

Pan-European Commission on Climate and Health: A Call to Action

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Terms of reference

Introduction

Climate change has hit the WHO European Region hard, with thousands of people dying from extreme heat as well as additional deaths from wildfires and floods. In addition, a wide range of health outcomes are affected by climate change including vector-borne and other infectious diseases; noncommunicable diseases, such as respiratory and cardiovascular diseases; and mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression following exposure to extreme events. Climate change also contributes to ill-health by affecting the security and safety of food and water and increasing the loss of ecosystems. Climate change disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable populations, including women and children, deepening inequities, including gender-based inequities, and perpetuating injustice. Its effects can escalate conflicts, lead to increased displacement, undermine trust and diminish social cohesion.

There is an urgent need for concerted action to prevent, prepare for and respond to current climate change risks. Accelerated mitigation efforts are needed, both to reduce future risks and to reap the near-term health co-benefits, for example by reducing air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels. Increased ambition is crucial to avoid missing the brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity for safeguarding a livable and healthy future. With countries facing multiple crises simultaneously, accelerated climate action for health would deliver cascading benefits, and build resilient systems for health, food, energy and the environment. When assessing the economic case for investment it is necessary to evaluate the cost of action compared to the cost of inaction for societies. Putting human health at the centre of an aligned response to these concurrent crises aims to secure a healthier and safer future for all.

Investment in health sector transformation plays a pivotal role in addressing climate change through efforts to increase the resilience of health systems to climate change; reduce their carbon emissions; embrace sustainable practices; develop adaptation strategies; and promote health co-benefits of climate change mitigation in other sectors.

Scope of the Pan-European Commission on Climate and Health

The (Pan-European) Commission on Climate and Health is being established to raise the political profile, awareness and commitment for stronger action to address the health impacts of climate change. The Commission aims to step-up policy development, health sector leadership, investments and actions to increase adaptation and resilience to climate change and promote mitigation policies that deliver health co-benefits.

The Commission will begin with a formal launch in June 2025, followed by three virtual “hearings” with key informants to review evidence and experiences related to the effects of climate change on health and the actions that are needed to address climate change. Drawing on these hearings and evidence synthesized by researchers, the Commission will formulate a Call to action to be proposed at the 79th session of World Health Assembly in Geneva Switzerland prefaced by a high-level event at COP30 in Brazil in November 2025. The Call to action will be followed by the development of an action plan for presentation at the 76th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2026.

The Commission’s activities are expected to support the outcomes of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health and the Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly resolution on climate change and health; be consistent with WHO policy frameworks, such as the 14th General Programme of Work; and be synergic to ongoing initiatives, such as the European Partnership for Health Sector Climate Action and the transatlantic dialogues on climate change and health. A list of the key policy frameworks and publications for consideration in the development of actions proposed by the Commission can be found in Annex 1.

Objectives of the Pan-European Commission on Climate and Health

Taking stock of the full scale of current and projected health impacts of climate change, the objectives of the Commission are to:

1. determine interconnected global and regional risks to health, the implications of reaching climate tipping points, the health implications of inaction, and opportunities for population health improvement through climate change adaptation and mitigation actions in the WHO European Region;
2. identify gaps in government actions, structures, policies and governance systems which have so far prevented successful climate change action;
3. recommend key entry points, measures, approaches and levers for accelerated health and climate action, both long- and short term;
4. raise the profile of health in climate policy by engaging scientists, public health institutions and health authorities, national and supranational agencies, parliaments, civil-society organizations and youth;
5. advocate for the final policy recommendations to high-level decision-makers across the Region; and

6. advise the WHO Regional Office for Europe on how best to strengthen its support to Member States around health and climate change by recommending concrete actions to tackle the threats of the climate crisis and capitalize on the benefits of climate adaptation and mitigation actions for a healthy net zero emission future.

Outcomes of the Pan-European Commission on Climate and Health

The main outcome of the Commission's work is expected to be a resolute and urgent Call to action on the climate crisis to protect and improve health including both the "what and how" to political decision-makers, health authorities, cities, communities and the public.

The dissemination of the Call will be driven by a robust communication and outreach strategy developed by the Secretariat of the Commission.

Stages of work

The Commission's work will take place in three stages.

Stage 1: the Commission's research team, in close collaboration with the Chief Scientific Advisor will prepare for the initial meeting and three hearings by reviewing and synthesizing the existing evidence of the health impacts of climate change in the WHO European Region, recent reports by European institutions and any relevant assessment of the health effects of adaptation and mitigation actions in the Region.

Stage 2: the Commission will work closely with the WHO Regional Office for Europe and engage in hearings with:

- scientists to understand the scale of the problem for Member States and populations in the WHO European Region, and identify options regarding adaptation and mitigation policy priorities;
- relevant policy-makers and other stakeholders at the international, national and local levels to identify further levers of and opportunities for action;
- public health institutions and health authorities; and
- civil-society and youth organizations.

Stage 3: the Commission will assess and synthesize the available evidence and the options identified in the first and second stages to provide WHO and health decision-makers with independent advice on future priorities, entry points and further ways of ensuring accelerated health and climate action.

Role of the Secretariat

The Office of the Secretariat at the WHO Regional Office for Europe is responsible for:

- overall project management of the Commission;
- all arrangements and costs of gathering the commissioners and holding meetings, and all expenses and the budget of the Commission;
- preparations prior to the Commission launch; and
- the development and implementation of a communications strategy leveraging the full corporate and media capacity of WHO to assure maximum coverage and publicity of the Commission's work and recommendations.

Role of the Chair

The Chair of the Commission is expected to:

- independently lead the Commission and further strengthen and maintain its credibility while simultaneously ensuring delivery of its aim, objectives and outcomes;
- chair all Commission meetings, including the launch of the Commission, virtual hearings and a final in-person meeting to decide on the final recommendations;
- advocate for and communicate about the Commission, its aim, findings and recommendations to amplify the work of the Commission and lift the profile of climate change and health; and
- represent the Commission at all meetings, launches and associated high-level events.

Duties of members of the Commission

The members of the Commission will be tasked with elevating the profile of health and climate change to drive leadership and action. As such, members of the Commission, will be expected to:

- contribute to identify key informants for Commission hearings;
- actively engage in the discussions of the hearings;
- contribute to drafting and reviewing the Call to action and provide critical feedback towards its refinement and finalization, aligned with current global and regional policies and processes on climate change and health; and
- support dissemination and advocacy efforts related to the Call, in line with the communication strategy.

To undertake this work, members of the Commission will be required to:

- participate in three virtual "hearings" in 2025;
- participate in two face-to-face meetings including the launch of the commission and the final meeting; and
- dedicate sufficient time to review background documents and to contribute to the drafting of the Call to action.

Independence of the Commission

The Call to action will be adopted by the Commission as an independent group in their personal capacity.

Timeline

The Commission will be formally launched in June 2025. It will be expected to complete its work by December 2026.

Annex 1. Policy frameworks

1. Declaration of the seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (EURO/Budapest2023/6; <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/371461>).
2. Report of the Seventh Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health: Budapest, 5–7 July 2023. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2024 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/375962>). License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
3. Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly, 1 June 2024. Climate change and health. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024 (WHA77.14; https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA77/A77_R14-en.pdf).
4. Zero regrets: scaling up action on climate change mitigation and adaptation for health in the WHO European Region, second edition. Key messages from the Working Group on Health in Climate Change. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023 (WHO/EURO:2023-3198-42956-69520; <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/368161>). License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
5. European Programme of Work 2020-2025: United Action for Better Health. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2021 (WHO/EURO:2021-1919-41670-56993; <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/339209>). License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
6. Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly, 3 May 2024. Draft fourteenth General Programme of Work, 2025–2028, Report by the Director-General. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024 (https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA77/A77_16-en.pdf).