

Climate change is here; please take action!

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During the last few weeks, the impact of Climate change in the daily lives of the people round the world has been very visible in the news. We have seen graphic pictures of starving children, and dying animals from drought and food shortage. We have seen wild fires destroy homes and disrupt livelihoods and we have seen pictures of rising sea levels threatening to wipe out small island nations. We have heard of epidemics of malaria and other diseases attributed to climate change. Yes, we have seen how the Antarctic ice sheet is melting away and separating.

At personal level, I have a farm where I grow entirely rain-fed crops. The rains have failed twice consecutively along with accompanying food crop failure and I have lost money in the process. While the local population is short of food. My concern is that while Climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity, African populations are not being actively informed and educated about this threat.

While no one is safe from these risks, the people whose health is being harmed first and worst by the climate crisis are the people in rural Africa who contribute least to its causes, and who are least able to protect themselves and their families against it.

Climate change is affecting the social and environmental determinants of health – clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter which we have discussed elsewhere in this journal. It is estimated that between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250 000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.

Countries with weak health infrastructure such as those in developing countries will be the least able to cope. Our countries can already respond by reducing emissions of toxic greenhouse gases through better transport, food and energy-use choices can result in improved health, particularly through reduced air pollution which is an issue in many of our cities.

The climate crisis threatens to undo the last fifty years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction, and to further widen existing health inequalities between and within populations. It severely jeopardizes the realization of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in various ways – including by compounding the existing burden of disease and by exacerbating existing barriers to accessing health services, often at the times when they are most needed.

What therefore should our countries be doing to create climate resilient health systems? Governments and Civil Society should raise the visibility of this crisis among the population. Our academic institutions should undertake research on climate change, health vulnerability and adaptation assessments at population and health care facility level to generate evidence to support advocacy and plan the response. Our governments should develop National Adaptation Plans targeting population health which should be widely disseminated among the population. Our Parliaments should enact laws on climate change



and appropriate resources to ensure that the implementation of the laws is fully funded.

Health professionals should become advocates for climate action and equip themselves with the necessary data to influence public opinion and national policy as well as acquire the technical competence to prepare the health system and the workforce to respond to the Climate Change generated disease burden.

Collectively we should all join the global movement and campaign to cause the big carbon emitting economies to take action to curb emissions faster than is being done now and meet the targets on keeping global temperature rise to the required levels.

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