

UNPACKING THE FIRST EVER COP 'HEALTH DAY'

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'The climate crisis is a public health crisis'. The 'Health Day' opening session | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The 28th UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), hosted by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at Dubai, was held in a year when the planet is facing unprecedented challenges. From it being the hottest year on record to wildfires that have devoured communities and floods that have wiped away cities, the evidence of the current crisis is crystal clear.

The climate crisis is a public health crisis. Severe temperatures, heat stress, excessive rainfall and floods, an increase in water- and vector-borne diseases, and more frequent extreme weather events are all evidence of this existential threat to our health security. That is why the World Health Organization (WHO) declared "Climate change as the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century". Marginalised communities are on the front lines of the worst impacts of the changing climate. According to a World Bank estimate, "Climate change could drag more than 100 million people back into extreme poverty by 2030". Much of this reversal would be due to the "negative impacts on health". The climate risk index shows that eight out of the 10 countries most impacted by extreme weather events are the low- and middle-income countries.

On December 3, the inaugural Health Day at COP28 highlighted the vital link between climate and health, underscoring that combating climate change is integral to advancing global health. The context to the day and the urgency to address the root cause of climate crisis — fossil fuel use — was set in early November with health leaders representing more than 46 million health professionals globally issuing an open letter calling on the COP28 Presidency and world governments to "commit to an accelerated, just and equitable phase-out of fossil fuels as the decisive path to health for all". Over 1,900 health professionals at this year's COP propelled the momentum to prioritise human health and well-being in climate decisions, taking centre stage.

Events and activities elevated a focus on people's health for the first time at a COP like never before. Most notable ones were the COP28 UAE Declaration on Climate and Health that "signifies a global commitment to address climate-related health impacts, emphasizing the imperative for governments to fortify healthcare systems". The declaration is now supported by 143 countries (to date). The COP28 Presidency, WHO, the UAE Ministry of Health and Prevention, and a group of champion countries also hosted the first-ever climate-health ministerial, which brought together nearly 50 Ministers of Health and 110 high-level health ministerial staff. Ministers of health, environment, finance, and other related sectors set out a "roadmap and opportunities for action to address the rapidly growing burden of climate change

on healthcare systems and capture the vast socio-economic benefits from better health and well-being through climate action”.

It is noteworthy that India was not represented on the historic health day at COP28. Over the last two decades, India has witnessed a significant rise in extreme temperatures, heat stress events, cyclones, floods, droughts, and malnutrition. In 2019 it ranked seventh globally for the severe impact of climate change, as in the Global Climate Risk Index. According to ‘India 2023: An assessment of extreme weather events’ brought out by Down To Earth magazine and the Centre for Science and Environment, India has seen a disaster nearly every day in the first nine months of this year — from heat and cold waves, cyclones and lightning to heavy rain, floods, and landslides. These disasters have “claimed 2,923 human lives, affected 1.84 million hectares (ha) of crop area, destroyed over 80,563 houses and killed close to 92,519 livestock”.

Explained | [The COP28 summit’s focus on health?](#)

According to the Reserve Bank of India’s most recent report, as much as 4.5% of the country’s GDP could be jeopardised by 2030 due to the impact of extreme heat and humidity on labour hours, emphasising the economic risks associated with heat-related challenges alone. Not to miss India’s notoriety on its record on rising air pollution that caused at least 1.6 million premature deaths in 2019. Major public health challenges, including malaria, malnutrition, and diarrhoea, further compound the situation. The projected increase in these incidents, aligned with weather-related disasters and their health ramifications, poses a significant threat to the already strained public health infrastructure in the country.

Placing health at the forefront of climate planning in India is not just a necessity but an imperative for several compelling reasons. Over 700 million individuals in India, representing a significant portion of the population residing in rural areas, rely directly on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and forests, as well as natural resources such as water, biodiversity, mangroves, coastal zones, and grasslands for their livelihoods. It is crucial to proactively formulate plans and policies that cater to their health needs.

Also read | [How climate change is making the world sick](#)

Prioritising health in climate planning safeguards both immediate and long-term well-being in the face of climate change impacts. This focus enhances community resilience and disease mitigation, ensuring that populations can better cope with challenges and contribute to sustainable development. Integrating health into climate planning is not only economically prudent, reducing health-care costs and increasing productivity, but also strategically crucial for the overall effectiveness and sustainability of climate actions in India.

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