

COP26 Special Report on Climate Change and Health – The Health Argument for Climate Action

Summary brief for business

In October 2021, ahead of the [United Nations Climate Change Conference COP26](#) in Glasgow, the World Health Organization (WHO) published its “[COP26 Special Report on Climate Change and Health: The Health Argument for Climate Action](#)” to draw attention to the urgency of the deeply intertwined climate and health crises. The report urges governments and policymakers to prioritize health and to step up their national climate commitments and policies for a healthy and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Developed in consultation with over 150 organizations and 400 experts and health professionals, the report outlines the wide-ranging and devastating ways in which the consequences of climate change are already impacting people’s health and burdening health systems worldwide, be that through more frequent heatwaves, floods, droughts, wildfires, and hurricanes, a rise in infectious diseases, mental health challenges or malnutrition. While the health effects of climate change are felt everywhere, it is evident that the health burden disproportionately effects the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, undermining livelihoods, and access to affordable healthcare services.

While scientific advances are progressively confirming the link between increases in morbidity and mortality due to climate change, only a small percentage of countries have health adaptation plans in place, and less than 0.5% of multilateral climate finance is allocated to health projects.

Against this backdrop and with the understanding that only transformational change will avoid stepping beyond critical societal and planetary boundaries, the WHO COP26 Special Report lays out 10 key recommendations to support governments, policymakers, and the health community in placing health and equity at the center of climate action. Each recommendation is supported by a series of action points, resources, and case studies to guide implementation.

This business summary highlights the main points from the WHO report relevant to business and puts it into context with the work that WBCSD is doing in working towards articulating a compelling narrative around the role of business in supporting health and wellbeing.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- The full WHO report is [here](#).
- The COP26 Health Program, which has been established to bring stronger health focus and ambition, is available to explore [here](#).
- The WHO has also published a [Manifesto](#), describing what a healthy recovery from COVID-19 could look like.

Key takeaways from the report:

- 1. The climate crisis is the single biggest health threat facing humanity.** To avert devastating health impacts and prevent deaths related to climate change, the world must limit temperature rise to 1.5°C as defined in the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).
- 2. The consequences of climate change impact everyone and all dimensions of human health.** The people whose health will be impacted the most are those that are contributing the least to the causes of climate change and are the most vulnerable to risks arising from it.
- 3. 50 years of progress in development, global health and poverty reduction are at stake** and existing health inequalities are likely to become more severe. It will more than likely not be possible to achieve universal access to healthcare without decisive climate action.
- 4. The consequences of climate change are already driving a significant amount of the global burden of diseases and illness.** Direct consequences that are currently unfolding include: more cardiorespiratory and cardiovascular diseases due to more frequent heatwaves; infectious diseases encroaching faster into societies; Rising levels of malnutrition; and emerging mental health issues.
- 5. While scientific evidence is advancing to proof the correlation between morbidity and mortality in relation to climate sensitive health risks,** the health impacts of climate change will be determined mainly by the vulnerability of populations, their resilience to the current rate of climate change and the extent and pace of adaptation.
- 6. Taking bold climate action can generate multiple co-benefits including for health.** It can help to enhance resilience, bridge the social divide, and deliver on many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 7. Considerations around health and equity must inform and influence climate decision-making** and need to be built into emerging climate policies.

10 recommendations to embed health into climate action

WHO outlines ten recommendations supported by a number of action points which highlight the urgent need and numerous opportunities for policy makers to prioritize health and equity in the global sustainable development agenda:

- 1. Commit to a healthy recovery:** the recovery from Covid-19 must be healthy, green, and just, with climate and health goals seamlessly aligned, and health being central to all national and sub-national policies.
- 2. Make health non-negotiable:** health and social justice must be placed at the heart of UN climate talks, with all efforts geared towards formulating and implementing the Paris Agreement Rulebook and limiting global warming to 1.5°C, as every additional tenth of a degree above this will harm the health of millions.
- 3. Harness the health benefits of climate action:** honor everyone's right to health by prioritizing those climate interventions with the largest health-, social- and economic gains.
- 4. Build health resilience to climate risks:** build climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable health systems and facilities, and support health adaptation and resilience across sectors through greater and more consistent funding.
- 5. Create energy systems that protect and improve climate and health:** with 9 out of 10 people currently breathing air that does not meet WHO quality guidelines, largely because of burning fossil fuels, there is a need to guide a just and inclusive transition to renewable energy to save lives from air pollution.
- 6. Reimagine urban environments, transport, and mobility:** promote sustainable, healthy urban design and transport systems, with improved land-use, and access to green and blue public spaces. As cities are responsible for over 60% of greenhouse gas emissions, walking, cycling and public transport must be prioritized.
- 7. Protect and restore nature as the foundation of our health:** we must protect and restore natural systems, which are the foundations for healthy lives, sustainable food systems and livelihoods. Nature-based solutions have the potential to contribute significantly to emissions reductions, while also providing a range of health benefits.
- 8. Promote healthy, sustainable, and resilient food systems:** current food systems are harming human health, with approximately 11 million annual deaths being caused by poor diets and a further 2.7 million deaths from zoonoses directly linked to food systems. It is imperative to promote sustainable and resilient food production and more affordable, nutritious diets that deliver on both climate and health outcomes.
- 9. Finance a healthier, fairer, and greener future to save lives:** in 2017, over 6% of global GDP was spent on subsidizing fossil fuels, while health remains critically underfunded, especially when it comes to climate finance. There is a need to transition towards a wellbeing economy that does not prioritize unsustainable growth.
- 10. Listen to the health community and prescribe urgent climate action:** mobilize and support the health community on climate action by providing more adapted training for healthcare workers and enabling health professional advocacy on this topic.

COP26 – a critical opportunity for dialogue

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on health as a critical global issue and highlighted the interconnection of human health and natural systems. The WHO report underlines that the coming years represent a unique and crucial window for the world to integrate climate and

health policies into their national COVID-19 recovery plans to guarantee a healthier and safer future for all.

WHO also underlines that COP26 represents an important opportunity to place the issue of health at the forefront of climate discussions, and to

join the dots between these two critical agendas. WHO perceives COP26 as a final chance for all stakeholders, including businesses from a wide range of sectors, to commit to the highest possible ambitions around climate and health.

The role of business

The WHO Special Report is unequivocal: systems transformation will be required in order to make health systems resilient in the face of climate change and safeguard human health in the decades to come. This will mean changing the way and the extent to which we finance health, but also tackling the root causes of climate change to prevent future shocks and pressures on health systems. While the report predominately calls on governments and policymakers to step up ambition and action, it also recognizes that the private sector plays a central role in supporting health and climate resilience and ensuring people can live healthy lives.

WBCSD's work on health and wellbeing

In 2021, WBCSD launched [Vision 2050: Time to transform](#) which provides a framework for business to lead the transformations needed to realize a world in which more than nine billion people live well, within planetary boundaries, by 2050.

At the heart of this framework are nine transformation pathways covering the areas of business activity that are essential to society, including a dedicated pathway on [health and wellbeing](#). With the understanding that business has a key role to play in helping to realize a world where all people have the highest attainable standard of health and wellbeing,

WBCSD is working to operationalize this pathway and to position health more centrally into its work. In particular WBCSD's [Healthy People, Healthy Business](#) project is working to establish a cross-cutting narrative around the role of businesses from all sectors in supporting health and wellbeing. This includes specific efforts to enhance global business understanding of the interdependence of human health and natural systems.

About the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)

WBCSD is the premier global, CEO-led community of over 200 of the world's leading sustainable businesses working collectively to accelerate the system transformations needed for a net zero, nature positive, and more equitable future.

We do this by engaging executives and sustainability leaders from business and elsewhere to share practical insights on the obstacles and opportunities we currently face in tackling the integrated climate, nature and inequality sustainability challenge; by co-developing "how-to" CEO-guides from these insights; by providing science-based target guidance including standards and protocols; and by developing tools and platforms to help leading businesses in sustainability drive integrated actions to tackle climate, nature and inequality challenges across sectors and geographical regions.

Our member companies come from all business sectors and all major economies, representing a combined revenue of more than USD \$8.5 trillion and 19 million employees. Our global network of almost 70 national business councils gives our members unparalleled reach across the globe. Since 1995, WBCSD has been uniquely positioned to work with member companies along and across value chains to deliver impactful business solutions to the most challenging sustainability issues.

Together, we are the leading voice of business for sustainability, united by our vision of a world where 9+ billion people are living well, within planetary boundaries, by mid-century.

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