall are expected to alter the geographical distribution of insect vectors that spread infectious diseases. Of these diseases, malaria and dengue are of greatest public health concern, which are already huge, largely concentrated in the developing world, and difficult to control.

- Malaria, diarrhoea and malnutrition kill millions of people every year, mostly children. Without effective action to mitigate and adapt to climate change, the burden of these conditions will be greater, and they will be more difficult and more costly to control.

- Both water scarcity in some parts and excess water due to more frequent and torrential rainfall will increase the burden of diarrhoeal disease, which is spread through contaminated food and water. Diarrhoeal disease is already the second leading infectious cause of childhood death and kills approximately 1.8 million people each year.

- Climate change-related displacement will fundamentally change the global distribution of HIV/AIDS and TB and will introduce new and difficult challenges to the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of AIDS, TB and other diseases.

Nutrition/water:

- Malnutrition: Rising temperatures and more frequent droughts can compromise food security. Increases in malnutrition are expected to be especially severe in countries where large populations depend on rain-fed subsistence farming. Malnutrition, much of it caused by periodic droughts, is responsible for an estimated 3.5 million deaths each year.

- According to projections, Africa will be severely affected as early as 2020. A decade from now, crop yields in some parts of Africa are expected to drop by 50%. By 2020, water stress could affect as many as 250 million Africans.

- Imagine the impact on food security and malnutrition. Imagine the impact on food aid. In many African countries, agriculture is the principal economic activity for 70% of the populations. Among Africa's poor, 90% depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. There is no surplus. There is no coping capacity. There is no cushion to absorb the shocks.

Healthy lifestyles:

- Reducing our carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions (which are causing global warming) through better transport, food and energy use choices can result in more physical activity, less obesity, fewer transport-related injuries, cleaner air, fewer asthmatic and other respiratory diseases, better diets and less diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Extreme weather event-related disasters:

- Excess death from disasters: Climate-related disasters, such as storms and floods, result in over 60 000 deaths each year, mainly in developing countries. Also, flooding can be followed by outbreaks of diseases, such as cholera, especially when water and sanitation services are damaged or destroyed.

- Increased displaced of people is expected to result from rising sea levels.

- Heat waves, particularly in large cities, will cause more deaths. Those most at risk from heat waves include socially isolated city dwellers, mainly with cardiovascular or respiratory disease and the poor.
Environment

- Each year, almost 800,000 people die from outdoor air pollution, and 1.5 million from indoor air pollution. Worsening air quality is expected to exacerbate asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases and respiratory infections, leading to increased hospital admission and deaths.