

## Health and care

### Health implications

Very few national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies will be untouched by the health implications of climate change. In places where they have always worked, say on water and sanitation or epidemic prevention, they may suddenly find themselves in greater demand. A response may also be required in new locations where it was not needed before. And, in some places, the challenge may change entirely, like killer heatwaves in northern Europe. There, the main fears concerning temperature used to be about exposure to cold and hypothermia.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) tells us that climate change will continue to contribute to the “global burden of disease and premature deaths”. More extreme events like flooding, drought, fire or storms will bring health challenges:

- Injuries
- Diarrhoeal diseases
- Outbreaks of vector-borne diseases like malaria
- Mental health problems such as anxiety and depression
- Malnutrition and its consequences

Some diseases transmitted by mosquitoes or other vectors will be affected. Many vectors as well as viruses, bacteria and parasites are sensitive to rainfall and temperature and, as rainfall and temperature patterns change, disease distribution may change with them. The outcome will vary from place to place but may include:

- Higher rates of transmission
- Disease appearing in new places
- Disease appearing at different times of the year than previously

Climate change will increase temperatures, and the adverse effects of heat will include:

- Worse urban air pollution. On hot days, car-exhaust fumes turn into ground-level ozone, harmful for cardio-respiratory health
- Greater risks for the sick and elderly who are vulnerable to extremes of temperature
- Uncomfortable or even dangerously hot workplaces
- Food-contamination bacteria growing quicker, making hygiene more important than ever

Rainfall patterns will change. There may be more rain in the wet season and less in the dry one. Changes in available water - too much or too little – have consequences

- More intense rainfall spreads diarrhoeal disease in areas with poor sanitation
- Reduced water availability sees people use less for hygiene and washing food
- Drought causes malnutrition and food security problems

#### Droughts and floods in Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa faces a phenomenon that could be described as drought-flood-drought. It is creating new complex emergencies and is already claiming thousands of lives. Many parts of Malawi hardest hit by floods, for example, have also suffered droughts, and subsequent widespread hunger. Ethel Kaimila, programme coordinator of the Malawi Red Cross, believes repeated droughts have contributed to the fall of her country's life expectancy to 39.

Many things concern her, from skin conditions getting out of control due to lack of water, to a need for psychological support for flood victims who lose their property. “They do not understand why it is happening so frequently,” she says, and thinks volunteers require new skills in communication.

There are also fears of malaria, with receding floodwaters leaving stagnant pools where mosquitoes multiply rapidly. The fear is shared by the Tanzanian Red Cross. Floods there are far more intense and widely spread than people can remember. Mosquitoes have had larger breeding grounds, and the water has stayed much longer.

Besides malaria, mosquitoes spread Rift Valley Fever. A potentially fatal viral disease, its most recent outbreak in Tanzania reached ten administrative districts, killing almost half the people infected.

“The communities were not getting the right information on how to prevent it spreading,” says Julius Kejo, the National Society’s head of disaster preparedness, “so what we could do was prepare leaflets carrying proper information.”

### Heatwaves in Europe

When a severe heatwave struck Europe in 2003, many elderly and sick people died. Europeans are not used to such weather. Houses are not air-conditioned; people drink too little water when it’s hot.

The heatwave came in the holiday season; many younger people were at the beach, and older relatives were not cared for. Some of them died as a consequence.

Now, people are more prepared. There are heatwave early-warning systems. Many National Societies visit vulnerable people, make sure they are all right and drink enough, and can get to hospital if needed.

## How to integrate climate change into health and care

National Red Cross and Red Crescent societies around the world are grappling with new health challenges likely caused by climate change. Proactive adaptation strategies, policies and measures need to be taken. How to start?

### Step 1: Collecting general background information

Get a good understanding of the changing risks as part of the national climate risk assessment (*see Getting Started ‘How to’ section, step 3*). Identify all possible health-related impacts in your country and gather extra information from partners, such as the health ministry and professional health-care institutions.

The following questions may help to assess risks:

- Are we in contact with the right experts, organizations or institutions to

understand the climate change health risks in our country?

- Did we identify possible health impacts in our different programmes?
- Are we aware of possible impacts or disease outbreaks for all our country’s regions?

### Step 2: Assessing priorities and integrating climate change into the strategy of the National Society

Raising awareness internally will be a good start. Listing the main disease burden within the different target areas will help prioritize operations. Priorities are related both to disaster-management response and risk-reduction activities as well as health and social-care programmes.

It is important to integrate activity linked to climate change into other existing health-care programmes as well: community-based health and first aid (CBHFA) or participatory health promotion, for example. To help prioritize and prepare for the risks, do we:

- Make full use of all possible weather and climate information that may help predict health impacts?
- Need to intensify capacities within our health programmes?
- Know which areas are most vulnerable to drought or flooding?
- Have capacity to deal with the impacts identified, for example malnutrition?
- Direct medication supplies to the right disease-prone areas?

Depending on priorities, the National Society could proceed to one or more of the following activities.

### Step 3: Enhancing preparedness for response and contingency planning

Identify new activities or intensify existing ones that might be effective interventions.

- Can we promote public health interventions at different levels within the National Society?
- Is new funding needed?
- What has been done in other countries or organizations to address our priorities?

- Do we regularly monitor surveillance data from the Ministry of Health, so we know when climate-sensitive diseases appear in new places or at different times of the year?
- Do we need extra training for volunteers? Is education on new health threats integrated into ongoing community awareness programmes?

#### **Step 4: Enhancing disaster risk reduction**

Health alerts in France or water pumps in Nicaragua have proved efficient ways of reducing the health impacts of climate change. But how can we integrate the impacts structurally in our country?

- Advocacy and longer-term partnerships that can be relevant at each level of the National Society
- Large programmes like national heatwave plans
- Community health care. Is extra training needed for volunteers? What knowledge does the local community lack?
- Practical risk-reduction options like seed banks as a safety buffer, water harvesting and conservation, local clean-up campaigns eliminating vector breeding sites

#### **Step 5: Enhancing early warning**

You can utilize early-warning systems to reduce health impacts of extreme weather events and outbreaks of weather-related disease. Various meteorological agencies and other organizations issue warnings through, for example, websites or email alerts. But:

- Is the National Society making the best use of this information?
- Is the health-and-care staff working together with the disaster-management staff to plan and respond?
- Who to alert among the population and relevant authorities, organizations and the health sector? How to alert them?
- Are there forecasts of disease or allergies related to weather that use models to predict health outcomes? Are we using the information available?

#### **Step 6: Awareness raising, establishing partnerships and advocacy**

Raised awareness of health impacts is needed to enable adaptation

- Is information tailored to the community helping people adapt to new situations?
- Is awareness raising integrated in other community activities?

The International Federation has formed global alliances on major health problems, such as the Global Malaria Partnership. Partnerships can be the basis for addressing health impacts of climate change.

- Is the national Red Cross and Red Crescent society building partnerships?
- Is there National Society advocacy to help address health impacts?
- In its dialogue with the Ministry of Health, does the National Society make sure the ministry monitors climate-sensitive diseases and shares surveillance data?

#### **Step 7: Evaluation**

As part of regular evaluation, ensure the National Society evaluates continuously whether health risks are changing.

*More information:* [www.climatecentre.org](http://www.climatecentre.org)