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ICN joins global health community's call for climate action ahead of COP26 to avert “biggest health threat facing humanity”

ICN endorses WHO report that calls for ambitious climate commitments as the only path to long-term recovery from pandemic

Geneva, Switzerland, 11 October 2021 – ICN calls on the governments of the world to take immediate action to avert a climate crisis that will have devastating effects on the health of people everywhere.

The call comes ahead of the UN climate conference (COP26) in Glasgow, UK as more than 300 organisations representing at least **45 million nurses, doctors and health professionals worldwide** [signed an open letter](#) to the 197 government leaders and national delegations. The letter warns that the climate crisis is the single biggest health threat facing humanity and calls on world leaders to deliver on climate action.

The letter's publication coincides with the release today of a [new report](#) by the World Health Organization (WHO), which argues that countries can only ensure a long-term recovery from the pandemic by implementing ambitious climate commitments. The report delivers ten high-level recommendations, backed up by action points, resources and case studies, including the need to place health and social justice at the heart of the UN climate talks (see below for full list).

The letter states: *“Wherever we deliver care, in our hospitals, clinics and communities around the world, we are already responding to the health harms caused by climate change. Those people and nations who have benefited most from the activities that caused the climate crisis, especially fossil fuel extraction and use, have a great responsibility to do everything possible to help those who are now most at risk.”*

ICN Chief Executive Officer Howard Catton said: “Whether it is the pandemic or the effects of climate change, people's health is suffering severe consequences. Nurses are witnessing this unfolding global crisis and the suffering it is causing, and they are no longer willing to stay silent about it. The pandemic has created so much illness and death, but its effects will be dwarfed by those of climate change unless action is taken now.

‘Every day, nurses are witnessing and dealing with the profound effects the climate crisis is having on human health and wellbeing. They are caring for people with bronchitis and worsening asthma from air pollution and wildfires. They are in the community caring for older people and people experiencing homelessness who have heat exhaustion and heat stroke from more frequent and intense heat waves. Nurses are seeing an increase in deaths in children under five from diarrheal disease because they do not have safe water sources.

‘The world is already facing a global emergency in mental health, and climate change will continue to worsen this as its impacts are causing post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety and worsening existing mental health conditions. Eco-anxiety is causing depression, anxiety and mental distress.

‘Disadvantaged and marginalised groups will be impacted first and the most. The irony is that they are not the ones to contribute to climate change. Effective public health responses have co-benefits for planetary health and can address climate change impacts - encourage a public health approach. Pandemic and climate change are compounding each other hence why both must be tackled. Public health strategies will help prepare for and respond to both climate-related disasters and health emergencies like epidemics and pandemics.’

Both the [letter](#) and the report argue that health and equity must be at the centre of climate change response; while the [letter calls for action](#), the report provides the blueprint for delivering climate action that will protect the health of people around the world.

The [letter](#) calls on all governments to update their national climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, in line with their fair share of limiting warming to 1.5°C. A recent report by UN Climate Change (UNFCCC) found that countries’ collective climate commitments are falling far short of this goal, and would lead to a global temperature rise of at least 2.7°C by the end of the century.

The 45 million health professionals [represented in the letter](#) are demanding a rapid and just transition away from fossil fuels; for high income countries to provide the promised transfer of climate funds; for investments in resilient and low carbon health systems; and for pandemic recovery investments to support climate action and reduce social and health inequities.

The signatories of the open letter represent every region of the world, and include the International Council of Nurses, the World Medical Association, the International Federation of Medical Students Associations, the International Confederation of Midwives, and the International Paediatrics Association. [See full list of signatories](#).

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Notes to editors:

WHO’s COP26 Special Report on Climate Change and Health, *The Health Argument for Climate Action*, provides 10 recommendations for governments on how to maximise the health benefits of tackling climate change in a variety of sectors, and avoid the worst health impacts of the climate crisis.

The recommendations are the result of extensive consultations with health professionals, organisations and stakeholders worldwide, and represent a broad consensus statement from the global health community on the priority actions governments need to take to tackle the climate crisis, restore biodiversity, and protect health.

Climate and Health Recommendations

The COP26 report includes ten recommendations that highlight the urgent need and numerous opportunities for governments to prioritise health and equity in the international climate regime and sustainable development agenda.

Commit to a healthy recovery. Commit to a healthy, green and just recovery from COVID-19.

Our health is not negotiable. Place health and social justice at the heart of the UN climate talks.

Harness the health benefits of climate action. Prioritise those climate interventions with the largest health-, social- and economic gains.

Build health resilience to climate risks. Build climate resilient and environmentally sustainable health systems and facilities, and support health adaptation and resilience across sectors.

Create energy systems that protect and improve climate and health. Guide a just and inclusive transition to renewable energy to save lives from air pollution, particularly from coal combustion. End energy poverty in households and health care facilities.

Reimagine urban environments, transport and mobility. Promote sustainable, healthy urban design and transport systems, with improved land-use, access to green and blue public space, and priority for walking, cycling and public transport.

Protect and restore nature as the foundation of our health. Protect and restore natural systems, the foundations for healthy lives, sustainable food systems and livelihoods.

Promote healthy, sustainable and resilient food systems. Promote sustainable and resilient food production and more affordable, nutritious diets that deliver on both climate and health outcomes.

Finance a healthier, fairer and greener future to save lives. Transition towards a wellbeing economy.

Listen to the health community and prescribe urgent climate action. Mobilise and support the health community on climate action.

Open Letter – Healthy Climate Prescription

The health community around the world (300 organisations representing at least 45 million doctors and health professionals) [signed an open letter to national leaders](#) and COP26 country delegations, calling for real action to address the climate crisis.

The letter states the following demands:

“We call on all nations to update their national climate commitments under the Paris Agreement to commit to their fair share of limiting warming to 1.5°C; and we call on them to build health into those plans;

We call on all nations to deliver a rapid and just transition away from fossil fuels, starting with immediately cutting all related permits, subsidies and financing for fossil fuels, and to completely shift current financing into development of clean energy;

We call on high income countries to make larger cuts to greenhouse gas emissions, in line with a 1.5°C temperature goal;

We call on high income countries to also provide the promised transfer of funds to low-income countries to help achieve the necessary mitigation and adaptation measures;

We call on governments to build climate resilient, low-carbon, sustainable health systems;

We call on governments to also ensure that pandemic recovery investments support climate action and reduce social and health inequities.”

The **International Council of Nurses** (ICN) is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

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