Unitaid — SAVE LIVES FASTER

Climate and Health

The World Health Organization has called climate change "the single biggest health threat facing humanity."

The impacts of climate change are jeopardizing progress in development, global health and poverty reduction, and creating new health risks that disproportionately affect the world's most vulnerable communities.

Climate change is making people more vulnerable to illnesses exacerbated by increased pollution, flooding, extreme heat, drought and famine, and increasing the spread of infectious diseases like malaria.

Deforestation and urbanization are raising the risk of spillover of disease from wildlife to humans; we have already seen this in recent years with new influenza strains and re-emerging viruses. Extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods are becoming more frequent, destroying critical infrastructure, disrupting supply chains and cutting off access to lifesaving health products.

While the global health sector is racing to address the impacts of climate change on people's health, it also contributes 4.6% of the world's carbon emissions, mostly through manufacturing, transportation and delivery of health products and services. If we are to achieve universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals in the face of climate change, the global health sector requires a fundamental rethink about the type of health care that is needed and how it is developed and delivered.

Photo: Pakistan's worst floods on record in 2022 displaced more than 8 million people from their homes. Standing water increased the breeding grounds for mosquitoes, resulting in the worst malaria outbreak in the country since 1973. © WHO / Mobeen Ansari.

How we work

At Unitaid, we save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. We connect all relevant partners to find and invest in innovative tests, treatments and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast.

We are working to address the impacts of climate change on our work – and the impact of our work on the environment. "Climate and health" is a key priority in Unitaid's 2023–2027 Strategy, and our new Climate and Health Strategy is focused on mitigation, adaptation, and reducing our own carbon footprint.

Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from undernutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress alone – WHO

Climate-smart health products: Unitaid's Climate and Health Strategy is anchored in a simple concept: climate-smart health products (see box below for detail). This aligns with WHO's comprehensive approach to "climate-resilient and low-carbon health systems". Climate-smart health products have a strong public health value, are relevant for affected communities, support our objectives for mitigation and adaptation, and are more sustainable than current products and interventions.

For example, post-partum hemorrhage – severe bleeding after childbirth – is a leading cause of maternal deaths. Oxytocin, the goal standard medication used to prevent and treat post-partum hemorrhage, requires cold storage, which many low-resource settings lack. We are investing in heat-stable carbetocin, an alternative product that can be used in areas where the quality of oxytocin cannot be guaranteed due to insufficient or unreliable cold chain systems, making it both a critical health intervention and more resilient to climate change.

Helping communities adapt: Climate-smart products also help communities in low- and middle-income countries adapt to climate-related health risks such as an increase in vector-borne diseases. For example, we are backing vital research into promising vector control tools like spatial repellents, easily portable products that are permeated with slow-release chemicals that ward off mosquitoes, protecting families wherever they are – even if they are displaced from their homes after a severe storm or flood.

How Unitaid defines climate-smart health products

Not harmful

Products that are not harmful to climate and nature, globally and locally, all along their life cycle – from minimized greenhouse gas emissions during manufacturing to responsible recycling.

Resilient

Products that can be manufactured, delivered, stored and used in a way that is resilient to climate and nature risks.

Responsive

Products that address the evolving needs of communities in low- and middle-income countries that are impacted by climate change, including health risks exacerbated by climate change and increases in infectious diseases.

Locally adapted

Products that are delivered as part of locally adapted interventions, based on local context and knowledge, delivered through community-led models, and produced regionally.

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Because of climate change, we need to rethink which health products we need and how they are designed, produced, delivered and disposed of. If we don't adapt to this new reality, we won't continue to progress towards the global health goals.

Vincent Bretin
Director of Unitaid's Results and Climate Team

Cutting our carbon emissions by 50% by 2030: We are also committed to reducing our Secretariat's greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and to progressively reduce emissions across our portfolio of investments, in line with the UNFCCC's Paris Agreement and net zero targets. We have partnered with the Climate Action Accelerator (CAA), a non-profit organization that helps organizations reach their climate goals, and we are working with our implementing partners and other stakeholders to ensure we reach these targets.

Case Study:

From milligrams to megatons: A climate and nature assessment of 10 key health products

A recent Unitaid report, released in November 2023, highlights the urgency of introducing climate-smart health products and cutting emissions from the global health sector. The report assessed the impact and climate vulnerability of 10 key health products.

It found that while these products save millions of lives, they also produce carbon emissions and pollution through their production, delivery and disposal; and the products are at increasing risk from climate change impacts such as extreme weather events that disrupt supply chains and rising temperatures that cause medicines to degrade.

To address these challenges, the report included 20 technical solutions that could reduce emissions for these products by 70% by 2030 and make them more resilient. Unitaid is committed to applying the report's recommendations through our market shaping role, working with climate and health partners to introduce, advance and promote equitable access to climate-smart products.

Photo: © Unitaid, Momcilo Orlovic

Looking ahead

At the first-ever Health Day at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in December 2023, world leaders have the opportunity to make firm commitments to address the health-related impacts of climate change and to help reduce the global health sector's impact on the environment.

Unitaid is calling on the global health industry, policymakers, governments, research institutions and major buyers of pharmaceutical products to take action now, before it is too late. If not, we risk backsliding on hard-earned gains in responding to infectious disease and improving health care in low- and middle-income countries.

About Unitaid:

We save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. We work with partners to identify innovative treatments, tests and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast. Since we were created in 2006, we have unlocked access to more than 100 groundbreaking health products to help address the world's biggest health challenges, including HIV, TB, and malaria; women's and children's health; and pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. Every year, more than 170 million people benefit from the products we've helped roll out.

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