Health actors speak out on climate change issues

From air pollution, to food security and population resilience to disease, the health impacts of climate change, received wide coverage at a range of side events at the 19th Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP19), 11–22 November in Warsaw, Poland. For the first time, a delegation of African and European health sector officials participated in the formal negotiations, demonstrating the growing recognition of the health impacts of climate change in developing regions.

"Uganda has experienced a tremendous change in weather conditions. Dry seasons have become prolonged causing drought, and crops have been destroyed; hence famine and high incidences of malnutrition," said Julian Kyomuhangi, Assistant Commissioner of Environmental Health in the Uganda Ministry of Health. "Wet seasons have brought unusually heavy rains, causing floods and landslides... loss of lives, property, food crops, and population displacement. The country has also experienced an increase in malaria incidence. Cholera has now become endemic due to the greater levels of flooding during the rainy season. We have been negotiating for the last nineteen years – it is time now for real action." More on COP19 Climate and Health events, European Region COP19 events, and about the co-benefits to health of climate change mitigation.

World Toilet Day paves the way for improved sanitation

Approximately 2.5 billion people lack access to improved sanitation facilities. Of these, 761 million use public or shared facilities and 693 million use facilities that do not meet minimum standards of hygiene. In 2011, one billion people still defecated in the open. 90% of all open defection takes place in rural areas. Poor sanitation facilities and unsafe wastewater management can lead to illnesses such as diarrhoea, typhoid, malnutrition and polio. Earlier this year, the UN General Assembly emphasized the importance of sanitation and hygiene by declaring 19 November World Toilet Day. It urged Member States and relevant stakeholders to promote behavioural change and the implementation of policies to increase access to sanitation among the poor, along with a call to end the practice of open-air defecation, deemed "extremely harmful" to public health. The UN resolution also calls on countries to approach sanitation in a much broader context that includes hygiene promotion, the provision of basic sanitation services, and sewage and wastewater treatment and reuse in the context of integrated water management.

WHO takes part in international radiation emergency exercise

From 20–21 November, tension was high in emergency operations centres in 58 states and 10 international organizations participating in the 'Bab Al Maghrb' radiation emergency exercise to test their response to simulated dirty bomb attacks. The simulated 'explosions' took place in the port of Tangier and in Marrakech medina in Morocco. This 'triggered' a number of implications categorized as 'actual' for few a states, 'potential' for some and 'perceived' for many others. Issues addressed during the exercise were connected to a radioactive release into the atmosphere, medical response and public health, security, transparent public communications, as well as trade and travel. This exercise provided an excellent platform for WHO as the specialized agency for health to exercise its emergency response capabilities and arrangements under the Inter-Agency Committee for Radiological and Nuclear Emergencies (IACRNE) and the provisions under the International Health Regulations. Click here for more information.
Pneumonia still responsible for one fifth of child deaths

Pneumonia remains the single biggest global killer of children under five years of age, claiming the lives of more than 1 million girls and boys every year. But pneumonia deaths are preventable. Five simple but effective interventions, if implemented properly, help reduce the burden of the disease: exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding complemented by nutritious foods up to the age of two; vaccination against whooping cough (pertussis), measles, Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) and pneumococcus; safe drinking-water, sanitation and handwashing facilities; improved cooking stoves to reduce indoor air pollution; and treatment, including amoxicillin dispersible tablets and oxygen. Find out more about the 5th World Pneumonia day.

WHO publishes new report on aircraft disinsection insecticides

International air travel carries the risk of inadvertent transport of mosquito vectors (and the diseases they transmit) into countries where they were not previously found. One method specified in the International Health Regulations to counter this risk is spraying of insecticides on board aircraft – a process known as aircraft disinsection. To date, no widely accepted, peer-reviewed human health risk assessment model has been available for insecticides used in aircraft. WHO has now published a risk assessment model on aircraft disinsection, which can be used for these products. This model aims to assist national regulatory authorities to evaluate new and existing products for disinsection. WHO has also published an evaluation of product types currently available or in development, using the criteria specified in the risk assessment model.

Children’s environmental health textbook

Over the past four decades, the prevalence of autism, asthma, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obesity, diabetes and birth defects have grown substantially among children around the world. During the same period, more than 80,000 new chemicals have been developed and released into the global environment. WHO attributes 36% of all childhood deaths to environmental causes. Evidence is also mounting that children are exquisitely sensitive to their environment, and that exposure during developmental ‘windows of susceptibility’ can trigger cellular changes that lead to disease and disability in infancy, childhood, and across the life span. A compelling need exists for continued scientific study of the relationship between children’s health and the environment. The Textbook of children’s environmental health codifies the related knowledge base and offers an authoritative and comprehensive guide to this important new field.

Climate change and health

- Climate change affects the social and environmental determinants of health – clean air, safe drinking-water, sufficient food and secure shelter.
- By 2030, the direct costs to health (i.e. excluding costs in health-determining sectors such as agriculture and water and sanitation), are estimated to reach between US$ 2–4 billion/year.
- Many of the major killers such as diarrhoeal diseases, malnutrition, malaria and dengue are highly climate-sensitive and are expected to worsen as the climate changes.
- Reducing emissions of greenhouse gases through better transport, food and energy use choices can result in improved health.

Read the full fact sheet

SELECTED HEALTH TOPICS FROM WHO’S PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT WEB SITES

- Climate change and health
- Ionizing radiation in emergencies
- Water, sanitation and health

REGIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT LINKS

- WHO Regional Office for Africa
- WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia
- WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific
- WHO Regional Office for the Americas
- WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
- WHO Regional Office for Europe

New Publications

- Aircraft disinsection insecticide

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