

Editorial



Building Climate Resilient Health Systems: prioritizing action for a healthier future

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The growing threat of climate change presents unprecedented challenges to global health systems. Sri Lanka is highly susceptible to climate-related impacts due to its geographical location, being a developing island, reliance on climate-sensitive livelihoods, and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events. Rising temperatures, intensified monsoons, increased flooding, and erratic rainfall patterns contribute to the spread of climate-sensitive vector-borne and zoonotic diseases such as dengue, leishmaniasis, and leptospirosis, climate-sensitive non-communicable diseases, malnutrition, and heat-related illnesses. Even though there is no internal transmission of malaria in Sri Lanka currently, surveillance needs to be continued, as malaria is a climate-sensitive vector-borne disease. Additionally, the health impacts of natural disasters, including injuries, mental health issues, and disruption of essential services, further threaten public well-being. Mental health issues due to climate change are inevitable and must be given careful consideration. The psychological distress caused by displacement, loss of livelihoods, and extreme weather events can lead to many mental health challenges among communities. Given these challenges, the health

sector must prioritize climate action to protect communities and strengthen its resilience.

Sri Lanka's health sector has taken commendable steps in this direction by developing the National Adaptation Plan for the Health Sector, producing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for adaptation in health, and committing to a low-carbon, climate-resilient health sector. These efforts are pivotal in addressing the multifaceted impacts of climate change on health, including the rise in infectious diseases, heat stress, and mental health issues associated with climate-related disasters (Ebi et al., 2018). Despite the progress made, there is still an urgent need for further action to enhance climate resilience in Sri Lanka's health sector.

All public health programs must integrate a climate lens into their planning to ensure that climate risks are systematically addressed in healthcare policies and interventions. The health sector must recognize that climate action is not a competing priority but a fundamental necessity. Strengthening the health system to address climate change related health adversities is very important.

Particular attention must be given to vulnerable populations such as children, pregnant mothers, the

elderly, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups who are disproportionately affected by climate

change. Tailored interventions, including improved healthcare access, early warning systems, and targeted health programs, can enhance resilience and reduce the burden of climate-sensitive diseases in these populations (WHO, 2020).

Planning for the integration of qualified mental health professionals and establishing platforms for psychological support at various levels of healthcare are essential steps in improving mental health for affected communities. Community-based mental health interventions should be implemented to address the psychological distress caused by climate-induced displacement, loss of livelihoods, and extreme weather events. Mental health services must be a fundamental part of climate resilience strategies to mitigate the long-term impacts on public health.

Building green, healthy, and safe hospitals that are climate-resilient is a critical component of this strategy. Such infrastructure not only reduces the carbon footprint of the health sector but also enhances the sector's capacity to provide uninterrupted care during climate emergencies. For instance, the use of renewable energy, energy-efficient technologies, and sustainable waste management systems can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions while improving the resilience of healthcare facilities (WHO, 2020).

Moreover, the health sector must take a leadership role in engaging and empowering communities to understand the nexus between climate change and health. Without active community participation,

effective climate action will be challenging and, in some cases, impossible. Public health campaigns, community-based surveillance systems, and capacity-building initiatives can foster resilience and preparedness at the grassroots level (Watts et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the health sector's proactive engagement in climate adaptation and mitigation is vital for protecting public health and achieving sustainable development goals. By integrating climate resilience into healthcare infrastructure, strengthening public health programs with a climate lens, and fostering community partnerships, Sri Lanka can build a robust and adaptive health system capable of withstanding the impacts of climate change. This holistic approach will not only safeguard lives but also contribute to global efforts in combating climate change and ensuring health equity for all.

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