

The scientific evidence that climate change is happening now, and is caused by human actions, is unequivocal, according to the fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The same report indicates that the Eastern Mediterranean Region is one of those that will be worst affected.

WHO has recognized the importance of the issue and the potential for impact on health security for some years. Climate change will adversely and profoundly affect some of the most fundamental determinants of health: water, air and food; and is having direct impact on the environment. And this environmental impact will have direct effect on the risk factors for health, in this Region and worldwide. For example, climate change will lead to water insecurity and water quality deterioration, and these, in turn will lead to an increase in water-borne and food-borne diseases and malnutrition. Climate change means that the weather patterns we are all used to are changing, and will change further. More direct exposure to heatwaves and other extreme weather conditions will have direct impact on health; people will be more at risk of disease and death. Therefore we need to work hard to put the protection of human health at the centre of the climate change agenda.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, climate change has already shown itself in the form of changing rainfall and storm patterns; increased ambient temperatures; shifting plant growth zones; change in the seasons; reduction in availability and quality of fresh water; increase in flooding of coastal areas due to rise in sea levels; increased frequency of dust storms and increased air pollution. The public health consequences of such events include extreme weather-related mortality, affecting the most vulnerable groups: the elderly, the chronically sick, and the poor. In the future, we can expect an increase in water-borne and food-borne diseases, and in acute respiratory infections and allergies due to dust storms. We can also expect an increase in the geographic range and incidence of vector-borne diseases, such as malaria, leishmaniasis and schistosomiasis, and the emergence of diseases that we have not seen much before in the Region, such as dengue fever. Forced migration and malnutrition are other important consequences of change in weather patterns that will affect human health.

Thus, climate change will adversely affect our food, the air we breathe, and our water supplies. In the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which are already characterized by water shortage, the impact on fresh water availability will be most felt. Water household insecurity is highly correlated with prevalence of diarrhoea and this directly threatens the health of children and the elderly.

Let us be clear. Climate change poses a serious threat to health and the future security of our natural resources. But we can do a lot to moderate the influence of climate change on our well-being. This is a problem made by humans, and all of us have to contribute to the solutions. Countries need to adopt efficient drinking-water quality management; secure minimum household water security requirements to safeguard health; ensure safe reuse of wastewater; maintain high sanitation standards; and sustain and increase pollution control activities. The health system needs to be prepared to manage the new risks to health and the new disease realities. Last but not least, countries need to invest in health education to ensure individuals and communities contribute to a safer future for all.

Climate change is real. Human activities are a prime cause. Human activities can also be the solution. We must act now, together, to find ways to protect human health and the people on this planet. Let me take this opportunity to call on everybody to rethink his or her lifestyle, in order to stabilize the root causes of the global warming causing climate change. Let us all conserve the scarce commodities of water and energy; minimize and reduce the generation of waste as much as possible, by recycling and reusing wherever possible. Our responsible behaviour will help to conserve our environment, and ultimately lead to the realization of sustainable development for our world. Sustainable development will ensure “that the needs of the current generation will be met without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs”.

Let us all do our part, for our children, and our children’s children.

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