

# Paris Climate Change Agreement: urgent priority for global health

## Call for actions by global leaders to tackle the climate crisis and improve health

Reacting to the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 6th Assessment Report<sup>i</sup> the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres declared a 'code red for humanity'<sup>ii</sup>. The report warns that under current rates of global greenhouse gas emissions, the internationally-agreed target of limiting warming to no more than 1.5°C is dangerously imperilled, and that 'we must act decisively now, to keep 1.5° alive'.

Direct health threats from our changing climate are increasingly visible. Just this year, we have seen extreme heat episodes across the US and Canada<sup>iii</sup>, unprecedented rainfall leading to extensive floods in China<sup>iv</sup> and Germany<sup>v</sup>, and the horror of climate-induced famine in Madagascar<sup>vi</sup>.

The climate crisis is a health threat that continues to grow and to increase health inequalities internationally as we battle the Covid-19 pandemic.

There is clear evidence<sup>vii</sup> that solutions to the climate crisis – including sustainable food, clean energy, active transport, and a resilient health system – can also directly benefit people's health. Making good on the fundamental rights of all people to health, clean air, and nutritious food can and must go hand-in-hand with climate action.

Delivering the ambition of the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to well below 2°C – and preferably to 1.5C – above pre-industrial levels could be the world's most important action for global health. The race to zero<sup>viii</sup> emissions is a race to save countless lives.

With our partners, the Health and Climate Network calls for health to be at the centre of global climate policy and decision-making.

We call on governments to take action to deliver urgent responses to the climate crisis which benefit health for all, including:

1. Providing affordable, carbon- and pollution-free, renewable energy for all.
2. Transitioning to healthier, climate friendly transport systems that benefit everyone.
3. Shifting to sustainable food production and healthy diets.
4. Building sustainable, climate-resilient health systems, delivering care when and where it is needed.
5. Investing in a green and healthy economy by reorienting finance towards sustainable priorities.

## 1) Provide carbon- and pollution-free renewable energy for all

The burning of fossil fuels – oil, gas, and coal – in energy production is a major source of air pollution and the leading cause of climate change, responsible for nearly three quarters of global greenhouse gas emissions. Evidence shows that coal is the worst offender; of the three fossil fuels it produces the greatest amount of greenhouse gas emissions and high levels of damaging air pollutants, posing a significant health risk.

In addition, over three quarters of a billion people still lack access to electricity worldwide, and 2.6 billion cook with unhealthy, polluting fuels. Lack of modern clean energy access traps people in poverty.

Providing pollution- and carbon-free renewable energy to everyone who needs it will dramatically benefit the climate, human health, and national economies.

We call on governments to:

- Improve human health and reduce premature deaths by phasing out fossil fuels and delivering sustainable energy for all.
- End fossil fuel subsidies and ensure the price of fossil fuels reflects the true cost of their health and environmental impacts.
- Eliminate deadly household air pollution by supporting clean cooking.
- Ensure an equitable and just energy transition

Further information is available at [energy-systems-that-protect-climate-and-health.pdf](#)

## 2) Transition to healthier, climate friendly transport systems that benefit everyone

Transport is critical for trade, mobility and access to goods, services, and employment. However, it also accounts for 24% of direct carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions from fossil fuel use. Modern transport systems also contribute to ill health and mortality, including through air pollution, traffic injuries, and health risks associated with physical inactivity, such as obesity.

Transitioning to healthier transport systems – centred on the needs of humans, not vehicles – can ensure fair access to mobility while cutting health and climate-damaging emissions.

We call on governments to:

- Prioritise safe public transport and active transport such as walking and cycling in planning and infrastructure decisions to reduce emissions and increase health benefits.
- Invest in efficient and zero-carbon transport systems and technologies according to the following principles:
  - Avoid the need to travel.
  - Shift to more sustainable modes of transport.
  - Improve the energy efficiency of operations.
- Ensure that mobility solutions reduce inequities and benefit everyone.

Further information is available at [transport-systems-that-protect-climate-and-health.pdf](#)

### 3) Shift to sustainable food production and healthy diets

Poor diet affects health in every country and is now the leading driver of ill health globally, through diet-related conditions such as undernutrition, obesity, heart attack, stroke, and diabetes. Food systems both drive climate change – producing between 20 and 35% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions – and are impacted by it. Global warming already affects food production across the world, reducing yields of staple crops, vegetables, and legumes, and impacting local food access during floods and drought.

Healthier diets, accessible to all, are better for the climate, the environment, and human health. To achieve climate, resilience and dietary health benefits, food systems must support diversified foods and diets that are rich in fruits, vegetables, pulses, and nuts.

We call on governments to:

- Promote access to sustainable, affordable, and healthy diet options for all.
- Remove financial and non-financial incentives that support and promote high-emission, unhealthy food options and agricultural practices.
- Rapidly transition away from unsustainable farming and food processing practices that damage the environment and risk human health.
- Prioritise ecologically sustainable food systems to strengthen resilience, increase food and nutrition security, and lower emissions.
- Ensure that the transition to a more sustainable, ecologically-friendly, and healthy food system is done in a fair and just way.

Further information is available at [diet-and-food-systems-for-health-climate-and-planet.pdf](#)

### 4) Build sustainable and climate resilient health systems, delivering care when and where it is needed

In responding to Covid-19, the world must also prepare for and respond to direct health threats from the climate crisis. Climate change is increasingly straining healthcare provision around the world. Already-limited services are often disrupted by climate-related extreme events, such as heatwaves, floods, and droughts.

Most current health systems are ill equipped to manage changing health risks due to climate change, including rises in ill health and death from heat exposure, diarrhoea, undernutrition, vector-borne disease such as malaria, and death and injury due to extreme weather.

The health sector itself feeds the climate crisis and resulting health risks. Current systems of healthcare provision account for 4.4% of global greenhouse gas emissions. If global healthcare were a country, it would be the fifth-largest climate polluter on the planet.

Sustainable, resilient health systems are needed to deliver care when and where it is needed in an unstable, changing climate.

We call on governments to:

- Build the capacity and resilience of health workers, facilities, and systems to proactively anticipate and respond to climate change.
- Develop sustainable and climate-resilient health systems which provide primary health care for all and are underpinned by a rights-based approach to public health.
- Decarbonise health systems in a health-centred way while also providing leadership for other sectors.
- Prioritise, promote, and facilitate investments in sustainable and resilient health care.

Further information is available at [sustainable-and-climate-resilient-health-systems.pdf](#)

## 5) Invest in a green and healthy economy by reorienting finance towards sustainable priorities

The World Health Organization<sup>ix</sup> has shown that the health gains from achieving the ambitions of the Paris Climate Agreement would more than meet the financial costs of climate mitigation at a global scale. We have a unique opportunity to maximize health gains as countries start to deliver their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and long-term strategies under the Paris agreement.

In most countries, delivery of the NDCs coincides with planning for and investment in recovery from the economic crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This recovery should aim to create a sustainable, more resilient global economy, capable of charting a course toward a zero-carbon world in which all people can thrive.

We call on governments to:

- Ensure that NDCs and long-term strategies delivered under the Paris agreement fully recognise win-win benefits with respect to health.
- Prioritise COVID-19 recovery investments that will set nations and the world on a trajectory towards a climate-resilient, healthy future.

## References

<sup>i</sup> Inter-governmental Panel on Climate change, 2021 Sixth Assessment Report. [ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/](https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/)

<sup>ii</sup> UN News, 2021, IPCC report: 'Code red' for human driven global heating, warns UN chief. [news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097362](https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097362)

<sup>iii</sup> Washington Post, 2021, This year's extreme fires and floods may change what Americans think about climate change, our research finds. [news/us/this-year-s-extreme-fires-and-floods-may-change-what-americans-think-about-climate-change-our-research-finds/ar-AAANuOe8?ocid=BingNewsSearch](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2021/08/15/climate-change-floods-and-droughts-will-be-greater-dangers-for-chinas-growth-than-earlier-thought-un-scientists-say/)

<sup>iv</sup> The Star, 2021, Climate change: floods and droughts will be greater dangers for China's growth than earlier thought, UN scientists say. [thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2021/08/15/climate-change-floods-and-droughts-will-be-greater-dangers-for-chinas-growth-than-earlier-thought-un-scientists-say](https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2021/08/15/climate-change-floods-and-droughts-will-be-greater-dangers-for-chinas-growth-than-earlier-thought-un-scientists-say)

<sup>v</sup> The Guardian, 2021, Climate scientists shocked by scale of floods in Germany. [theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/16/climate-scientists-shocked-by-scale-of-floods-in-germany](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/16/climate-scientists-shocked-by-scale-of-floods-in-germany)

<sup>vi</sup> Time, 2021, Climate, Not Conflict. Madagascar's Famine is the First in Modern History to be Solely Caused by Global Warming. [time.com/6081919/famine-climate-change-madagascar/](https://www.time.com/6081919/famine-climate-change-madagascar/)

<sup>vii</sup> Health and Climate Network Briefings, 2021. [wellcome.org/reports/connections-between-climate-and-health](https://www.wellcome.org/reports/connections-between-climate-and-health)

<sup>viii</sup> Race to Zero, 2021 [racetozero.unfccc.int/](https://www.racetozero.unfccc.int/)

<sup>ix</sup> World Health Organisation, 2018, COP24 Special report: Health & Climate Change. [who.int/publications/i/item/cop24-special-report-health-climate-change](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/cop24-special-report-health-climate-change)

**This call to action is supported by the following organisations:**

