

Upholding equity and justice in climate change and health

The start of this month was marked by animated discussions at the 156th Session of the WHO [Executive Board](#). Among the many topics up for discussion, the World Health Organization's draft Global Action Plan on Climate and Health was arguably one of the most consequential. The ever-increasing impact of climate change on all aspects of life, including its potential to increase the risk of pandemic outbreaks and antimicrobial resistance, mean the plan is a welcome step that comes not a moment too soon.

Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, it was evident that the draft still needs a lot of work to get it over the line. In particular, Member States disagreed on the inclusion (or not) of the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) principle. (For a great summary of the debates, see this [post](#) from Third World Network).

This CBDR principle is central to the international climate framework, first mentioned in the 1992 Rio Declaration ([principle 7](#)). It argues that some States have contributed far more to environmental degradation than others, and that developed nations must acknowledge their responsibility. The CBDR principle was crystallised in the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC) as well as more recently in the [Paris Agreement](#). Both texts are (almost) universally ratified. The principles contained within these texts should be operationalised in subsequent relevant legislation and proposals.

It is therefore unfortunate that this principle has been absent from proposed text on climate and health. One can therefore wonder where this leaves equity and climate justice?

As already alluded to, it is undeniable that climate and health are inextricably linked. (See HAI's previous blog on [climate and health](#) from last year). Increasing severe weather events impact our health in a multitude of different ways and are not a problem of the future. All of this is happening now and requires concrete and coordinated action on the part of our governments. It is also particularly relevant that the effects of climate change on health are disproportionately felt by vulnerable populations, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. This means that equity and climate justice should be central to any discussions, as well as proposed solutions surrounding climate change and health.

While that may be considered 'mitigation' of the effects already being felt, strong commitments for prevention of worsening climate change (and breaching the 1.5° Celsius target) are also needed. Ending dependence on fossil fuels is a key part of achieving that goal, yet the draft global action plan does not make any reference to

it. That is missed opportunity that we were alone in calling at the Executive Board.

Meanwhile, during the discussions, representatives from the Global South pleaded for increased finances to work towards a lower-carbon and more sustainable future. This is an important point because the financial burden of addressing the impact of climate change on health must not fall on countries who have historically and continue to play a smaller role in climate breakdown than richer countries.

As the draft Global Action Plan on Climate and Health continues to be debated in the run up to the next World Health Assembly, Member States must commit to upholding principles of equity and justice in order to ensure real change and impact in addressing the consequences of climate change on health, and avoid further burdening States in more vulnerable positions. This is the engagement we all need for an actionable and effective plan of action.

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