Brief from Webinar3: November 2023
Climate justice and primary health care systems

Regional Network for Equity in Health in east and southern Africa (EQUINET) through Research for Equity and Community Health (REACH) Trust, and the International Working Group for Health Systems Strengthening (IWGHSS) with Training and Research Support Centre

Background

In the 2022 EQUINET conference on Catalysing change for equity and social justice in health, climate justice was identified as intersecting with and impacting on key drivers of health equity in east and southern Africa (ESA). The EQUINET steering committee thus initiated a programme to integrate climate justice in all key areas of its work, including on primary health care (PHC) oriented health systems. To support this, in 2023 – 24 EQUINET is organising a series of online dialogues to share knowledge and perspectives from community/local, national and international level on the impact of climate trends, the intersect with the other drivers/ determinants of inequity, the implications for policy and action that links climate to health equity and vice versa, and the proposals for policy, practice, research, and action.

This brief reports on the issues raised in the third webinar in the series on climate justice and health rights, convened by the Research for Equity and Community Health (REACH) Trust, and the International Working Group for Health Systems Strengthening (IWGHSS). REACH Trust and IWGHSS are the EQUINET steering committee leads of work in ESA on primary health care (PHC) oriented health systems. The webinar was held on Wednesday 25th of October 2023, with 30 participants from nine different countries. It was moderated by Nadine Nanji of IWGHSS, with input from Joy Muhia IWGHSS, support from Kingsley Chikaphupha REACH Trust and technical support from Belinda Ncube, TARSC Consultant.

The three panelists were Mr. Christopher Ogwang, Senior Program Officer, Community Empowerment Program at CEHURD, Uganda on the local experiences of the Impact of Climate change on local health systems, health equity and PHC; Mr. Allone Ganizani, Deputy Director of preventive Health services, MoH Malawi, on National issues and actions on climate justice and equitable, PHC-oriented health systems; Ms. Tatum Louw, Change researcher/consultant, Cape Town, South Africa, on Global policies, rules and forums climate and health systems. The presentations were followed by participant discussions and interaction with presenters in breakout sessions, including in the 'chat'. The video of the webinar is available at https://youtu.be/BjUvKbb6OTo.

This brief summarises key points raised by speakers and participants on
• how climate features are impacting on PHC-oriented health systems;
• the actions that need to be taken to address these issues at local, national and regional level and in international/ global level processes and forums from a regional lens;
• issues raised to be further discussed in the other thematic webinars.

Climate impacts on PHC and health systems

* Climate change has negative impacts on the execution and effectiveness of public sector health programmes in ESA countries. Central and local governments face an increasing demand to plan for, manage and address the effects of climate change on primary health care systems and on community health.

- The burden of climate change is particularly evident in areas prone to floods, with an impact in increased cases of diseases such as malaria and cholera. Heavy rains, exacerbated by damaged infrastructure, can also undermine access to healthcare services, affecting coverage of and equity in health programmes.
- Disrupted agricultural production, caused by climate change, can also result in food shortages and malnutrition, affecting the socioeconomic status and health of communities.
- Degradation and loss of income due to climate change negatively impact on the mental health of vulnerable groups and contribute to the the burden of climate-related impacts on communities.
- Corporate-led globalization and the pursuit of profit over nature and social wellbeing has resulted in significant changes in production patterns and the adoption of unsustainable practices that worsen the effects of climate change, harming both vulnerable communities and the environment.
- Strengthened PHC systems are essential to prevent and manage these climate related health problems.

Actions proposed to address climate impacts on PHC and health systems

- Tackling climate-related harms on health and health systems these require collaboration and integrated, comprehensive solutions.
- Multisectoral action, as promoted in comprehensive PHC, is thus key to address the interconnected challenges of environmental injustice, human rights, and poverty. The challenges call for coordinated efforts involving various sectors, and including government, civil society organizations, and international bodies.
- It is crucial to translate environmental health challenges into policies that protect vulnerable groups and promote sustainable development. This involves developing regulations and guidelines that link actions that address environmental justice, human rights, inequity and poverty through PHC, as a key health system lever for responding to climate change.
- The health infrastructures - health services, transport networks and other key services need to be planned and built in a manner that is resilient to the effects of climate change and able to withstand extreme weather events to play its role in protecting vulnerable communities.
- ESA nations need to show clear efforts to lessen the severity of climate-related challenges and protect the health and well-being of their populations. The health system also has a role in prevention of harmful emissions and environmental degradation that worsen climate impacts. This implies national and international efforts to transition towards clean and renewable energy sources, including in health services.
- PHC systems can play a role in raising awareness about the intersecting issues of environmental injustice, human rights, and poverty. Education campaigns can help communities understand the links between these issues and their health and wellbeing and empower them to advocate for their rights, and for action and policy change.
- Health workers, especially those working at primary care level and in communities play a vital role in these actions. Enhancing their capacity, training healthcare professionals on climate change-related health impacts, and promoting climate-resilient healthcare practices should thus be integrated within health systems planning and financing.
- These changes call for us to reclaim policy space from corporates to community and state-led processes that promote socio-economic justice and primary health care practices. A key aspect of this is involving communities in decision-making processes. PHC should not just be viewed as a medical intervention, but a means to strengthen the democratic functioning needed to address climate at all levels.
- Local, national, regional and global actions need to align. This means linking the efforts of local communities and organizations with national, regional and global movements and initiatives. Doing so will exert a broader pressure on policy decisions and institutional practice to adopt more sustainable practices and to prioritize the protection of nature, people and futures.

Issues to carry forward for future webinars

- How do we embed fairness, equality, and sustainability in addressing the impacts of climate change so that vulnerable communities are not disproportionately burdened by its consequences?
- How do we better link climate action to efforts to reclaim policy space for development from corporates and to prioritise community and state-led processes to set and implement policies and collective actions that support PHC and socio-economic justice?
- What research and development do we need to do to advance to strengthen PHC systems and activism to demonstrate health impacts to inform advocacy to change policies and hold those polluting and destroying of our environmental resources accountable to pay for loss and damage?
- How do we converge efforts across multiple sectors and platform to mobilise people and align efforts at different levels to prioritize sustainability, social justice, and the protection of our environmental resources at all levels as fundamental for health and wellbeing?