
Health, environment and climate change

Draft plan of action on climate change and health in small island developing States

Report by the Director-General

1. In January 2019, the Executive Board at its 144th session considered an earlier version of this report.¹ The document has been amended to take account of Member States' comments.

BACKGROUND

2. Climate change undermines the environmental determinants of health – clean air and water, sufficient food and adequate shelter – and can increase the risks of extreme weather events. Although all populations are at risk, some are more vulnerable than others. Small island developing States are in the front line, encapsulating the full range of acute to long-term risks, including (a) more extreme floods, storms and drought; (b) increased risks of water-, vector- and food-borne infectious diseases; (c) increased risks of noncommunicable diseases; and (d) sea-level rise threatening fragile health care facilities, mainly but not exclusively, situated in coastal areas. These additional stresses presented by climate change combine with the existing challenges of communicable and noncommunicable diseases, resulting in a triple burden of disease that causes high morbidity and mortality. The special report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C further underlines the particular vulnerability of small island developing States to climate change if warming exceeds 1.5 °C, and the likely increasing impacts if it reaches 2 °C or higher.

3. Since the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, protecting “human health and welfare” has been recognized as a priority in responding to climate change. In the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, the Parties to the Agreement acknowledge that they should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on, inter alia, human rights and the right to health. It further recognizes the particular vulnerability of small island developing States, which have made a minimal contribution to global carbon emissions, but are among the most susceptible countries to the health impacts of climate change. Similarly, resolution WHA61.19 (2008) on climate change and health recognizes the particular vulnerability of small island developing States and least developed countries.

4. In recognition of the severe and urgent threats to the health and well-being of the people of the small island developing States, at a presidency event during the twenty-third session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, held in Bonn in 2017, WHO launched a special initiative on climate change and health in small island developing States, in collaboration with the secretariat of the United

¹ Document EB144/16 and the summary records of the Executive Board at its 144th session, ninth meeting.

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Fijian presidency of the Conference. The initiative is also a platform within the Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023.

5. In 2018, the Executive Board adopted decision EB142(5) on health, environment and climate change. In that decision, the Director-General was requested, among other things, to develop a draft action plan for the platform to address the health effects of climate change initially in small island developing States, and to submit the draft action plan for consideration by the Seventy-second World Health Assembly in May 2019, through the Executive Board at its 144th session in January 2019. The draft plan of action on climate change and health in small island developing States was developed following the recommendations of the Third Global Conference on Climate and Health 2018, which was organized as a series of three separate events dispersed across three regions with a focus on small island developing States. Regional plans of action were agreed upon for small island developing States in the Western Pacific Region at ministerial-level meetings held in Nadi, Fiji, on 15 and 16 March 2018 (later launched by Pacific health leaders at a side event during the Seventy-first World Health Assembly); for small island developing States in the African and South-East Asia regions in Mauritius on 21 and 22 March 2018; and for small island developing States in the Region of the Americas in St George's, Grenada, on 16 and 17 October 2018. These regional plans describe the specific actions that should be taken at the national and regional levels, as well as associated indicators.¹

6. The aim of the draft plan of action is to provide the overarching support needed to deliver on the regional plans of action; its design is closely aligned with the support that the Secretariat provides to all Member States through the revised WHO workplan on climate change and health, as approved in decision EB136(15) (2015), and through the mandates on climate change and health delivered by WHO regional committee meetings. It will supply the platform referred to in decision EB142(5). The draft plan of action will also contribute to the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) and Goal 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts).

7. In line with the Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023, the focus of this draft plan of action is a targeted effort to rapidly scale up support for a group of countries facing unique and severe challenges; it provides a response to the call for urgent action made by the health ministers of the small island developing States. It should not undermine ongoing work to protect the health of other vulnerable populations, but rather, should be used to strengthen experience and operational mechanisms that can also be applied to other countries.

VISION

8. This draft plan of action has a vision that by 2030 all health systems in small island developing States will be resilient to climate variability and change.

9. This vision must be realized in parallel with the steps taken by countries around the world to reduce carbon emissions, in order to both protect the most vulnerable from climate risks and gain the health co-benefits of mitigation policies.

¹ The Regional Office for the Western Pacific has published the Pacific islands action plan on climate change and health (<http://iris.wpro.who.int/handle/10665.1/14236?show=full>) (accessed 20 March 2019); regional action plans have been completed and are in the process of being published for the small island developing States in (a) the African and South-East Asian regions and (b) the Region of the Americas.

SCOPE

10. The draft plan of action aims to provide national health authorities in small island developing States with political, technical, capacity-building and financial support, and the evidence needed to:

- (a) better understand and address the effects of climate change on health, including those mediated via climate change impacts on the main determinants of health, for example, food, air, water and sanitation;
- (b) improve the climate resilience and environmental sustainability of health services; and
- (c) promote the implementation of climate change mitigation actions by the most polluting sectors, for example, transport, energy, food and agriculture, that will maximize health co-benefits, both within and outside small island developing States.

11. The draft plan of action also aims to lead the way in transforming health services in small island developing States away from a model of curative services with escalating costs and towards a model based on disease prevention, climate resilience, sustainability and community participation. Further aims are: to promote a more integrated way of working across different health programmes, such as, environmental health, worker's health, food security and nutrition; to contribute to overlapping objectives, including universal health coverage, health security and emergency preparedness and response; and to collaborate with other international and intersectoral partners, in line with respective comparative advantages.

12. The draft plan of action is designed to support WHO's special initiative on climate change and health in small island developing States, which is a voluntary grouping that includes small islands irrespective of their constitutional status, that is, it also includes independent States, overseas departments, dependencies and territories.¹

STRATEGIC LINES OF ACTION

13. The draft plan of action has four interlinked and mutually reinforcing strategic lines of action; each has two associated actions and two indicators for monitoring progress.

Strategic line of action 1 – Empowerment: Supporting health leadership in small island developing States to engage nationally and internationally

14. Health is increasingly recognized in climate discussions; nevertheless, it is still not routinely and formally identified as a priority, resulting in missed opportunities in both protecting and promoting health as an argument and a measure of success for climate action. There is a need to ensure that the necessary information on the connections between health and climate change is made available to Member States, so that it can be considered in establishing the official positions of relevant small island developing State groupings in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and other relevant sustainable development processes. Small island developing States constitute about one fifth of United Nations and WHO Member States and could leverage their strength in numbers to advocate more effectively for global action. The strategic line of action on empowerment aims to promote the voice of

¹ Reference elsewhere in this report to national adaptation plans and national communications is intended to include submissions by both independent States and overseas departments, dependencies and territories, either in their own right, or within those of their respective governing nations.

health leaders, on behalf of the most vulnerable populations, in support of adaptation in small island developing States and mitigation by countries around the world.

Action 1.1 – Establish at WHO a small island developing States hub or alternative coordination mechanism on small island developing States to provide support for action on climate change, environment and other priority health issues

15. This action will address the request from countries to identify and promote mechanisms that support an open process of engagement between small island developing States and WHO, and between small island developing States and other development partners. The action will support capacity building among policy-makers in climate change and health. The hub will also work with other partners to connect the issue of climate change to other health and development priorities, including tourism, environment, waste management, agriculture, fisheries and industry. Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 1.1 – Small island developing States coordination mechanism established in WHO for climate change, environment and other priority health issues

Action 1.2 – Provide health sector inputs (for example, national adaptation plans, national communications and nationally determined contributions) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and stakeholders leading relevant national climate change processes

16. To implement this action, WHO will work to strengthen the monitoring of health issues within international conventions and agreements on the environment, and put in place regional risk assessment and risk communication mechanisms. Through the platform to address the health effects of climate change in small island developing States, WHO will work to ensure that health leaders in small island developing States are fully aware of the latest evidence regarding the relationship between climate change and health, and are empowered to highlight the threats and opportunities for action in national and international contexts. The Secretariat will also work to promote high-level engagement by working with Member States to include the small island developing States initiative in ongoing global and regional agendas, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and regional Health and Environment ministerial fora. Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 1.2 – Number of small island developing States that include health as a priority in their most recent national communications, national adaptation plans or nationally determined contributions to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Strategic line of action 2 – Evidence: Building the business case for investment

17. The global evidence base for the impacts of climate change on health is comparable to that for any other climate-sensitive outcome, for example, agriculture and water resources. However, the information is often not presented in an easily accessible form at the national or subnational level where most policy decisions are made. It also often lacks the systematic economic evidence base needed to make the case to potential investors, such as international climate finance institutions, development banks and national finance ministries. Finally, there is a lack of operational research on the

implementation of climate change and health programmes in small island developing States and elsewhere.

18. In addition, limited human resources and research capacity in most small island developing States presents a challenge in generating new, locally relevant research. Hence, there is a need to ensure that existing evidence is connected as directly as possible to policy, and to build capacity and strengthen connections between national research institutions in small island developing States, as well as with research institutions outside those States and with policy-makers. This strategic line of action therefore aims to ensure that health ministries have the necessary health, environment and economic evidence to support scaled-up investment in climate change and health, identify priority investments and monitor their impact.

Action 2.1 – In collaboration with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, develop or update national climate and health country profiles for every small island developing State

19. In collaboration with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, WHO has already produced country profiles for 45 countries, including six small island developing States. The platform to address the health effects of climate change in small island developing States will work with partners to conduct new or updated climate change and health vulnerability and adaptation assessments. Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 2.1 – Number of small island developing States that have completed climate and health country profiles supported by WHO and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Action 2.2 – Identify, support and build on existing centres of excellence in increasing capacity, conducting assessments, data analysis, research and implementation of actions, including with organizations and universities that have regional mandates

20. This action will include: estimating the cost of climate change impacts on health in small island developing States; working with partners to develop detailed investment plans informed by sound economic analyses of costs and gaps so as to increase the resilience of health care systems, including health care facilities; conducting operational research in parallel with implementation; and developing and implementing a research agenda, including by providing support for building research capacity in countries. Information on small island developing States will be better used in order to inform the global effort to reduce emissions. Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 2.2 – Number of collaborating centres actively engaged in supporting the platform to address the health effects of climate change in small island developing States

Strategic line of action 3 – Implementation: Preparedness for climate risks, adaptation, and health-promoting mitigation policies

21. The draft plan of action will build on the experience gained in climate and health adaptation projects around the world, in order to increase coverage of evidence-based interventions within a comprehensive approach based on WHO's operational framework for building climate resilient health systems. It also aims to strengthen the role of the health sector in promoting the health co-benefits of

climate change mitigation actions implemented by those sectors with greater responsibility for global warming, both within and outside small island developing States.

22. This strategic line of action aims to bring about transformational change in health systems by promoting and supporting a culture of disease prevention, building the climate resilience of health systems, and maximizing the health co-benefits of climate change mitigation policies.

Action 3.1 – Support small island developing States through regional frameworks to build climate resilient health systems

23. This action includes preventive measures, such as, integrating into the implementation of universal health coverage protection of the environmental determinants of health, for example, water and food security, and strengthening surveillance and control of climate-sensitive diseases. It also includes a specific effort focused on climate resilient and environmentally sustainable health care facilities (building or retrofitting health infrastructure to become resilient to extreme weather events and ongoing climate change); ensuring reliable access to, and efficient use of, energy and water; and reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. The action will also entail baseline assessments and the development and implementation of climate mitigation plans for the health sector in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from energy, food, transportation and procurement. Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 3.1 – Number of small island developing States that have initiated actions for climate resilient, environmentally sustainable health care facilities

Action 3.2 – Develop and implement programmes to raise awareness and build capacity for adaptation and disease prevention both by people and health systems

24. To implement this action, WHO will support small island developing States in implementing national and subnational health adaptation plans within broader intersectoral climate change action plans. It will also facilitate information sharing, stocktaking and research, and conduct advocacy and awareness campaigns for health leaders, policy-makers, key stakeholders and the general public. The action will also require a strengthening of environmental health programmes so they make a full contribution to preventive health services and primary health care (including disaster risk management) and the control of communicable and noncommunicable diseases (including mental health). Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 3.2 – Number of small island developing States that have begun implementation of climate change and health national and subnational adaptation plans or actions to achieve the health co-benefits described in their nationally determined contributions to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Strategic line of action 4 – Resources: Facilitating access to climate and health finance

25. A significant change in the current health vulnerability of the populations of small island developing States will not be possible without access to sufficient financial resources. Health ministers have prioritized the need to expand and diversify the funding streams potentially available to build health resilience into climate change. They have identified specific challenges, which include the following: the fact that the main climate finance mechanisms currently allocate only about 0.5% of resources to health;

the complexity of accessing these funds; the fact that no health agencies are currently accredited to implement projects on behalf of such mechanisms; and that the eligibility of countries for some funding streams is linked to overall measures of economic development without due account being taken of the particular challenges facing small island developing States, such as, high per capita costs of providing health care and high economic vulnerability to extreme weather events.

26. This strategic line of action aims to facilitate access to climate finance, development assistance and domestic resources, with an aspirational goal of tripling the current level of investment in climate change and health in small island developing States over the period 2019–2023.

Action 4.1 – Lead a process to identify new and innovative forms of funding and resource mobilization mechanisms

27. This action will entail addressing the requests of Member States for support from WHO in identifying available resources to tackle climate-related health issues, and for transparency in accessing funds, including simplified funding mechanisms. The Secretariat will track and report on funding for climate change and health in small island developing States within existing climate and health finance streams, including WHO's own programme budget. To the extent that existing funds do not respond to the needs of small island developing States in addressing changes in climate and health, WHO will explore the possible establishment of a new fund for this purpose, as appropriate and in line with existing mandates. Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 4.1 – Number of small island developing States receiving financial support for climate change and health

Action 4.2 – WHO will pursue the process of becoming an accredited agency of the Green Climate Fund and facilitate support to small island developing States

28. Small island developing States have advocated for WHO to simplify mechanisms and overcome current complexities in obtaining funding for adaptation and mitigation in the health sector. The Secretariat will also continue to support countries by strengthening national leadership, advocacy and instruments to establish a clear process to access financing for climate change and health. Progress will be monitored against the following indicator:

Indicator 4.2 – Total funds received for climate change and health sector in small island developing States

MONITORING AND REPORTING OF PROGRESS

29. Progress in implementation of the plan of action will be monitored against the indicators defined above, primarily on the basis of survey information collected in consultation with countries, which also forms the basis of the climate and health country profiles supported by WHO and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It is proposed that progress should be reported biennially to the Health Assembly over the period 2019–2025.¹

¹ WHO regional committees may wish to consider separate monitoring arrangements for individual regional action plans.

ACTION BY THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

30. The Health Assembly is invited to note this report and to consider the following draft decision:

The Seventy-second World Health Assembly, having considered the draft plan of action on climate change and health in small island developing States,¹ decided:

(1) to note the plan of action on climate change and health in small island developing States, and

(2) to request the Director-General to report back on progress in the implementation of the plan of action on climate change and health in small island developing States to the Seventy-fourth World Health Assembly.

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¹ Document A72/16.