

Urban Health, Food Security, and Climate Action

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*Inspired by Stakeholder Ideation at COP29 in Azerbaijan
Hosted by CHD Group – Holding UNFCCC Observer Status*

The outcomes are inspired through the discussion held at the COP 29 UNFCCC meeting at Baku, Azerbaijan through a stellar line up of panellists.

Panellists:

1. Moderator: Dr. Edmond Fernandes, Director, Edward & Cynthia Institute of Public Health
2. Lauren Baker, Deputy Director, Global Alliance for the Future of Food,
3. Jess Beagley, Policy Lead, Global Climate and Health Alliance,
4. Sira Secka, The Gambia COP Negotiator for Agriculture
5. Gulbaniz Ganbarova, Chairperson, Azerbaijan Rural Women's Association,
6. Dr Sanjay Srivastava, Chief of Disaster Risk Reduction at UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific region (ESCAP)

Executive Summary

The urgency of climate action has never been greater, yet discussions around urban health, food security, and climate resilience remain marginal in global climate negotiations. This policy brief emerges from discussions at the COP29 UNFCCC meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan, where experts across public health, food systems, agriculture, disaster risk reduction, governance and climate policy explored critical linkages between these sectors. The effects of climate change extend far beyond rising temperatures and extreme weather events. Food insecurity, public health risks, and climate-induced displacement are key challenges requiring an integrated policy response. This brief highlights the need for system-wide transformation in food systems, urban planning, and global governance to ensure resilient, health-centered climate strategies.

Key Insights:

- **Food security is inseparable from public health and climate resilience:** Current food production and distribution systems are fragile and increasingly vulnerable to climate shocks. Industrial agriculture depletes natural resources and exposes workers to occupational health hazards, while unsustainable farming practices contribute to biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants.

- **Climate change is a major public health threat:** Rising temperatures, pollution, and shifting ecosystems exacerbate malnutrition, foodborne illnesses, and non-communicable diseases. Vulnerable communities bear the brunt of these impacts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.
- **Multisectoral collaboration is critical:** Policies in food, health, and urban development must be aligned to address interconnected challenges. A cross-sectoral approach will ensure that mitigation and adaptation strategies account for human well-being, equity, and sustainability.
- **Health must be mainstreamed in climate governance:** Current climate discussions focus primarily on carbon emissions and financial investments but often overlook the direct health implications of climate change. This brief calls for greater representation of public health priorities in UNFCCC negotiations taking place at COP meetings.

Background: The UNFCCC and COP

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) serves as the leading platform for international climate negotiations. Established in 1992, the UNFCCC has facilitated global cooperation in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change. Its annual Conference of Parties (COP) meetings bring together governments, civil society organizations, and experts to assess progress and refine policy strategies.

However, despite decades of climate negotiations, key gaps persist:

- The nexus between climate, food, and health remains underexplored, limiting the effectiveness of climate adaptation strategies in spite of a growing body of robust scientific evidence that stresses on the linkages.
- Climate-induced food insecurity is escalating, yet agriculture and nutrition that mainstreams health needs remain secondary concerns in global climate agreements.
- Urban vulnerabilities are increasing, with climate-related disasters disrupting food supply chains, public health services, and essential infrastructure.
- COP29 in Baku provided an opportunity to reframe these challenges through a health and food security lens. This policy brief synthesizes expert insights to propose actionable recommendations that integrate health, food systems, and climate action into global policies.

Expert Insights from COP29

Health Risks in Food Systems and Agriculture

[Lauren Baker, Global Alliance for the Future of Food]

- Food systems are not just about nutrition—they are deeply tied to public health, environmental sustainability, and economic resilience.

The industrialization of agriculture has introduced multiple risks:

- Occupational hazards – Farmers and food production workers face chronic exposure to toxic agrochemicals, leading to long-term health complications.
- Environmental degradation – The widespread use of pesticides and fertilizers contributes to biodiversity loss, soil depletion, and water contamination.
- Food safety concerns – Contaminated food and unsanitary processing conditions result in foodborne illnesses, exacerbating malnutrition and non-communicable diseases.
- Urban food insecurity – Modern cities rely on complex, often fragile food supply chains. Disruptions due to extreme weather events can lead to crises, as seen in Toronto, where studies suggest only a three-day food supply is available in case of an emergency.

Proposed Solutions:

- Promote agroecology and regenerative farming to reduce reliance on harmful chemicals and enhance soil health.
- Strengthen urban-rural food linkages by supporting local food production and reducing dependency on global supply chains.
- Enhance food safety regulations to prevent contamination and improve consumer health outcomes.

Integrating Climate and Health in Policy

[Jess Beagley, Global Climate and Health Alliance (GCHA)]

- The health sector cannot tackle climate change alone—it requires collaboration with energy, transport, agriculture, and urban development sectors.
- 95% of emissions come from non-health sectors, yet they significantly impact public health.
- Mitigation and adaptation must go hand in hand—resilient food, water, and sanitation systems are essential for reducing climate-related health risks.
- Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the UNFCCC must explicitly address health challenges and integrate climate-health considerations.

Proposed Solutions:

- Establish a UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Climate and Health to drive cross-sectoral policy integration.
- Enhance multisectoral coordination at the national level to ensure climate action prioritizes public health.

Food Sovereignty and Climate Justice in Developing Nations

[Sira Secka, Lead Negotiator for The Gambia on Agriculture]

- Least Developed Countries (LDCs) face unique challenges in ensuring food security while adapting to climate change.

The Gambia's experience highlights critical barriers:

- Lack of infrastructure and investment prevents small-scale farmers from achieving self-sufficiency.
- Dependency on imported, processed foods from wealthier nations increases health risks and weakens local economies.
- Climate finance remains inaccessible, with many local NGOs struggling to secure meaningful support.

Proposed Solutions:

- Ensure equitable climate finance that directly benefits smallholder farmers and vulnerable communities.
- Prioritize food sovereignty by investing in local, climate-resilient agriculture.

Disaster Resilience in Agrifood Systems

[Dr. Sanjay Srivastava, UN ESCAP, Chief of Disaster Risk Reduction]

- Extreme weather events and disasters disrupt entire agrifood systems, affecting food availability, affordability, and accessibility.

To build resilience, countries must:

- Anticipate risks through better climate forecasting and early warning systems.
- Identify vulnerabilities in food supply chains and develop targeted adaptation plans.
- Improve crisis response mechanisms by integrating government agencies, UN bodies, and civil society.
- Implement "Loss and Damage" frameworks within climate adaptation policies.

Policy Recommendations

1. Mainstream Health in Climate Policy

- Ensure that public health experts are actively involved in UNFCCC negotiations and climate adaptation planning.
- Develop health-centered climate financing mechanisms to address climate-related disease burdens.

2. Strengthen Urban Food Security

- Implement emergency preparedness strategies for urban food systems to withstand climate shocks.
- Promote sustainable local food production to reduce dependency on fragile supply chains and trade dependence.

3. Ensure Equitable Climate Finance for Food Security

- Direct more funds toward climate adaptation in agriculture & food systems, particularly in Least Developed Countries (LDCs).
- Enhance accessibility to climate adaptation funds for smallholder farmers and marginalized communities.

4. Build Resilient Agrifood Systems

- Integrate disaster risk reduction strategies into national agricultural and food security policies.
- Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure food systems are climate-adaptive and health-centered.

5. Regulate Industry Influence in Climate Policy

- Reduce the influence of agribusiness and fossil fuel lobbies in UN climate negotiations.
- Establish stronger governance mechanisms to prioritize public health over corporate interests.

Inference:

Urban health, food security, and climate action are deeply interconnected. Integrating these themes into climate governance is essential for long-term resilience. The discussion in this brief provide a roadmap for policymakers to develop sustainable, equitable, and health-centered climate strategies, ensuring food security and public health for future generations. UNFCCC must look at sustainable public health engagement built on cross sectoral thematic areas to ensure adaptation gap is more achievable, loss and damage funds are used appropriately which leaves no one behind and health systems are strengthened from a lens of climate gaps.

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