

Putting health at the heart of climate action

By  Katja Hamilton

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The time for action when it comes to mitigating the impact of climate change on health is now - not five years from now, not 10 years from now - now.



Source: [Pexels](#)

With rising temperatures, more than half of the infectious diseases are increasing globally and over 20 million people are being displaced every year due to the rising heat, floods and drought.

WHO is projecting that annually 250,000 people are dying as a result of climate change and in total, \$3bn in losses are incurred every year because of that. Unless health systems are made to be strong, sustainable and resilient we will face serious challenges in future. This is the take-home message of Shyam Bishen, head of health and healthcare at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Geneva.

He was speaking at a WEF panel discussion entitled *Putting Health at the Heart of Climate Action*. Among the organisations represented were Seed Global Health, Wellcome Trust, United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC).

“ David Attenborough has already said that unchecked climate change will collapse civilisation. Anyone who thinks that one billion people being forced to move across the planet will not result in world war, is living in cloud cuckoo land <https://t.co/HcS9mRbxDq>— Matthew Todd 💎💎💎💎 (@MrMatthewTodd) [February 19, 2023](#) ”

One of the central themes brought up at the discussion was the need for public-private partnerships to work together to help the poor and destitute by creating access to better preventative healthcare across the globe. The primary step to achieving this goal is in the healthcare sector accounting for its carbon footprint and embarking on a journey of decarbonisation.

Statistics show that 5% of global emissions are from the health sector and 45% of this total is derived from the supply and delivery of healthcare services and medical consumables to patients.

"The average person in their lifetime will create around 10 to 15 tonnes of carbon in their adult life, Bishen said. "If they go on to be diabetic, they'll create between 30 and 45 tonnes of carbon." This, he said, is tallied according to the transport of related medicines and caregivers to hospitals.

"Preventative health that is helping people not make the journey from pre-diabetic to diabetic for example, can have a simply mind-boggling impact positively, not only on them, but on the climate. This is just one example of how non-communicable diseases can drive climate change.

"But generally when we think of climate change we think of it in reverse: how it is driving the increase of non-communicable diseases."

And the statistics speak for themselves.

Deteriorating air quality

Take air pollution, for example. New estimates in 2018 revealed that nine out of 10 people globally were breathing air which do not meet WHO air quality guidelines. Air pollution is the second leading cause of non-communicable diseases globally right now and the first in Southeast Asia. In 2016, an [estimated](#) 2.4 million premature deaths were attributed to air pollution.

"When you think about what that impact looks like, that's actually a projected \$47tn in costs globally - calculated between 2010 and 2030 - just to manage some of that disease," Bishen said.

Not enough work is being done in research in climate change and health, Vanessa Kerry co-founder and chief executive officer of Seed Global Health said.

"Decarbonising the healthcare journey requires data. Poor data is being collected in the United States, and globally, and so it's really difficult to know who's affected, how it's in fact affecting them, and what the outcome is."

Data collection is key

"A data network is absolutely necessary to a systematic collection of that kind of information, particularly in poor countries where children's bodies are the most susceptible and most vulnerable to the impact of heat waves and water insecurity.

"I saw it in Ethiopia. This land is so dry and it means that these children are literally wasting away," said Catherine Russell, executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef). "We're doing a lot of work trying to deal with severe acute malnutrition. To see it is something that really is just heartbreaking.

"You first see the animals waste away, then the children start to waste away. And what happens is a population starts to move; we end up with more conflict. I've seen it in Ukraine and the DRC where these children are seeing horrible violence. This in turn impacts on their mental health.

"What we're seeing is that the climate crisis is really a child health crisis."

“ *Every child has the right to a safe and healthy life.*

At a hospital in Ukraine, our Goodwill Ambassador Orlando Bloom saw how UNICEF supports mothers and babies with equipment, medicine and more. [@UNICEF_UA](https://twitter.com/qvH7UjdU4i) [pic.twitter.com/qvH7UjdU4i](https://twitter.com/qvH7UjdU4i)— UNICEF (@UNICEF) [April 13, 2023](#) ”

But data and technology can only get us so far, Kerry said.

"The work that we do in global health is very much rooted in health systems and the health workforce that makes up their systems. We've done an incredible job of promoting technology and trying to leapfrog to the right solutions, but we're actually leapfrogging the fundamental people who are needed to deliver care."

Climate change impacts every aspect of health and is strongly correlated to stillbirths and premature births, malnutrition and maternal deaths.

"We have to start building that workforce that is going to manage the extra 250,000 deaths a year that we're gonna see from climate change and to manage the growing existing non-communicable disease that is already there. It doesn't mean that there isn't a need for technology, but you leverage it through the humans that hold it and know how to use it."

Harnessing global, public-private partnerships

It was important, the WEF panel said, for healthcare workers to be trained in, and to understand, how interlinked climate change and healthcare are.

And whether the focus is on preventative healthcare when it comes to mitigating the impact of climate change on the healthcare industry, or making provision to treat non-communicable diseases after the fact, the time for action is now.

"The answer is people from different sectors have to come together and act on it in global, public-private partnership. We [need to] invest in the health workforce, we invest in this resilience. Addressing this problem would actually lead to about 4.4tn in GDP growth for these countries. That means there's a \$2 to \$4 return on investment for every dollar invested," Kerry said.

"Mobilising these finances comes down to political will, policy updates, open-mindedness, multi-stakeholder progress, and for patients themselves to be aware.

"We have a fundamental financing gap that we're going to have to close."

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

Katja is the Finance, Property and Healthcare Editor at Bizcommunity.

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