

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
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MESSAGE ON WORLD HEALTH DAY
7 April 2008

Climate change is sometimes debated as if it affected only the planet, and not the people living on it. This year's World Health Day is an opportunity to broaden this view by spotlighting the major health threats we face as a result of global warming.

Climate change endangers the quality and availability of water and food, our fundamental determinants of nutrition and health. It is causing more frequent and more severe storms, heat waves, droughts and floods, while worsening the quality of our air. The result is an upsurge in human suffering caused by injury, disease, malnutrition and death.

We need to give voice to this often-overlooked reality, ensuring that protecting human health is anchored at the heart of the global climate change agenda.

The impact will be most severe in poor countries, which have contributed least to this global crisis. By 2020, up to a quarter of a billion Africans will experience increased water stress, and crop yields in some African countries are expected to drop by half.

Malnutrition and climate-related infectious diseases will take their heaviest toll on the most vulnerable: small children, the elderly and the infirm. Women living in poverty face particular risk when natural disasters and other global-warming related dangers strike.

We must do more than decry these circumstances. We must act to ensure that the health of the vulnerable is protected during climate change. This means stepping up efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals, from cutting childhood mortality to empowering women, as a central component of the international response to climate change.

Public health has decades of experience in dealing effectively with problems that climate change will exacerbate, and we can use this as a basis for predicting – and forestalling – the consequences.

Climate change is real, it is accelerating and it threatens all of us. We must respond with urgent action to stabilize the climate, achieve the MDGs, and encourage individual action. Our collective efforts can foster social and economic development for the world's poorest peoples, improving their health systems and their lives.

World Health Day challenges us to join forces in the great effort to combat climate change, for the sake of our planet and all of its inhabitants.