

Health and social impacts of climate change

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Key points

- At its heart, climate change is an equity issue. The effects of climate change will be disproportionately felt by those in society who are already vulnerable, such as those with lower socio-economic and health status.
- Many climate change risks to health and society will arise indirectly from a variety of non-health sectors, including agriculture, water, disaster management and planning.
- An understanding of approaches to reduce vulnerability to the health and social risks of climate change must incorporate an understanding of equity issues, as well as focus on multi-sectoral activities.
- Community-based and social service organisations play a vital role in responding to climate change risks, given the need for these responses to be framed at a local level.

Introduction

Climate change poses a major threat to society, human health and health inequities. The health and social impacts of climate change are becoming clearer. There is a general consensus that climate change will negatively affect health and social wellbeing, predominantly due to the exacerbation of existing health conditions such as infectious diseases and malnutrition. Climate change may also increase the risk of non-communicable diseases and mental ill health, directly via increasing frequency and intensity of extreme temperatures and weather events, fires and air pollution, and indirectly via changes to food and water security. These health effects will occur globally.

The distribution of health impacts will be inequitable with the most vulnerable communities, in rich and poor countries, experiencing the worst effects. The degree of a community's vulnerability to the health effects of climate change is determined by a multitude of factors, including spatial segregation and the associated poor physical living conditions, low income, low levels of education, poor governance structures and processes, and already poor health status.

Responses to reduce vulnerability to the effects of climate change must therefore be equity-focused, and are necessarily multi-sectoral given that the majority of the health impacts will arise via other sectors, such as planning, water and agriculture.