

**RCEU KEY MESSAGES – CLIMATE AND HEALTH**

The Red Cross EU Office and its members, the 27 National Red Cross Societies in the European Union (EU), the Icelandic Red Cross, the Norwegian Red Cross, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) are actively engaged in addressing the health needs, as well as the consequences of climate change, on communities in situations of acute vulnerability. Through the auxiliary role to public authorities and local presence within communities before, during and after crises, Red Cross and Red Crescent teams work with communities to strengthen health systems and to anticipate, prepare for and adapt to climate change, supporting people to recover faster from its humanitarian impacts and be resilient for the future.

Climate change is often perceived as a threat to the future of our planet, but it is also already driving humanitarian crises around the world and triggering unprecedented consequences on people's physical and mental health. Floods, landslides, storms, droughts, epidemics, heatwaves and cold spells are becoming more unpredictable, frequent and intense – severely impacting people's health and wellbeing, lives and livelihoods. These events directly damage human health but also negatively impact health-determining sectors such as food production and access to water. The interlinkages of the climate and health crises are striking and it is urgent to act.

Therefore, we are calling on the EU and Member States decision makers to:

**ADDRESS PRESSING HEALTH NEEDS EXACERBATED BY CLIMATE CHANGE**

It is vital to recognise that **climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity** (WHO), and to take strong and ambitious action accordingly. The climate crisis is a health crisis, changing both the environmental and social determinants of health for the worse. Climate change is widening inequalities and creating new vulnerabilities through its impacts on health, water supplies, nutrition, livelihoods, air quality, mental health and psychosocial well-being, labour productivity and income, and displacement, amongst others. Climate and health are still often addressed in silos at political, institutional and donor levels, but communities face these concomitantly and decision makers should commit to **protecting health from the wide range of climate change impacts**.

**STRENGTHEN CLIMATE RESILIENT HEALTH SYSTEMS**

Health and water services are disrupted by extreme events, leaving chronically ill and people in situations of vulnerability at risk. It is even more relevant for women, children, minorities, lower-income communities, migrants or displaced persons, and older people. We are particularly concerned for communities with weak infrastructures, as those with the least ability to adapt, tend to bear the biggest brunt and are the least able to respond and recover from climate-induced disasters. The EU should **support climate resilient health systems, investing in primary health care, water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and community-led preparedness** to respond to evolving climate risks, achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) goals. It is urgent to invest in climate-proofed immunization approaches and strategies, including vaccines, medicines and health technologies to prevent and respond to changing risks and prevent disease outbreaks fuelled by climate change. Furthermore, climate risk assessment must be used in the definition of the location of community health services and **health systems' climate footprint must be addressed**, leading by example in cutting emissions quickly and building climate resilient healthcare.

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**SUPPORT LOCAL ACTORS RESPONDING TO THE COMPOUNDING EFFECTS**

To address the concomitant challenges of the climate and health crises, as well as their compounding and cascading effects, it is crucial to **strengthen the role of local actors and frontline responders, including ensuring the preparedness and protection of carers**. We need to invest in local capacities and community-based workers and volunteers to ensure services reach those who need them the most, rather than focusing solely on medical countermeasures and disaster response. More than ever before, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, recent years have demonstrated the value of local capacity to go through several crises simultaneously. Community engagement and tangible people-centred approaches should be at the core of the EU's action, implementing the '*Leave No One Behind*' commitment, hand-in-hand with local and national actors such as National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. This will also support a greater degree of localisation and allow for a greater degree of engagement and ownership, valuing the role of communities in changing mindsets towards resilience and sustainability.

**BUILD ON ANTICIPATORY ACTION TO IMPROVE RESPONSE TO CRISES**

Most disasters are predictable, including public health emergencies. Treating them as such leads to critical opportunities to save lives and build long-term resilience. Despite improvements in abilities to predict the likelihood of disasters, the response comes after they occur, and often slowly. Meanwhile, lives and livelihoods are lost. **Investing in Early Warning Early Action systems and improved forecasting services**, such as impact-based forecasting, can save lives, and if connected to longer-term development perspectives, can also save livelihoods. It is key to invest and ensure countries and communities are of withstanding future shocks, without exacerbating existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. The multiple benefits of anticipatory action are increasingly recognised, including in the public health sector. We must ensure that capacities and systems are in place to bring long-lasting changes to communities.

**ADDRESS THE MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

While mental health issues caused by natural disasters have not been considered for a long time, it is clear today that natural disasters and climate change exacerbates many social and environmental risk factors related to mental health and well-being. The EU should **support and ensure adequate funding for mental health and psychosocial support to respond to the growing needs**, within and outside the EU. Current extreme events with record-breaking intensity require the international community to invest urgently in loss and damage, resilience and adaptation, and mental health and psychosocial support should be fully integrated within these strategies. Creating sustainable and long-term strategies to enhance community's ability to cope with ongoing climate challenges' toll on mental health and well-being is critical and require a specific focus on groups with increased vulnerability to adverse climate impacts.

**ENSURE EQUITY AND GENDER EQUALITY**

The EU should put equity and gender equality at the centre of its action and ensure strong and resilient community health systems, including for mental health and social protection, focusing on the most vulnerable people who are often the most impacted by disasters. In particular women and children, but also of displaced and isolated communities, and people who experience homelessness and have no place to call home. They are all already affected by lack of equity and

access to quality health care services and social protection, suffering even more from the interlinkages between the crises faced. They are also the ones who would be most impacted by negative coping strategies, including increases in early child marriage and gender based and intra-familial violence. It is crucial to step up action and ensure that **everyone, everywhere and at any time has effective access to quality health and care services**, including mental health and psychosocial support, maternal, new-born and child health, and sexual and reproductive health.

#### ENSURE SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND APPLY THE ONE HEALTH APPROACH

As climate change and environmental degradation continue to exacerbate already tense contexts, it is urgent to act and apply a comprehensive One Health approach in all EU and Member State' policies. This should be multisectoral, integrated and transdisciplinary to efficiently address the increased risk of major pandemic outbreaks. These are influenced by changes in land-use, environmental degradation - destruction of wild habitats and biodiversity loss - complex food production systems and intensified trade and travel, but also the burden in low- and middle-income economies of neglected pollution-related or endemic diseases, which can be zoonotic, air-, water or vector-borne. **Strengthening community health systems and surveillance, enabling, empowering and equipping communities to recognise and respond to public health threats** is essential for a One Health approach, as well as **including environmental and ecological considerations**, especially in the agri-food sector and in highly urbanised areas.

#### STRENGTHEN LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND PROMOTE POLICY COHERENCE

It is crucial that decision makers **develop and strengthen policies and legal and operational frameworks to effectively manage rising health risks** integrated in health and climate adaptation strategies. Authorities should increase their efforts to strengthen the resilience of health systems' and to scale up locally led and anticipatory health actions, including updated disaster laws and Early Warning Early Action systems, outlining coordination structures, and the roles and responsibilities of all relevant actors. National planning on health, water and climate change should be strengthened and coordination across government bodies and local authorities should be enhanced. **Policy coherence must be ensured**, including by the EU translating its commitments such as the "*health in all policies / health for all policies*" across sectors.

#### INTEGRATE CLIMATE AND HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES AND INVESTMENTS

Climate and health risks should be integrated in all investments and initiatives, to increase their sustainability, and ensure they can withstand the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather and of climate change slow onset disasters. **Interventions and direct climate finance to enhance protection against specific climate-sensitive risks should be supported**. This includes supporting climate-informed health surveillance linked to Early Warning Early Action systems at community level, access to water, sanitation and hygiene, and heat action plans. Alongside the discussion on climate finance, the EU should engage Member States and partner countries to invest in and strengthen community health systems to make them capable of facing the impacts and consequences of climate change. Furthermore, procedures and regulations should be adapted so that **development and multilateral climate funds are accessible to local actors** to strengthen disaster preparedness, and expand flexible, coordinated and predictable financing for anticipatory action, including at community level increase impact of action.