

PLANETARY HEALTH

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and meeting UNDP's vision to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities and exclusion, requires new ways of working: identifying co-benefits across targets, encouraging effective cross-sector action, and ensuring policy coherence.

Planetary Health, a new trans-disciplinary field, calls for simultaneously safeguarding human health and the natural systems that underpin it. Its focus is more expansive and holistic than traditional environmental health, bringing to the forefront inter- and intra- generational equity dimensions and calling for integrated approaches to address social, environmental and economic impacts of increasing pressures on our planet.

This issue brief explores what is meant by planetary health, and how it can inform UNDP's work at the nexus of environmental sustainability and climate change, disaster risk reduction, health, gender equality, and poverty alleviation to support SDG implementation and acceleration, ensuring no one is left behind.



Photo: UNDP Guatemala, Caroline Trutmann

A healthy planet, a healthy people

Recent work by the [Stockholm Resilience Centre](#) has shown that two of the earth's nine planetary boundaries – biospheric integrity and biochemical flows – have already been exceeded. Two others – climate change and land-system change – have

Key Facts

- Climate change could push 100 million people into poverty by 2030. Between 2030 and 2050, it is expected to kill an additional 250,000 people annually, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.
- In 2012, almost one quarter of global deaths were attributed to unhealthy environments. Of the 12.6 million deaths, children and the elderly were disproportionately impacted.
- The increased frequency of natural disasters is a clear threat to health particularly for women who accounted for 70–80% of fatalities in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and 91% in the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh.
- Health systems in low- and middle-income countries are estimated to account for 3-5% of their countries' greenhouse gas emissions.

passed the safe operating space, and ocean acidification is nearing the threshold. This has dire repercussions not only for the environment, but also for our economies, health, and the well-being of future generations. The [Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health](#) argued that: "We have been mortgaging the health of future generations to realize economic and development gains in the present."

Growing scientific evidence, summarized in the Commission report, has documented the numerous ways in which human health is impacted by the disruption to our planet's natural systems – from increasing food insecurity and malnutrition, contributing to the spread of zoonotic, water- and vector- borne diseases (such as Ebola, Zika and other arboviruses), heightening the burden from non-communicable diseases, and resulting in more injury and death from natural disasters. Current trends related to unplanned urbanization, population growth and ageing, conflict, crisis and migration, create an urgency to holistically address the health of our planet and our people.

Leaving no one behind

The 2030 Agenda promises to 'leave no one behind' and to reach those furthest behind first. A planetary health lens can help uncover the overlapping ways in which people remain vulnerable, highlighting how the inequitable distribution of environmental degradation drives health inequities. Within countries, for example, the poorest and those with the least political power are often most exposed to waste and pollution. Women are often disproportionately impacted by indoor air pollution due to traditional cooking practices and secondhand tobacco smoke, and indigenous populations, which rely more heavily on biodiversity for their livelihoods, nutrition, and well-being, are particularly hurt by biodiversity loss. Between countries, the risks and burdens are similarly not equally shared. For example, while low income countries are often least responsible for climate change, they are also most vulnerable to, and least prepared to mitigate its impacts.

Key entry points for UNDP

Given the large policy and programmatic portfolios of UNDP on environment, climate change mitigation and adaptation, gender equality, poverty reduction, governance, and health, as well as the significant presence and convening power at the country level and considerable work with vertical funds (GEF, GCF, Global Fund), UNDP is uniquely placed to advocate for an integrated and systems-approach to planetary health for advancing the SDGs.

The Planetary Health frame can be used to accelerate ongoing work in at least two areas: 1) supporting multi-sectoral policies to respond to the growing burden due to planetary health threats, paying particular attention to the rights of the most vulnerable; and 2) building resilience in the health sector. New cross-cluster and cross-regional initiatives can also be supported to ensure the increased use of sustainable and clean energy sources, promotion of sustainable transportation, conservation and management of biodiversity, and addressing zoonotic- and water-borne diseases and sanitation.

Opportunities for new partnerships

The planetary health approach calls on diverse sectors to come together, including health, environment, agriculture and trade, and is of growing interest to donors and foundations, academic institutions and networks, and the UN family including UNEP and WHO. UNDP can leverage its experience leading multi-sectoral HIV and NCD responses, and collaborative approaches that engage civil society and grass-roots movements to ensure that the commitment to 'leave no one behind' is met.

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Building on UNDP strengths and successes

Supporting multi-sectoral policies & regulations to respond to increased planetary health burdens

In line with the 2030 Agenda and the [HIV, Health and Development strategy 2016-21: Connecting the Dots](#), UNDP is uniquely placed to support multi-sectoral policies and action to respond to the complex and growing health burden caused by climate change, environmental degradation and threats to biodiversity, in partnership with the WHO, UNEP, the Global Fund, GEF and others. **For example:**

- UNDP is supporting the integration of health and gender in [Environmental Impact Assessments](#), across 11 countries in Africa. In Burkina Faso, it supported the revision of existing environmental and social assessments by integrating HIV, gender and health.
- In [Bhutan](#) UNDP helped link climate data with epidemiological surveillance, and in [China](#) national capacities to respond to heat stress were strengthened.
- Work is being undertaken to ensure co-benefits are realized across multiple SDGs and raise awareness of the growing burden of [non-communicable diseases](#) in low- and middle-income countries from planetary threats. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNDP developed [tools to assess social, economic, and environmental determinants of health and health equity](#) to maximize co-benefits.
- In response to Zika, UNDP documented the [socio-economic impact of the virus in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

Building resilience of the Health Sector

UNDP has extensive experience working on climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts, including in the health sector, and is continuously innovating. **For example:**

- UNDP's [Solar for Health](#) initiative supports governments to increase access to quality health services through the installation of solar energy photo-voltaic systems, ensuring constant and cost-effective access to electricity, while also mitigating the impact of climate change. In [Zimbabwe](#) 500 clinics and warehouses are being equipped with solar panels, improving quality and safety of basic services.
- In the [Pacific](#), UNDP, the GEF and WHO, work together to embed climate risks and resilience into health practices.
- UNDP hosts the Inter-Agency Task Team on [Sustainable Procurement in the Health Sector](#), which aims to contribute to greener health systems, reducing greenhouse gases and chemical pollution to improve human health. It has influenced members' own procurement practices and helped develop tools to monitor performance of suppliers and manufacturers.

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