

Climate Change Is a Health Problem

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The debate is over; climate change is real. Further, the human health impacts of climate change are now being felt. The World Health Organization estimated that since 1990, climatic changes already have claimed at least 150,000 deaths and an additional 5.5 million years of life lost to premature death or lived with disabilities (2003). The human health impacts are certain to worsen, and the impacts will be felt most acutely by the world's poor. Health philanthropy could make a significant difference in helping communities avoid the most severe impacts of climate change.

Global climate change is increasingly understood as a major public health challenge. People are exposed to climate change through changing weather patterns and indirectly through changes in water, air, and food quality; ecosystems; agriculture; industry and settlements; and the economy.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently released its fourth assessment report, which noted that we are experiencing a changing climate *now* (2007). They cited evidence showing *current* health effects of climate change such as altered distribution of some infectious disease vectors and increased heat wave-related deaths.

For example, heat waves are becoming more frequent and intense worldwide. Europe's heat waves in 2003 caused approximately 23,000 deaths. Heat waves in the United States increased by 88 percent during the period 1949-1995 (Center for Health and the Global Environment 2004).

With climate-changing disease vectors, malaria also is a major concern, currently killing 3,000 children *every day*. Climate change could expand regions suitable for disease transmission and increase the person-months of exposure by 16 to 28 percent (IPCC 2007).

The IPCC warns that we should expect future health impacts, particularly for those with low-adaptive capacity (such as the poor), including increased malnutrition; increased deaths, disease, and injury due to heat waves, floods, storms, fires, and droughts; and more frequent cardio-respiratory diseases.

UNEQUAL HEALTH BURDEN

Climate change has a disproportionate impact on the poor and elderly in both industrialized and industrializing countries.

Those at greater risk include the urban poor, the elderly, children, traditional societies, subsistence farmers, and coastal populations.

Coastal communities in general are at great risk, with the heavily populated delta regions in Asia at greatest risk due to increased flooding (IPCC 2007). Whereas coastal regions and deltas are likely to suffer from too much water, drought-prone areas of Africa will be particularly vulnerable to food shortages due to a reduction in the land area suitable for agriculture. The IPCC notes that some rain-fed crop yields could decline as much as 50 percent by 2020.

The poor face more barriers to being able to adapt to climate change and cope with its health impacts, given inadequate or nonexistent health insurance, poorer housing stock, and vulnerability to extreme weather events. They often cannot afford to move from flood or drought zones, cool their homes during heat waves, or ride out extreme weather events such as hurricanes. Poverty also places "medical mitigation" of climate impacts out of reach, when asthma medications to cope with increased smog or antimalarial medications to deal with infectious diseases are unaffordable or unavailable.

Poor people and people of color who become sick from environmental hazards too often enter a world of "health disparities" shaping their access to insurance, health care, and quality care. Climate change will further exacerbate these.

HEALTH GRANTMAKERS CAN HELP

► **Support health professionals and health messages about the impacts of and solutions to climate change**— Research shows that doctors, nurses, and public health professionals are highly trusted messengers. In the past, the health impacts of climate seemed too speculative and distant to be featured. As the impacts of climate change are being felt now, direct messages on the health impacts of climate change can and should be highlighted so citizens and policymakers better understand the health consequences of inaction. Health groups like the American Lung Association, American Nurses Association, and Oxfam International are already speaking out and making an impact.

Information on the negative health impacts of climate

change and the positive health impacts of clean energy solutions can influence policymakers. In the lead up to California's passage of policies limiting greenhouse gas emissions, the American Lung Association's foundation-supported Health Network for Clean Air urged the governor to act on climate change.

Foundation support, from The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, and others, enabled Physicians for Social Responsibility-Los Angeles to conduct outreach around the health impacts of climate change. Following a Symposium on Energy Production and Human Health with the Health Lung Association of California, the California Medical Association passed resolutions on energy and climate change.

➤ **Bring tailored health messages to impacted communities**

– As climate change health impacts become more apparent, it is important to communicate the disproportionate impacts of climate change to communities that will be most impacted so that they can advocate for their interests. The National Commission on Energy Policy, for example, supported the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (CBCF) report *African Americans and Climate Change: An Unequal Burden*, which examined disproportionate impacts on African Americans and the types of climate policies that would most benefit them. CBCF also authored *Climate Change and Extreme Weather Events: An Unequal Burden on African Americans* and convened outreach events targeting policymakers. Armed with new awareness of climate impacts, grantmaking can strengthen impacted communities' capacity to effectively engage in policy decisions.

➤ **Clean your air, cool the planet**

– Many actions to slow climate change have direct local health impacts. Projects to reduce power plant and transportation pollution, build for energy efficiency, plan communities for public transportation and walkability, and shift energy sources to cleaner ones all offer multiple “wins.” They will reduce greenhouse gas emissions driving climate change. They also will improve local air quality, which can yield multiple health cobenefits such as reduced asthma, pollution-related cancers, and outdoor environments more conducive to active living and exercise.

The health of poor communities and communities of color will often also be disproportionately improved by local actions to reduce the dirty-energy drivers of climate change. For example, the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation and Environmental Protection Agency each have bundled health and climate goals through clean diesel projects in Connecticut that simultaneously reduce health hazards, health disparities, and greenhouse emissions through projects like diesel school bus retrofits.

➤ **Build impacted communities' voice and adaptive capacity**

– Climate-vulnerable populations usually have little capacity to represent their interests in energy or disaster preparedness decisions; foundation support can play a critical role. The Ford Foundation, for instance, has supported the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative

to boost community-based organizations' engagement in climate work. Foundations whose missions would preclude their engagement in climate or energy issues *per se* could boost “medical mitigation” planning and health care for communities likely to experience increased respiratory or infectious disease problems from climate change.

➤ **Walk the Talk** – Foundations can also make a difference by reducing and offsetting their own greenhouse gas emissions and/or mobilizing their endowments in climate friendly ways. The Henry P. Kendall Foundation calculates its carbon dioxide emissions from office operations, internal paper usage, and staff transportation and works to reduce emissions. The foundation then purchases “offsets” to cover their emissions. Offsets allow an organization to mitigate their greenhouse gas emissions by investing in off-site projects like solar panels or efficiency measures that avoid emissions.

Foundations can also mobilize their endowments to increase investments in clean technologies, introduce shareholder resolutions, and expand the clean energy economy. Investment capital in renewable energy and efficient technology increased to \$100 billion in 2006, illustrating robust “green technology” investment opportunities, which will increase as policies limiting emissions are enacted. Foundations increasingly are party to shareholder proposals concerning the environment and climate change. The Merck Family Fund, The Boston Foundation, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, The Henry P. Kendall Foundation, and others recently sponsored a forum on mobilizing foundation endowments for climate solutions, highlighting options for investment screens and investing for climate results.

The time is ripe to put a human health face on climate change. Health philanthropy can play a major role in helping slow climate change by mobilizing resources, bringing new voices to the call for action, and empowering impacted communities in defense of the health of current and future generations.

SOURCES

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