

Moving towards the right to 'health for all' by training the public health and wider health workforce on climate change and health

Joint statement by the EU Health Policy Platform's thematic network
"Climate action through public health education and training"

Climate change continues to be the biggest challenge of the 21st century, with profound and growing negative consequences on public health. The cost of inaction to act in a timely and systemic manner will have catastrophic implications for the planet, the ecosystem, our livelihoods, notably the health and social systems of today and in the future.

Background

Responses to the climate emergency that do not prioritise public health, social rights and justice threaten to damage communities, reaffirm existing structural and geographical inequities. These inadequate responses expose new dimensions of social and environmental vulnerabilities, maldistribution and/or waste of resources, and limited access to scientific advice and education for health. While Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 emphasises the urgency to take "*action to combat climate change and its impacts*", inaction threatens achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals. The imperative for action is clear from each and every perspective: moral, ethical, environmental, economic, social and justice. There is a need for public health and healthcare professionals to be prepared to address the climate emergency. This statement will help guide climate-health education and training of the public health and wider health workforce.

Evidence of the impact of climate change on health is clear. According to the recently published Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, if temperatures rise to between 1.7°C and 1.8°C above the 1850s level, half the human population could be exposed to periods of life-threatening climatic conditions arising from heat and humidity. Climate change effects have a permanent and population-wide health impact on the most vulnerable people, places and ecosystems. At this point, without effective, large-scale and immediate action, we are in a vicious cycle, increasing the exposure of people and planet to worsening environmental risks, natural disasters and additional, avoidable emerging patterns of both infectious and non-communicable diseases. Multi-disciplinarity and all-level governance structures are essential here, this including public health care educators, providers, managers and funders. Public health, healthcare facilities and healthcare professionals all hold a duty towards human and planetary health. We need to acknowledge that climate change is a critical issue that needs to be addressed through our policy, practice and research actions embedded into broader health, social and education systems and ways we organise our communities and societies.

As frontline connectors to the general population, public health professionals recognise that their current approaches to improve health have not taken due account the significant pressures that the health sector places on the environment, particularly their carbon footprint and waste management. The very sector responsible for keeping us healthy is itself a major contributor to the problem. Carbon footprint assessments of the health system from across the globe are equivalent to 4.4% of global net emissions.¹ This takes account of the direct and indirect contributions of energy consumption, transport, product manufacture, use, and disposal. If the health care sector were a country, it would be fifth leading in global emissions. Climate advocates, including public health and healthcare professionals, who hold powerful voices, have called for the health sector to take responsibility for its climate footprint. Climate-health actions must respond to the growing climate emergency beyond simply preventing and treating diseases, but also through reshaping policy and practice in primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of further climate change effects, and financially rewarding sustainability-enhancing actions.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the importance of effective public health actions that have played a role at every level of the pandemic response and recovery. Multidisciplinary leadership has become the future of public health and wider health workforce. This includes raising awareness, educating individuals and populations, policy design and advocacy, and research with and on behalf of citizens and communities. These same tools and approaches need to be utilised to address the climate emergency. COVID-19 has forced the world to a deeper understanding that significant change at all levels is needed to build a climate-smart health system. Public health actions need to complement other multilateral climate efforts, aiming to anticipate, avoid, or minimise harm, wherever it may emerge.

Public health and healthcare professionals must take ownership of their role to increase their accountability regarding their contribution to the climate crisis and reflect the needs of the planet in the way that they serve the people going forward. Public health and healthcare professionals require core training and continuous professional development to improve their understanding of the linkages between climate and health and to make it a priority in their work. Successful integration of the climate conversation in the education and practice of the public health and wider healthcare workforce training must be comprehensive. It should include ways that impact can be monitored and measured, while providing tools that focus on building trust, enabling empowerment of communities whose risk of harm from climate change has been inadequately recognised and addressed, and developing sustainable and additional ways of working in partnership. Effective, climate-smart partnerships with local citizens and communities should reduce the burden of treatment of avoidable disease as well as the adverse effects of climate change. These are measurable benefits. The curricula for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and continuous professional development must be updated. Planetary health and one health concepts are currently not central to public health education; this is creating an unprepared workforce. Education that improves climate-health literacy helps build consensus and becomes the foundation for the acquisition of the expertise required to contribute to the solution of climate problems, build understanding of the gravity of the twin crises of climate and health, the urgency of the threat, awareness about what can be done and the skills to work with others to take the first steps.

¹ Health Care Without Harm (2019)

Call for Action

As part of the thematic network "Climate action through public health education and training" under the EU Health Policy Platform, we urge climate change, education, and public health leaders from European institutions and Member States, public health and healthcare schools, education decision makers, public health and healthcare professional organisations, and civil societies to bring climate change and health concerns to the forefront of the debates.

We call for strong, tangible measures and concrete actions by:

1. Acknowledging and disseminating the central role that a respectful relationship with the natural environment has on human physical, mental, spiritual, and social health and wellbeing.
2. Recognising the negative impacts of climate change on human health, and highlighting the co-benefits of climate change mitigation and adaptation actions to human health, such as active travel and affordable plant-based diets.
3. Supporting the evolving understanding of the relationship between climate change and mental health for people, and professionals, increasing exposure to high quality nature-based solutions such as green and blue spaces for all, and investing in empowering communities to sustain action to prevent and mitigate further climate change.
4. Intensifying the investment in interdisciplinary education and training for public health and healthcare professionals in existing curricula and including them into EU legislation for public health and healthcare professionals' education requirements to facilitate intersectoral action.
5. Building climate resilience, climate-health literacy and political literacy to enable public health and healthcare professionals to gain a deeper understanding of the changes that need to be implemented, and how to communicate the direct and indirect environmental impact of our health system, institutions and daily lives.
6. Including concepts such as One Health and Planetary Health in the development of public health and healthcare professionals' education frameworks in undergraduate, postgraduate and continuous professional development, recognising the ongoing contribution of experts and people with lived experience in these areas.
7. Providing voices for climate change education and response from among those communities who currently suffer the effects including generational inequalities and who will be most harmed by an inadequate public health response. Considerations include the development of robust mentorship structures, intentional recruitment, prioritisation of co-designing and co-development of climate-health actions for a unified approach.
8. Building trust across disciplines with those with wider public health responsibilities by focusing on anticipating and preventing adverse health effects derived from climate change on populations and ecosystems.
9. Promoting and implementing sustainable research and innovation in the EU's research-focused programmes such as Horizon Europe that emphasises preventing and minimising the impact of climate change on the health and safety of minoritised, excluded and remote populations, anchored in wider public health objectives.

10. Promoting management of the health system within a transdisciplinary ecological approach, creating the conditions for making decisions informed by equity, ethics and collective rights, with a focus that minimises carbon emissions.
11. Recognising and enabling public health and healthcare professionals as essential partners and leaders in decision-making on mitigation and adaptation actions but also on climate change and disaster risk reduction and management at the local, regional, national and international levels.
12. Developing future public health goals, targets and indicators, that support the design and monitoring of strategic frameworks that produce mitigation programmes that lead to improvements in overall environmental health and health equity.
13. Supporting international agencies to synergise existing EU climate-health processes, policies, strategies and initiatives to develop a multi-level public health action framework to be applied in all world regions, including collecting and publishing the data that helps measure progress and consolidate implementation and monitoring of effective actions on adaptation and mitigation to shape climate policy.

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This statement is endorsed by the following organisations:

The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), leader of the thematic network “Climate action through public health education and training”.



Organisations marked in bold: Individuals from these organisations actively contributed to the writing of the joint statement.

Global level organisations

Cochrane	Global Consortium on Climate and Health Education (GCCHE)	Global Network for Academic Public Health (GNAPH)
		
Global Health Literacy Academy	INCHES	International Primary Care Respiratory Group (IPCRG)



Medicus Mundi International – Network Health for All (MMI)



Vital Strategies



UAE Climate Change Research Network (CCRN)



Europe level organisations

European Federation of Nurses (EFN)



EuroHealthNet



European Hospital and Healthcare Federation (HOPE)



European Public Health Association (EUPHA)



European Nursing Research Foundation (ENRF)



EuroNet MRPH



EuroPubHealth+ Students and Alumni Association



EUPHAnxt



European Children's Hospitals Organisation (ECHO)



European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)



Federation of European Academies of Medicine (FEAM)



Health Care Without Harm Europe	Health Literacy Europe	Young Forum Gastein
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Young European Leadership	Mental Health Europe
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Academic organisations

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Country level organisations

Gesundheit Österreich GmbH - Austrian National Public Health Institute (Austria)	Consulta dei Medici in formazione specialistica in Igiene e Medicina Preventiva SItI (Italy)	Malta Association of Public Health Medicine (Malta)
		
Accelerator Hub Planetary Health (Netherlands)	De CO2-assistent (Netherlands)	De Duurzame Verpleegkundige (Netherlands)
		
DJAMG De Jonge Arts Maatschappij en Gezondheid (Netherlands)	GREENER (Netherlands)	LOGGIO Landelijk Overleg Sociaal Geneeskundigen in Opleiding (Netherlands)
		
NeLL National eHealth Living Lab (Netherlands)	Zorg voor Klimaat (Dutch Climate and Health Network) (Netherlands)	Asociación de Residentes de Medicina Preventiva y Salud Pública (Spain)

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