



Guest Editorial

By Dr Patrick Cloos

What about climate change and health adaptation needs in the Caribbean?

The World Health Organization has declared that anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change is the biggest existential threat to all living beings. Fossil fuels (oil, gas and coal) are the primary sources of greenhouse gas emissions (mainly carbon dioxide) and the resulting climate change.

The United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change is organizing the Conference of the Parties (COP28), which takes place from November 30 to December 12, 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (www.unfccc.int). Heads of State from industrialized, developing and least developed countries have been invited to discuss issues regarding climate change action.

Objectives of COP 28 are to confirm the previous agreement to slow global warming and adapt to climate extremes known to have recently intensified all over the planet. The 2030 target (to substantially reduce global GHG emissions), adopted by all parties in 2015 in Paris and would have enabled global warming to be kept below 2C, will be missed. Thus, global warming will intensify together with climate extremes. Other COP 28 discussions will surround previous commitments from richer countries - that still need further implementation, such as funds for losses and damages experienced during a climate event and for adaptation measures to be allocated to developing and least-developed countries.

Climate Change and Health

Health will be a theme of the COP 28. Climate change is already impacting the health of human populations around the globe, including Caribbean small islands. Climate extremes, such as storms, heatwaves, extreme precipitation and flooding, drought, sea level rise, and land degradation, among others, interact with social circumstances such as poverty, housing conditions, unemployment, migration, and (lack of) access to resources, including health care services, to influence human health. In other words, climate change contributes to social factors threatening the availability and quality of food and water. It exacerbates mental health issues, chronic diseases, and infectious and vector-borne diseases such as Dengue transmission. Thus, Caribbean territories, including Dominica, have to plan and implement adaptation policies to climate change to protect the health of their population. However, the available knowledge on the links between climate change, social factors, and health in the Caribbean needs to be regularly assessed. Hence, producing climate-health data is essential and requires intersectoral collaboration and more human resources and capacities in the field of public health.

With the collaboration of colleagues

in the health domain from Canada and Dominica, we have recently conducted some qualitative interviews in Dominica with people to understand their experiences of displacement or relocation after Tropical Storm Erika and Hurricane Maria (according to global climate models, it seems that the frequency of the most intense hurricanes will increase with global warming). We also interviewed primary healthcare professionals in each of the seven health districts to study their perspectives on climate change, how they think it affects communities and how the system should prepare to cope with future climate change impacts in Dominica.

Summary of Findings

To summarize some of our findings: Mental health was a central issue discussed by participants. Some respondents raised issues regarding the loss of livelihoods and poverty that affected their living conditions. Other themes and challenges included loss of income, housing damages, lack of access to food and water, lack of access to health care and psychosocial services, unequal assistance and social support, and loss of social ties in case of displacement or relocation—an ensemble of insecurities that can have negative and long-term consequences for people's health and well-being.

Additionally, healthcare providers perceive climate change as contributing to an increase in health issues (e.g., mental health and chronic illnesses). Climate-related events like hurricanes are viewed as creating barriers to care and exacerbating the regular challenges within the primary healthcare system, including the lack of resources, especially in the absence of high-level policy support and public health leadership. These interviews also underscore the need for more disease prevention, health promotion, and epidemiological surveillance on the links between climate events and health issues. Health assessment is a necessary public health function to guarantee access to quality health care and equity. The need to develop a mental health programme was also raised during our conversation with the Primary Health Care staff.

Recommendation: strengthening public health capacity

In articles that we have published in academic journals and posted on a website entitled 'Climate change and health in the Caribbean' (climihealth.hypotheses.org) – with international and Dominican colleagues, we have recommended capacity building in public health and greater

involvement of the health sector in the necessary adaptation process to climate change. More specifically, strengthening primary health care services is an initiative that can support adaptation to climate extremes to protect the health of populations. Primary health care needs more resources to assist communities, especially those that can become more vulnerable to climate extremes and difficult social circumstances (e.g., poverty).

Hence, the health sector, including the primary health care system, should be involved and should play a leadership role in assessing adaptation and planning measures together with communities and with the support of policymakers and other sectors.

We hope that COP 28 discussions will lead to agreements and initiatives for allocating funds, especially for small islands, to support adaptation to climate change that could also benefit the population's health. However, proper adaptation to climate change in Dominica will only happen if all social actors, institutions and sectors, including the health system, are involved and invited to participate in the decision-making process and its implementation.

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