



United Nations
Global Compact

**AN EMPOWERING
BUSINESS NARRATIVE
AND CALL FOR HEALTH
RESILIENT CLIMATE
ACTION**

APRIL 2021

TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE GREATEST GLOBAL HEALTH OPPORTUNITY OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

CLIMATE CHANGE IS A HEALTH CRISIS

The year 2020 starkly reminded the world that climate change is increasingly affecting society's health in direct and indirect ways. One fourth of global disease is generated by environment-related risks, including degradation of the ecosystem, biodiversity loss, climate change, and exposure to air, water and soil pollution and toxic chemicals.^{1 2} These illnesses include many non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes, as well as infectious diseases. Infectious diseases come from zoonotic, or animal sources, such as Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and COVID-19, or through vectors such as mosquitoes and ticks, which can carry dengue, Zika, malaria or Lyme disease. Biodiversity loss through deforestation, land-use change, agricultural expansion and encroachment on wildlife habitats is a leading factor behind the emergence of zoonotic diseases like the coronavirus. Climate change favors the growth of zoonotic pathogens by creating longer growing periods and expanded habitats.³

The effects of a changing climate are directly threatening human lives and livelihoods as temperatures rise and the habitats for infectious diseases, such as vector and water-borne illnesses, expand. Extreme weather events, exacerbated by climate change, influence individuals' mental health. Flooding, prolonged droughts and associated food insecurity or displacement create anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorders.⁴ Society's deadly addiction to coal and the burning of fossil fuels drives climate change and air pollution, which alone causes one in five premature deaths globally. That translates to more than 8 million deaths per year.⁵ Hunger and malnutrition are increasing as changing environmental climate conditions can negatively affect crop yield as well as the nutritional content and safety of several food crops. All in all, climate projections present dire health outcomes across the world. The most vulnerable groups — poor and marginalized people, including women and children — often living in nations that are the least responsible for climate change, are disproportionately impacted. **This makes tackling climate change the greatest global health opportunity of the twenty-first century.**

1. World Health Organization (WHO). [Preventing disease through healthy environments: a global assessment of the burden of disease from environmental risks](#), 2016.

2. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). [Making Peace with Nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies](#), 2021.

3. UNEP and International Livestock Research Institute. [Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission](#), 2020.

4. American Psychiatric Association. [How Extreme Weather Events Affect Mental Health](#), 2019.

5. Environmental Research, K. Vohra et al. [Global mortality from outdoor fine particle pollution generated by fossil fuel combustion: Results from GEOS-Chem](#), April 2021, Vol. 195.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR TAKING INTEGRATED CLIMATE-NATURE-HEALTH ACTION

Business has an ongoing, crucial role to play in tackling climate change and health resiliency.

It is both a moral imperative, aligned with the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, and an opportunity for business as climate change continues to increase health costs and business risks around the globe. With the coronavirus pandemic and climate change impacts, society has painfully learned that the cost of inaction far outweighs the costs of bold and rapid response and prevention. Equity can no longer be an afterthought: as experienced with the COVID-19 vaccine campaign, no one is safe until everyone is safe.

The health costs associated with climate change, including conditions linked to air pollution, undernutrition, extreme weather events and infectious disease, are immense.

These costs will reach \$2 billion to \$4 billion by 2030, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The International Labor Organization (ILO) is predicting that with heat stress under a 1.5°C scenario, 2.2 per cent of work hours will be lost in 2030, the equivalent of 80 million full-time jobs. Air pollution also causes significant health-related productivity losses, leading to more sick days and negatively affecting consumer behavior. Supply chains operating in areas vulnerable to climate change will face increasing disruptions due to droughts, heatwaves and floods, which will impact supply and business continuity. Companies will increasingly need to establish a business strategy that recognizes the interdependence of human rights and health and environmental risks by conducting integrated human rights and environmental due diligence processes.

Meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity's emerging post-2020 global biodiversity framework hands businesses across all sectors the opportunity to deliver co-benefits for human and planetary health, the climate and business performance. These opportunities will benefit

companies by reducing their costs and operational and regulatory risk while aligning their products with consumer trends. At the same time, companies can help save lives, reduce absenteeism, increase productivity and retain their employees. Achieving the Paris Agreement would deliver health benefits worth much more — 1.4 to 2.5 times — the cost of mitigation efforts. The latest figures suggest that limiting warming to 1.5°C by the year 2100 would generate a net global benefit of \$264 trillion to \$610 trillion.⁶

“**The true cost of climate change is felt in our hospitals and in our lungs. The health burden of polluting energy sources is now so high, that moving to cleaner and more sustainable choices for energy supply, transport and food systems effectively pays for itself. When health is taken into account, climate change mitigation is an opportunity, not a cost.**

Dr. Maria Neira, WHO Director of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health

6. The Lancet, [The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: responding to converging crises](#), 2020.



THE FLIP SIDE OF RISK: BUILDING HEALTH RESILIENCY IS A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

Reducing GHG emissions and air pollution:

Meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement through a large and rapid drop in GHG emissions and reduced air pollution could bring \$54.1 trillion in health benefits.⁷ The health gains resulting from shifting away from coal, oil and natural gas to renewable energy would repay the cost of the investment twice over.⁸

Reversing biodiversity loss: Land-use change, agricultural expansion and urbanization are responsible for more than 30 per cent of emerging diseases, including zoonotic diseases like Ebola.⁹ Ending deforestation and conserving at least 30 per cent of the world's land and ocean space by 2030 will deliver immense co-benefits for planetary health and drastically strengthen peoples' resilience.

Boosting food and nutrition security:

Shifting towards plant-based diets, reducing food waste and promoting agroecological practices can help build resilient food systems that reduce emissions while improving access to healthy food. According to the Lancet, "food is the single strongest lever to optimize human health and environmental sustainability on earth."

A planetary health diet, less-reliant on animal-based agriculture, could prevent 11 million deaths annually.¹⁰

Improving Water Resilience: By 2025, half of the world's population will be living in water-stressed areas, and contaminated drinking water is estimated to cause 485,000 diarrhoeal deaths each year.¹¹ Every dollar invested in clean water and sanitation delivers \$5.5 in health co-benefits return, more productivity and fewer premature deaths, according to the WHO.¹²

The Future of Work and Just Transition:

The transition to a low-carbon economy will deliver immense opportunities, with a potential of 25 million jobs in the energy sector, and 78 million jobs in the circular economy by 2030, according to the ILO.¹³ It is essential to support a just transition and build social protection by investing in green decent jobs and reskilling and upskilling the workers and communities most impacted by the shift to a low-carbon economy. It is also essential to prevent and address the health impacts of resource extraction linked to the development of renewables on vulnerable populations, including indigenous peoples.

7. UNEP, *Global Environment Outlook 6*, 2019.

8. World Health Organization, *WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19*, 2020.

9. Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), *Workshop Report on IPBES Workshop on Biodiversity and Pandemics*, 2020.

10. The Lancet, *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems*, 2019.

11. World Health Organization, *Drinking-water Fact sheet*, 14 June 2019.

12. World Health Organization, *Sanitation Fact sheet*, 14 June 2019.

13. International Labour Organization, *Skills for a Greener Future*, 2019.

PRIORITY ACTIONS TO DELIVER CLIMATE AND HEALTH CO-BENEFITS FOR COP 26

Only rapid, concrete and concerted action will help meet biodiversity goals and those of the Paris Agreement. These priority actions will avoid millions of premature deaths associated with preventable environmental factors each year, cut back the incidence of communicable and non-communicable disease, enhance mental health and bring substantial healthcare cost savings.

The United Nations Global Compact is now calling on companies to take action, through the UN Global Compact and partner initiatives, to deliver climate, nature and health co-benefits in five key areas.

1 **GHG EMISSIONS AND AIR POLLUTION:**

Join the visionary corporate leaders taking the most ambitious level of climate action by setting 1.5°C-aligned science-based emissions reduction targets through the [Science-Based Targets Initiative](#) and its [Business Ambition for 1.5°C](#) campaign — which is itself part of the broader [Race to Zero](#) campaign convened by the High-Level Climate Champions. Companies can also [set an internal price on carbon](#) and commit to go 100 per cent renewable through [RE100](#), switch their entire fleet to electric vehicles by 2030 through [EV100](#), and use energy more productively through [EP100](#). By joining the [Clean Cooking Alliance](#), companies can help make cooking with clean energy accessible to the 3 billion people who live each day without it.

2 **NATURE AND BIODIVERSITY LOSS:**

Align with a nature positive business model that helps restore biodiversity and safeguards ecosystem services by setting science-based targets for nature with the [Science-Based Targets Network](#). Take action to reverse nature loss with [Business for Nature](#).

3 **FOOD SYSTEMS:** Engage in the [2021 UN Food Summit Action Tracks](#), and scale up agricultural biodiversity, boost sustainable diets through product portfolios, and eliminate deforestation by joining the [One Planet Business for Biodiversity](#) (OP2B) coalition focusing on agriculture.

4 **WATER RESILIENCE:** Join the [Water Resilience Coalition](#), a CEO-led initiative committed to reducing water stress by 2050. It is part of the [Race to Resilience](#), a sibling campaign of the Race to Zero.

5 **JUST TRANSITION:** Take the [Business Pledge for Just Transition and Decent Green Jobs](#) and join the [Climate Action for Jobs Initiative](#), uniting global efforts for a just transition and the creation of green decent jobs.

“Unlike the direct benefits of carbon mitigation, which are ultimately long-term and understood in terms of damage limitation, the health co-benefits of ambitious climate policies have an immediate positive impact.”

Ian Hamilton, Executive Director,
Lancet Countdown on Health and
Climate Change

In the lead up to COP 26 on climate and COP 15 on biodiversity, companies need to show how they are already taking ambitious, health resilient, climate and nature positive action based on science. At the same time, they should align their investments and company communications across all departments and with associated trade groups.

More ambitious corporate leaders are needed to push policymakers to enhance nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs), with health co-benefits in mind, and embed climate and nature goals in green recovery packages. Business can provide Government with constructive, responsible inputs for NDCs and biodiversity goals that fully include the climate-nature-health nexus. They can lead by example through showcasing their own integrated climate-nature-health action.¹⁴ Some studies have shown that aligning the NDCs of the largest economies with the goals of the Paris Agreement would save about 10 million lives per year by 2040. Placing explicit health objectives in these plans would avoid hundreds of thousands additional deaths through cleaner air, healthier diets and increased exercise.¹⁵

A systemic shift to a zero-carbon, nature positive and health resilient economy is within our reach — **our only future depends on making this vision a reality.**

14. A Caring for Climate Report, [Guide for Responsible Corporate Engagement in Climate Policy](#), November 2013.

15. The Lancet Planetary Health, [The public health implications of the Paris Agreement: a modelling study](#), 2021.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEALTH RESILIENT ACTION THROUGHOUT THE VALUE CHAIN

Businesses have the opportunity to build health resilience in the face of climate change throughout their value chain:

At the supply chain level: by investing in the health resilience, including health coverage, of their supply chain workers and in climate-resilient infrastructure in areas that are vulnerable to climate change.

Through their operations: by reducing their greenhouse gas emissions, investing in employees' health, conducting risk assessments and creating contingency plans for climate-related shocks.

Through their products: by altering product portfolios, embedding social and environmental priorities into product innovation goals, and identifying product opportunities that target health and environmental co-benefits for consumers.

BACKGROUND

Since 2016, the UN Global Compact has created thought leadership on ways the private sector can positively contribute to challenges facing the nexus of human health, the environment and climate change. This thought leadership culminated with the launch of the [Business Leadership Brief for Healthy Planet, Healthy People](#) in 2019, a report that set the business agenda for planetary health action.

This UN Global Compact action-oriented narrative synthesizes the key insights gathered through a series of webinars organized in 2020 on the climate-nature-health nexus, in the framework of the Business Ambition for Climate and Health Action Platform. Reminding the business case for taking integrated climate and health action, it provides guidance on how companies can deliver climate and health co-benefits by pointing towards relevant action-oriented initiatives. It focuses on the five areas that were addressed by the webinar series: air pollution, nature and biodiversity, food systems, water resilience, and the future of work and just transition.

The UN Global Compact thanks its Action Platform participant companies for their engagement and inputs. The list includes Accenture, Acciona, AstraZeneca, BASF, Bayer AG, Biogen, Braskem, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Charoen Pokphand Group, Sinopec, Cigna Corporation, Colgate Palmolive Company, Danone, Ecolab Inc., Enel, Essity Aktiebolag, Global Green Chemicals, Global Impact Initiative, Iberdrola, Impossible Foods, Jayco Interface Technology, LEO Pharma, Nestlé, Novozymes, Ørsted, PJSC PhosAgro, PTT Global Chemical Public Company Limited, ROCKWOOL International A/S, Safaricom, Schneider Electric, Sumitomo Chemical, Unilever and Walgreens Boots Alliance. The UN Global Compact also extends its thanks to the World Health Organization, BSR, Duke University, and UN Environment Programme for their expertise and review.



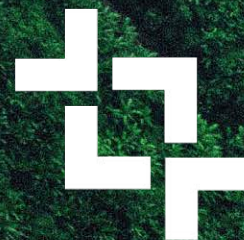
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