

# **Act on Climate – Our Lives Depend on It**

**A shared narrative for people and organizations  
urging joint action on climate and health**

November 2023

# Narrative at-a-glance

**The climate crisis is a health crisis, fueled by an untenable status quo.** It is threatening our food, water, and air, worsening disease and extreme weather, and putting our physical, mental, and social well-being at risk.

**While the threat of the climate crisis is universal, the speed and severity of the impacts are not.** Those who did the least to cause this emergency are suffering the most, as climate shocks push already inequitable and fragile health systems past the breaking point.

**The need to change course becomes more apparent by the day. If we take action right now, we can do more than simply avert catastrophe — we can seize the chance to achieve a better world.** We have the resources, technology, and evidence needed to cultivate societies where every person enjoys good health, well-being, and shared prosperity, without harming our planet.

**By joining forces for climate and health, we can decide the future we will live in.** Together, we must:

- **Stop the crisis at the source:** Rapidly and equitably phase out fossil fuels, starting with the largest polluters first, to prevent further heating, stop health threats from escalating unchecked, and reap immediate and local health benefits.
- **Build resilient systems and societies to safeguard health for all, once and for all:** Adapt quickly to protect people's physical, mental, and social health and well-being and create climate-safe futures for all.
- **Mobilize the resources the most affected communities need and deserve:** Prioritize equity, justice, and local priorities across the climate response and ensure no country or community is left behind in the transition to healthy, sustainable, and affordable renewable energy, food, transportation, and livable cities.
- **Define success in terms of people's health:** Hold leaders accountable to a health-centered response to the climate crisis that protects the well-being and livelihoods of people everywhere.

**A better world is possible — and we must all take part in demanding it.** Those in positions of power must take swift and decisive actions, based on the best available evidence, the lived experience of frontline communities, and ongoing monitoring to course correct as we learn more. Principles of equity, justice, and human rights must remain our centers of gravity. The climate and health movement belongs to all of us, from the health workforce on the frontlines to national decision-makers, across every sector, geography, and cause.

**Act on climate now. Our lives depend on it.**

## The purpose of this strategic narrative is to:

- Align the growing climate and health movement around a shared vision of a society that can support the health and well-being of all people and operate in harmony with the environment.
- Provide common language to facilitate crucial and productive conversations that drive solutions among all relevant climate and health stakeholders.
- Speak cohesively, accessibly, and persuasively to decision-makers to increase urgency for action, communicate accountability for inaction, and drive home what is at stake

# 1. From crisis to better world: Joining forces for climate and health

**The climate crisis is a health crisis that has been fueled by an untenable status quo.** The cost of inaction and neglect is now being measured in lives and livelihoods lost to more extreme and deadly natural disasters, changing patterns of disease, disruptions to where people can safely live, and threats to life-sustaining food, water, and air. As these accelerating threats take their toll on people's physical, mental, and social well-being, the climate crisis is pushing already weak and inequitable health systems past their breaking point.

**While the threat of the climate crisis is universal, the speed and severity of the impacts are not.** The people that have done the least to cause this emergency, including in the Global South and polar regions, are suffering larger impacts faster. Communities that are already marginalized — including young people, Indigenous communities, poorer communities, people with disabilities, people suffering the effects of conflict, and those who experience race- and gender-based oppression — will face exacerbated risk, and if we're not careful, could be harmed by hasty and poorly executed responses.

**The urgent need to change course becomes more apparent by the day.** For too long, too many have downplayed the threat a changing climate poses to human health and postponed systemic action in pursuit of short-term profits. Now the speed of the crisis is accelerating, and the time to prevent the worst health impacts of climate change is rapidly running out.

**If we take action sooner rather than later, we can do more than simply avert catastrophe — we can seize the chance to achieve a better world.** We have the resources, technology, and evidence needed to cultivate societies where every person enjoys good health, well-being, and shared prosperity, in ways that protect our climate and nature. Ending our dangerous dependency on fossil fuels and building more resilient and sustainable health, food, water and other key systems will improve the health of future generations, save lives right now, and protect the environmental balance that is necessary to sustain life. We cannot become so numb or overwhelmed by the crisis that we forgo this opportunity to bring a better world within reach.

**By joining forces for climate and health, we have the power to decide the future we will live in.** A strong movement that seeks to protect human health by stabilizing the health of the environment is needed to increase the motivation for, and the speed and scale of, the global response. Let us collectively seize this moment to transform growing awareness into the action we need.

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## How the climate crisis and reliance on fossil fuels put health at risk

*A few of the many ways climate change & fossil fuel reliance threaten our physical, mental, & social health and well-being.*

### Fossil fuels directly harm human health through ...

**Extraction.** Fossil fuel extraction and refinement pose several risks to workers and surrounding communities, including terminal respiratory diseases and safety hazards.

**Air pollution.** Fossil fuels are the biggest contributor to air pollution, which causes **7 million deaths**<sup>1</sup> each year and contributes to significant illnesses including heart disease, asthma, poor birth outcomes, and numerous cancers.

### Greenhouse gas emissions — especially from fossil fuels — are dangerously heating the planet, leading to ...

**Increased disease transmission.** More than **half** of infectious diseases are made worse by climate change<sup>2</sup> which creates ideal conditions for the spread of food-, water-, and vector-borne diseases, including to previously unexposed populations.

**Extreme heat.** Rising temperatures and more severe heat waves increase the risk of heat-related illness and death, especially for very young children, pregnant people, outdoor workers, athletes, and older adults. Heat exposure negatively impacts people's livelihoods and was responsible for **US\$863 in lost income** in 2022.<sup>3</sup>

**Extreme weather.** More frequent and severe heatwaves, storms, droughts, wildfires, and floods cause death, injury, and illness; disrupt livelihoods; pollute water; damage infrastructure; and forced migration. People living on small islands, in coastal regions, and in low-lying areas are especially at risk.

**Food and water insecurity.** The climate crisis is threatening crop yield, disrupting food systems, and causing massive food insecurity and undernutrition for an additional 500 million people by midcentury.<sup>4</sup> Access to clean freshwater is threatened by waterways drying out, salination from sea level rise, and contamination, particularly in the wake of climate disasters.

### These escalating crises are taking a toll on ...

**Health systems and human resources for health.** Extreme weather devastates health facilities, medical supply chains, and reliable access to quality care. People are getting sicker, increasing the burden on the health system. Faced with migration, disasters, and burnout, more health workers are leaving the profession, making the job harder for those that remain.

**Mental health.** Climate change impacts are taking a serious toll on mental health: causing post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression, especially in young people.

**Inequity and social determinants of health.** No matter the crisis or health threat, people and communities who are most marginalized by society consistently suffer the greatest impacts. If left unchecked, all impacts of climate change will contribute to this vicious cycle of inequity, which in turn worsens health outcomes.

**Social stability and security.** Tensions over scarce natural resources and land use can exacerbate ongoing conflicts and lead to political unrest, threatening to displace an additional **1.2 billion**<sup>5</sup> people by 2050. Climate disasters, displacement, decreased economic opportunity, and longer journeys to retrieve food and water can increase the risk of gender-based violence.

# 2. Heal the planet, heal ourselves: calls to action for climate and health

While the climate and health landscape represents a wide range of issues, geographies, sectors, and constituencies — all working on unique priorities — these are four fundamental calls to action that we can all stand behind and collectively support in our work.

Together, we call on leaders and decision-makers across sectors to:

- 1. Stop the crisis at the source:** A rapid phase-out of fossil fuels and a just transition to clean energy — prioritizing the largest polluters first — is necessary to mitigate threats to human health and unlock incredible benefits for our individual and collective well-being. Our health also depends on defending our environment, from forests that are critical to regulating the earth's temperature, to the biodiversity that is essential to our food systems, medicines, ecosystem stability, and more.
- 2. Build resilient systems and societies to safeguard health for all, once and for all:** Even as we work to prevent further heating, the climate crisis is already threatening people's physical, mental, and social health and well-being around the world. We need to adapt the many systems that impact health to be more resilient and equitable, so they can better withstand shocks — from climate-fueled disasters to future pandemics — and finally uphold everyone's human right to health.
- 3. Mobilize the resources the most affected communities need and deserve:** The communities that have suffered the most loss and damage from the climate crisis to date are often those that bear the least responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions. It is in all of our best interests to ensure communities have the financial resources they need to rebuild, respond, and put locally-led solutions to work. It is also our collective responsibility to push for the mobilization of new funds, with particular emphasis on wealthier nations that have been polluting for longer.
- 4. Define success in terms of people's health:** When measuring the impact of actions and investments to address the climate crisis, we must keep people at the center. Prioritizing the inclusion of health in metrics of success ensures that we are creating people-centered solutions to the climate crisis that deliver tangible benefits for human health. In the end, our success will be measured in the number of lives saved.

## There is no “safe” level of warming

*Why all global heating puts lives and health at risk*

Through the Paris Agreement, countries committed to limit global warming to well below 2°C, and to strive to limit warming to 1.5°C.<sup>6</sup> Not only is the world on track to exceed this 1.5°C target, but heating is happening at a much faster pace than anyone anticipated. This year is expected to be the hottest on record.

Crucially, while some discussions around the 1.5°C threshold might imply that there is a margin for error in our emissions targets, or that 1.5°C is an acceptable level of warming, this is far from the case.

The reality is that every tenth of a degree of warming heightens the risk of irreparable harm to the environment, has deadly consequences for communities, and reverses years of hard-fought health gains. The faster this warming happens, the harder it will be for societies to adapt, and our capacity to adapt safely and equitably to warming beyond 1.5°C is questionable.

Right now, with average global temperatures already 1.14°C above pre-industrialization levels<sup>7</sup> we are already seeing more frequent and severe natural disasters, deadly heat waves, and a rise in infectious diseases among other health impacts.

The only solution available at scale to meaningfully reduce emissions and deliver health co-benefits is to rapidly phase out greenhouse gas emissions and the use of fossil fuels. But in order for that transition to be just, the countries, companies, and communities responsible for the highest shares of historical emissions must bear the largest share of the burden for decarbonization. And countries still building infrastructure and working to reduce energy poverty must be given the resources and support needed to develop low-carbon and renewable energy sources from the start.

# 3. Guiding principles for climate and health action

All our actions must be guided by core principles:

- **Believe that a better world is possible — and take part in demanding it:** We cannot let pessimism make us complacent about escalating temperatures and threats while we still have the chance to curb the severity of the crisis. Together we can hold those with the worst track records of greenhouse gas emissions and pollution responsible for the systemic action needed to prevent further warming and human suffering.
- **Allocate responsibility and resources in a way that advances equity and justice:** Climate and health policies must meet the needs of the most affected groups, and cannot do so unless these communities are at the front of the room, around the table, and on the agenda wherever decisions are made. This is more than a bid for fair representation — it is our pathway to the best possible outcomes. At the same time, the greatest accountability for action lies with the countries, companies, and communities most responsible for creating this crisis, along with leaders who shape systemic decisions.
- **Ground all climate action in evidence and lived experience while actively fighting disinformation:** We have the knowledge we need to take meaningful action, from decades of climate evidence to proven solutions to the lived experiences of frontline communities who have been protecting the planet and responding to the crisis for a long time. At the same time, the crisis is emerging and escalating, and we need to continue researching and monitoring to course correct when necessary. We must also actively fight misinformation and disinformation about climate change, including by working with community health workers and other trusted brokers of information.
- **Work across every sector, geography, and cause:** Tackling the climate crisis and building resilient communities will require us to build new relationships and identify solutions in every sector that determines health outcomes. Our efforts must be multi-sectoral and non-duplicative.

# 4. We do not act alone: The many allies & spaces working on climate and health

From “Health in All Policies” and planetary health to “One Health” and disaster risk reduction, people are championing a variety of frameworks for understanding how human health and the health of our planet are inextricably linked.

To ensure progress on climate and health, we need to be thinking and working together across sectors, including everything from better systems for energy and health care, to how we build, organize, and connect communities, to achieving a more harmonious relationship with nature and the natural resources we rely on.



## Energy

We must transform our energy sources to minimize damage to the planet, end energy poverty, and prevent harm to the communities surrounding energy production and fuel burning.



## Health systems

We must ensure resilient, sustainable, and equitable health systems that can meet the needs of all people, everywhere, without exacerbating the climate crisis.



## Healthy & connected communities

We must ensure that the places we live and the ways we travel are designed to promote the best possible health and well-being outcomes for people.



## Food, water, & air

We must ensure that all people have reliable access to life-sustaining resources including healthy food, drinkable water, and unpolluted air, produced in ways that are sustainable and healthy for the planet.



## Natural environment

We must end our exploitation of the natural world that we rely on for health, and find balance in our relationship with nature.

## EXAMPLES

### Energy:

- Transitioning to renewable energy sources, rapidly and equitably
- Targeting energy poverty by providing financing and technical support for countries to leapfrog fossil fuels and have green energy from the start
- Supporting/investing in people and communities whose livelihoods might be affected by fossil fuel phase out
- Addressing harmful extraction practices to ensure resources needed for renewable energy are obtained without violating human rights or destroying the environment

### Health systems:

- Reducing the climate impact of the health sector by addressing waste, switching to renewable sources of energy, switching to low emissions anesthetic gases, and reducing supply chain emissions<sup>8</sup>
- Investing in universal health coverage, based on strong primary health care, to support everyday health and underlying resilience of all people and communities
- Ensuring all healthcare infrastructure can withstand extreme weather threats
- Equipping the health workforce to recognize, respond to and discuss climate-related health impacts with patients and decision makers

### Healthy & connected communities:

- Building safe and accessible routes for walking, wheeling, and riding, as well as expansive, well-connected, affordable public transportation systems that run on renewable energy
- Creating green space in cities to reduce heat impacts and improve mental health
- Improving disaster response plans, and investing in social safety net programs to support impacted communities
- Providing schools the resources to counsel young people grappling with the mental health impacts of climate change

### Food, water, & air:

- Investing in regenerative agriculture, agroecology, and Indigenous foodways and promoting consumption of plant-rich, sustainable healthy diets,
- Transitioning away from industrial livestock farming, while protecting smallholder farmers
- Building water and waste management systems that are resilient to extreme weather, including droughts and flooding

### Natural environment:

- Ending deforestation and restoring forests in largely impacted territories and ecologically crucial areas like the Amazon Rainforest
- Promoting biodiversity
- Ending the practice of dumping toxic waste in rivers, lakes, and oceans

**These examples are far from exhaustive. As you use this narrative, we look forward to seeing examples of your own work across sectors.**

# APPENDIX: Intentionally building critical connections in the climate and health movement

**A note to the community:** To build a strong climate and health movement and bring all relevant climate and health actors to the table, we need to invest in real conversations and relationships that will help carry momentum through to the finish line.

We therefore hope this community will engage with the concepts explored in this narrative off the page, in all of the spaces we occupy together, and work to move toward tangible next steps and solutions. To facilitate the best version of these conversations, we should engage with each other in the following ways:

- **Assume best intentions:** At the end of the day, the climate and health movements share many similar goals and values. However, sometimes these common threads can be obscured by differences in jargon and culture. In conversation with one another, we should seek first to understand and clarify differences, assuming that others are operating with the best intentions.
- **Listen to learn:** The growing climate and health movement exists due to the longstanding work of community members who have laid the groundwork over decades and have important lessons to share. At the same time, folks who are new to the space are uniquely positioned to understand best what motivates new audiences to take action. Climate activists have engaged in decades of debate about terminology and solutions, as have health professionals. We must value everyone's voice in this space, and attempt to share and learn from past experience.
- **Prioritize reciprocal relationships:** The climate and health movements have strengths and resources to offer each other, and can together be more than the sum of the parts.
- **Make space for hard conversations:** Envisioning a more beautiful future requires facing head-on where our current societies fall short, and co-create a vision of alternatives. We must not shy away from hard conversations but instead invest in building the trust needed to have them.

# About this document

## Audiences

This document is primarily designed for individuals and organizations already working on climate, health, or both, who are interested in urging joint action. The hope is that the narrative provides useful shared framing language, calls to action, principles and more that can then be further customized to address particular issue areas, policy asks, or other priorities.

The secondary audience is the decision-makers that stakeholders across the climate and health movement are seeking to influence: from the leaders of our organizations up through national and international policy-makers.

## Why now?

While this narrative is not specifically tied to COP28 negotiations, there is a particular need to equip a growing number of climate and health actors to speak cohesively heading into COP28, which will have the first-ever Health Day on 3 December and a greater overall health focus than past years. We intend to revisit this language with partners in early 2024 to collate and integrate lessons learned during COP28 about the most effective and resonant messaging.

## Process of co-creation

The concepts, ideas, and principles reflected within the narrative build on years of conversation and collaboration among people and organizations working at the intersection of climate change and health.

In the lead-up to COP28, many in the space identified a need for a shared, big-picture narrative to support a growing number of interested organizations to speak clearly and cohesively about the need for joint climate and health action. To meet this need, the Global Climate and Health Alliance secretariat began drafting a framework in June 2023, building on previous efforts including the 2021 Healthy Climate Prescription, the WHO COP26 Special Report on Climate Change and Health, the 2021 Regional Consultations on Climate Change and Health, and the COP27 health community policy recommendations. After consulting GCHA members and close partners to revise the framework, GCHA worked closely with the Climate x Health Secretariat to create a cohesive draft and circulate it widely for review. Through workshops, surveys, and multiple drafts, the Climate x Health Secretariat facilitated and integrated feedback from 50+ organizations and all Climate x Health co-conveners to create the current version of the narrative.

We expect there will be future opportunities for consultation and revision as the challenges for climate and health continue to evolve, along with our opportunities to drive positive change.

# About the Climate x Health initiative

Climate x Health seeks to build on, complement, and amplify ongoing efforts of longstanding climate and health actors by:

- Expanding and diversifying participation in the climate and health movement
- Developing a shared big picture narrative to align and inspire action
- Offering forums and support to coordinate strategies and activities across the landscape, particularly as more organizations get involved
- Elevating the work, perspectives, and calls to action of climate and health champions

Climate x Health is co-convened by **Wellcome Trust**, **The Rockefeller Foundation**, **Global Climate and Health Alliance**, and **Amref Health Africa**. Visit their websites to learn more about their individual work on climate and health.

The **Climate x Health Secretariat** is based out of Global Health Strategies, and can be reached at [team@climatexhealth.org](mailto:team@climatexhealth.org).

# References

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