

## Feature Articles

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### Climate Experts Warming to Consideration of Health Issues

**By: Paula Whitacre**

*Meetings highlight the links between climate change and human health*

Three meetings in mid-2014 gave prominent recognition to research findings that demonstrate climate change effects on human health. The World Health Organization (WHO) held its first high-level meeting on this issue in August. In September, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon convened the UN Climate Summit in New York that featured, for the first time, a panel on Climate, Jobs, and Health. And in July, in Washington, D.C., child health was the focus of an [\*Expert Consultation on the Effects of Climate Change on Children's Health\*](#) convened by a Presidential task force.



Balbus (center) and co-presenters at the WHO Conference on Climate and Health; <http://www.iisd.ca/who/hcc/> (Photo courtesy of IISD/Earth Negotiations Bulletin)

As context for the implications for global environmental health, consider this statement made by WHO Director-General Margaret Chan, M.D., at the WHO meeting, “The evidence is overwhelming: Climate change endangers human health. Solutions exist, and we need to act decisively to change this trajectory.”

#### **WHO Conference: Challenges and Opportunities**

The WHO Conference on Health and Climate focused on strengthening health system resilience to climate risks and promoting health while mitigating climate change. It brought together more than 350 policy makers, technical experts, and civil society leaders.

“The meeting marked a turning point in the level of awareness among ministries of health about the importance of climate change to the populations they are serving, especially those in low-income countries,” said John Balbus, M.D., M.P.H., NIEHS senior advisor for public health. He pointed to the significance of Margaret Chan, Michel Jarraud, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), and Christina Figueres, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, sharing the stage at the conference’s opening session, in front of an audience of ministers of health and other high-level officials.

Balbus was a member of the Technical Advisory Group that contributed to planning and reviewing background material for the meeting. He also spoke as part of a panel that focused on the resilience of the health sector. A takeaway message of the conference, according to Balbus, was that concerted action on climate change can improve human health overall, but many countries lack the technical capacity to act effectively.

“The good news is that reducing climate change can yield substantial and immediate health benefits,” said Maria Neira, M.D., director of the WHO Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health. “The most powerful example is air pollution, which in 2012 was responsible for 7 million deaths—one in eight of all deaths worldwide. There is now solid evidence that mitigating climate change can greatly reduce this toll.”

A summary of the meeting was produced as input to the United Nations Climate Summit held the next month. WHO has also established a joint Climate and Health Office with WMO to promote the coordinated development and use of climate services to improve public health.

### **UN Climate Summit: Catalyzing Action**

On September 23, Secretary-General Moon convened the UN Climate Summit in New York to “raise political momentum for a meaningful universal climate agreement in Paris in 2015 and to galvanize transformative action in all countries to reduce emissions and build resilience to the adverse effects of climate change.” About 1,000 people, including 100 heads of state, attended.

WHO and the International Labour Organization co-hosted a panel on climate, health, and jobs. Here, as in Geneva, participants stressed the positive opportunities, not just the negative impacts of climate change now and in the future.

“Part of the challenge is to communicate the threats that climate change presents to health,” stated Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, who moderated the panel. “But it is better to emphasize the opportunities. Changes to diet, electricity generation, and transportation will bring benefits to our well-being. We need concrete actions to turn this opportunity into a reality.”

Many public and private sector representatives used the summit to [announce](#) new initiatives and partnerships related to resilience, energy, and other sectors.

### **Expert Consultation: Children as a Population of Concern**

The effect of climate change on children's health is emerging as an issue of concern, globally and in the United States. "Children are vulnerable for many reasons," noted Kimberly Thigpen Tart, J.D., NIEHS analyst in the Office of Policy, Planning, and Evaluation and co-chair of the subcommittee that organized the [Expert Consultation on the Effects of Climate Change on Children's Health](#). "Not only because they take in air, water, and food differently than adults relative to their size, but also because of their developing bodies and behaviors that can increase risk of environmental exposures."

The President's Task Force on Environmental Health Risks and Safety Risks to Children convened the consultation, which featured scientific expert panels on climate change impact topics such as air quality, extreme weather events and mental health, and food security, as well as a session on research needs. The following areas were just some of those discussed as potential topics for future research:

- Impacts of climate change such as extreme heat and floods on indoor environments, especially schools where children spend much of their waking hours
- Potential prenatal effects, including premature or low birth weight infants, of extreme weather events and changes in food nutrition
- Impact of climate variations on seasonal respiratory viruses, such as respiratory syncytial virus

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., participated in the meeting. "NIEHS interest and support on this topic is no accident, but rather the natural convergence of our investment in children's health with our efforts to examine the implications of climate change on the health of all people, particularly those populations that are likely to be most vulnerable to climate change effects," she said.

### **Online Portal on Climate Change and Health**

As shown at these meetings, the body of knowledge on climate change and health is growing, although gaps remain. NIEHS, as part of its workplan as a WHO Collaborating Centre, is creating a publicly available, online portal to consolidate research about climate change and health in one tool. Scheduled to launch in late 2014, the searchable database will include more than 5,000 studies from 2009 to the present.

## For Further Information

Background documents, presentations, and summaries on these three meetings are available online:

[WHO Conference on Climate Change and Health](#)

[United Nations Climate Summit](#)

[Effects of Climate Change on Children's Health](#)