

COP26: a summit for climate and humanity

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As the world gears up for the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), to be hosted in Glasgow, UK from 31 October to 12 November 2021, Jess Beagley, NCDA's climate and environment consultant, outlines what's at stake for global health: "code red for humanity"

In August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its latest report on the [physical science of climate change](#) [1]. The report is a 4000-page synthesis of the best evidence world-over, requested by the [195 Member States](#) [2] of the IPCC and authored by hundreds of scientists.

In the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres, the report signalled "code red for humanity". Indeed, July 2021 was the [hottest month ever recorded](#) [3], with such levels of global heating driving [extreme weather events](#) [4] like those observed in recent months around the world, jeopardising health and livelihoods and undermining decades of human development gains. In direct opposition to the tenets of climate deniers everywhere, the report asserts that "it is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land".

Recent evidence indicates that [83 million cumulative deaths](#) [5] will occur due to the heat-related impacts of climate change alone by 2100. As the world prepares for COP26, governments must consider how policy can address the existential threat of climate change. Anything less than revolutionary change will fall short of what is needed to protect the health of current and future generations.

The consequences of inaction

In signing the Paris Agreement in 2015, governments agreed to limit global warming to well below 2°C, and preferably to 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial levels. And the world has been witnessing in horror the consequences of inaction: Just in recent months, fatal catastrophic events have included the decimation of Lytton in Western Canada and

villages in Greece by wildfires, floods in China, Germany, India, Niger, the USA and Belgium, cyclones in Indonesia and Fiji, and [famine in Madagascar](#) [6]. These are occurring at just 1.1 °C of average heating worldwide. People living with NCDs are among the most at-risk due to increased vulnerability to heatwaves and poor air quality and dependence on access to vital medicines and treatment which is jeopardised when floods, storms and cyclones displace communities, cut off supply chains and routes to crucial healthcare services and destroy hospitals.

Governments will be considering how to respond to the IPCC report which shows that limiting warming to 1.5°C requires [major and immediate transformation](#) [7] at a scale and speed which is unprecedented. A 1.5°C limit to warming is not safe for all, but risks associated with warming are substantially lower at 1.5°C than 2°C. Action to limit warming protects populations not only through reducing the risk of extreme weather events, but because the very same solutions to mitigate climate change yield vast benefits in terms of NCD prevention.

For example, the energy, food and agriculture sectors are leading contributors of greenhouse gas emissions. In the energy sector, transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy leads to reductions in air pollution. Food systems which promote access to diets which are [plant-rich and low in meat \(especially red meat\) and processed foods](#) [8] both dramatically reduce emissions and improve health by preventing diet-related NCDs. Transport systems which support active and public transport over the use of cars enable higher levels of physical activity. Projections in just nine countries show that transformations in these sectors could save millions of lives [every year by 2040](#) [9] through improved air quality (1.64 million), healthier diets (6.43 million), and increased physical activity (2.09 million) respectively – even before the health benefits of reduced climate impacts are taken into account.

The healthcare sector itself also accounts for [4.4% of global emissions](#) [10]. If the healthcare sector were a country, it would be the fifth largest emitter on the planet. In order to protect the health of populations, the healthcare sector must therefore both reduce its carbon footprint and become more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Policy solutions that save lives and improve global health

The NCD Alliance is a member of the Health and Climate Network, an international coalition of organisations across the health, climate, energy, food and transport sectors hosted by the Wellcome Trust. The Health and Climate Network is working to put positive health outcomes at the centre of responses to the climate crisis, advocating evidence-based policy solutions that save lives and improve global health. In 2021, NCDA has contributed to four sectoral briefings with priority policy recommendations published by the network ahead of COP26. These can be viewed [here](#) [11].

In addition, the World Health Organization has released a dedicated [COP26 Special Report on Climate Change and Health](#) [12], drawing on consultations with the health community. In two days time, the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change will publish its 2021 [report](#) [13], highlighting once more how ambitious action now is crucial to protect health. Amplification of these messages by the health community can help to increase climate ambition at COP26 and beyond, for the sake of people everywhere.

The climate COP is the largest annual United Nations conference, attended on average by around 25,000 participants. COP26 in Glasgow will be the fifth such conference since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, and the first since governments are due to have submitted their updated national plans (referred to as “Nationally Determined Contributions” – NDCs) to reduce emissions in line with the treaty.

COP26 comes at a pivotal moment to evaluate the gap between current and required action to respond to climate change, and steps to close it. Despite a momentary dip in carbon dioxide emissions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as of the end of 2020, the world is still heading for a temperature rise of [more than 3°C](#) [14] this century.

Put people and planet first

The importance of COP26 for climate and hence humanity cannot be overstated, but whether the necessary political will to prioritise people and planet over other interests and barriers will be demonstrated remains to be seen. Finance from high-income countries to low- and middle-income economies to enable them to implement policies to mitigate and adapt to climate change, protecting both their own and the global population, falls [far short of the USD 100 billion previously committed](#) [15] by governments.

The NCD and wider health community therefore has a crucial role to play in the lead up to COP26. Emphasising the health impacts of climate change, and the added benefits of mitigation actions across sectors, can build the political support for ambitious action which is so badly needed. Climate change threatens the health of people everywhere, both now and increasingly for future generations. Action on climate change saves lives, and makes both health and economic sense.

About the author

Jess Beagley (@JessicaBeagley) works at the intersection of health and climate policy. She has nine years of experience in public health and environmental determinants, having previously worked with the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, the NCD Alliance, and the International Diabetes Federation.

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- [10] <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/healthcares-climate-footprint>
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