

High-level Segment- Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean

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As a young medical doctor, I witnessed firsthand the impacts of climate change on the health of my community. I vividly remember a 2-year-old girl presenting with asthma and persistent wheezing due to being exposed to high levels of air pollution. Not only did it have detrimental effects on her growing body and brain, but it also prevented her from undergoing the surgery she needed and we had to wait until her overall condition improved.

This is just one of the many anecdotes of the rising impacts of climate change on health and well-being. The effects can be direct through deaths and injuries from extreme weather events such as wildfires, flooding, and heatwaves; or indirect through air pollution leading to heart and lung diseases, as [nine out of ten people](#), like this young patient, breathe in polluted air globally.

As one of the most climate-impacted regions in the world, the unmitigated impacts of climate change currently have 54 million people suffering from severe food insecurity in the EMR region alone. Likewise, one in five children lacks access to safe drinking water, leading to more disease and fragility in the region which is currently the most water-scarce. Emerging infectious diseases, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are predicted to be more common and severe due to increasing temperatures. Massive displacement of millions of people in the region is driven by climate change, conflict, or both together - with women and girls making up more than 80% of the migrant population. Women continue to face increasing gender-based violence and discrimination aggravated by higher temperatures and scarcity of resources.

Climate change is also affecting the mental health of communities. Farmers are dying by suicide, communities are experiencing ongoing distress and post-traumatic stress disorder, and people living with mental health conditions are three times more likely to die during a heatwave. As one of the most youthful regions in the world, more than 60% of the Eastern Mediterranean population is young people aged under 30 who are also feeling despair at the unpredictable climate disasters and anxiety about the future they face. These feelings are further heightened by the disconnect between the necessary climate action many young people want and what is being done by their government and public institutions.

On the other hand, as young health professionals, we are working hard to reimagine the future and lift ourselves from the fatigue of despair proposing and implementing evidence-based and radical solutions to deal with the changing climate. We know that action for a safer climate fosters the conditions for a world that supports better health and flourishing - creating resilient societies with cleaner air, safer energy and infrastructure, access to green spaces, and connected communities. Thus, climate adaptation and mitigation actions are central to protecting health and well-being. For affected communities to adapt and respond to climate threats, integration of and investment in psychological resilience is integral.

That is why young professionals are catalyzing the decarbonization of their healthcare systems by integrating climate mitigation actions within service delivery, governance, and workforce training to prescribe nature to improve patients' mental well-being by connecting with nature. Many are using their voices in community-led movements to highlight that the climate crisis is a health crisis and that climate action is an action for health leveraging their activism to hold governments and corporations accountable for their violations of their right to a safe, clean and healthy environment.

Nevertheless, youth continue to face multiple challenges that restrict their meaningful participation and their identification beyond only beneficiaries in matters of existential importance. There is a growing need to

reorient institutional structures to integrate youth, not as add-ons, but as natural stakeholders in formal roles such as youth advisory groups and councils such as the newly established WHO Youth Council. Young people are a diverse constituency who hold uniquely critical perspectives and skills that should not be marginalized. Climate and health policies should be grounded in the needs and insights of the most vulnerable youth including young women, refugees, and internally displaced youth in armed conflict. This requires establishing sustainable and intergenerational mechanisms not only for their participation but also for the emergence of youth-led solutions and implementation pathways.

To respond to this, the Egyptian Presidency of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP27) took progressive action to listen to young people and to demonstrate that the inclusion of health and intergenerational equity is far from optional. This was exemplified by appointing the first official youth envoy to the President of the UN Conference of Parties, marking a critical turning point for meaningful youth engagement in the highest level of climate decision-making.

The COP27 Presidency also recognized the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in the [COP27's Sharm El Sheikh Implementation Plan \(SHIP\)](#). This was the first such mention of health in a COP outcome decision. The Presidency also established the breakthrough agreement to provide [loss and damage funding](#) to the most affected countries in response to the catastrophic impacts of climate-related events.

To further elevate the political profile of the climate-health nexus and respond to the health-related losses and damages communities are experiencing from climate hazards, the COP28 in the UAE will host the first-ever [Health Day](#), and an interministerial meeting on climate and health that will bring health ministers together for the first time with ministers of environment and finance. This presents an opportunity to call attention to the science and evidence-based interventions that protect the health of populations as the climate changes and reduce carbon emissions with proven benefits to health. In addition, technical assistance and finance mobilization will be generated for climate and health interventions.

It is also critical to ensure youth perspectives are considered in the mobilization for the climate and health agenda by institutionalizing youth inclusion within governments, particularly in Ministries of Health through the appointment of a national youth focal point or the establishment of a youth advisory group that would mainstream the input of young people, foster trust, and elevate youth agency across all fronts of climate and health policies and action.

Climate justice can be a new “narrative of hope” as Desmond Tutu of South Africa said. Only through intentional integration and intergenerational collaboration, we can address the climate and health emergency and the systemic inequalities my generation is living through. We must connect, listen, and work together across silos and generations to build the healthy and secure world we all want and deserve.