



Climate Change : Natural Disasters

Climate Change & Public Health: A Morbid Connection

When a severe heat wave hit Europe in the summer of 2003, public health officials across the continent struggled to tend to the thousands of critically ill victims. By the time the heat finally subsided in late August, tens of thousands of people - many of them elderly - had perished of heat stress and heat-related illness.



Dry land emerges under the "Boats Bridge" near Pavia, Italy after a severe heat wave had struck the area in the summer of 2005. Officials issued a health warning for elderly and children (Photo: Reuters)

The European heat wave could not have more clearly illustrated the connection between climate and public health, but for people in the world's poorest regions, such a reminder is hardly necessary. After all, it is in the rural and impoverished reaches of sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia where people are already aware - perhaps too aware - of the morbid connections between climate and public health.

Climate change could make an already dire situation significantly worse. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that around 150,000 people already die annually from factors related to climate change.

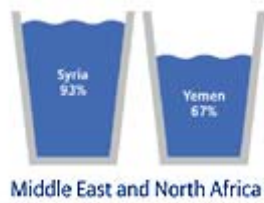
Most of those deaths occur - and will continue to occur - in the developing world, where the health and survival of communities often hinges delicately on access to water, stable ecosystems and regular weather patterns - all factors that will be negatively affected if current trends continue.

Bearing the brunt

In May 2006, UK-based non-profit Christian Aid published "The Climate of Poverty," a report that argues "it is the poor of the world who are already suffering disproportionately from the effects of global warming."

The report, which discusses climate and health problems in Kenya, Bangladesh and elsewhere, presents the possibility that over 182 million people in sub-Saharan Africa could die from climate-related factors during the 21st century. Such grim projections correlate with the idea that "poor people in the world's most vulnerable communities will bear the brunt" of the impacts of global warming.

Along with projected increases in extreme weather events - droughts, heavy rains and hurricanes, for example - a rise in average global temperatures will affect access to clean water and agricultural production.



Infographic (click on the image to enlarge)

Access to safe drinking water worldwide (Graphic: Allianz)

"Some parts of West Africa...have dealt with issues of drought over the past century or more, and they have accumulated certain knowledge that has helped them," Anthony Nyong, professor of geography and planning at the University of Jos in Nigeria, told OneWorld Radio in June

"This is no longer working for very obvious reasons, such as the increase in the intensity and frequency of these drought events," says Nyong. "It is making it difficult for them to cope, (and making) traditional systems no longer effective."

Devastating and fatal

Scientists have also suggested that extreme weather can lead to outbreaks of diseases. One paper written by scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and published in the journal "Nature" in 2005 cited evidence linking climate fluctuations to the spread of insect-borne diseases like malaria and dengue fever in the developing world.

The outbreak of disease does not only affect human health, but also the livestock and products that many depend on for their livelihoods.

The International Research Institute (IRI) for Climate Society at Columbia University in New York provides an example: the outbreak of the rift valley fever (RVF) in Ethiopia and Somalia that resulted from the unusually heavy rains of 1997-98. The RVF outbreak led to international bans on animal products, greatly affecting the income of rural farmers in the Horn of Africa - already one of the world's poorest regions.

Hurricane Katrina painfully reminded many people that extreme weather conditions also have devastating and fatal consequences in the developed world. And as the 2003 heat wave in Europe suggested, more hot weather could mean more deaths and illness from heat stress, respiratory and heart disease and exposure to ultra-violet radiation.

Triggering Action

"The European heat wave of 2003 was the trigger for a number of government initiatives," says Bettina Menne of the WHO's Regional Office for Europe, referring to recent national studies that point to future increases in heat waves in the northern hemisphere, as well as propose strategies for adaptation.

Meanwhile, some of the other predicted effects of global warming,

including desertification, more forest fires, and rising sea levels, may have untold future consequences on humanity, further reducing access to resources and forcing the migration of millions of people in the coming decades.

"We are looking at a number of possible scenarios," says Menne. "That figure of 150,000 climate-related deaths every year globally could conceivably double by 2020."

Suffice it to say that climate change will create some daunting challenges for global public health, but many experts seem convinced there are solutions to slow climate change and to deal with its health effects around the world.

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"Especially for the developing parts of the world who are going to suffer much more than we do, the imperative for us to do something about it is absolutely inescapable," said British scientist and climate expert Sir John Houghton when introducing the Christian Aid report in May. "There are things we can do about it if we only got on with it."

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