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ROUNDTABLE ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC HEALTH: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

FINAL REPORT

Climate Change and Health

1. For several years, PAHO's Directing Council has included a roundtable as an agenda item related to a given year's World Health Day (WHD) theme. WHD is celebrated annually on April 7, which marks the founding of the World Health Organization (WHO) and serves as an opportunity to draw worldwide attention to a subject of major importance to global health. "Protecting Health from Climate Change" was selected as the 2008 WHD theme and a roundtable on the topic was held during the 48th Directing Council in September 2008.

2. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate change as "change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods."¹ The United Nations (UN) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have devoted considerable time to analyzing the issue of climate change and have concluded that the effects of rising temperature on some aspects of human health are already being observed; that the net global effect of projected climate change on human health is expected to be negative, especially in developing countries, small island developing States, and vulnerable local communities which have the least capacity to prepare for and adapt to such change, and that exposure to projected climate change could affect the health status of millions of people, through increases in malnutrition, death, disease, and injury due to extreme weather events, in the burden of diarrheal disease, in the frequency

¹ Article 1, paragraph 2 of the Convention, UN, 1992.

of cardio-respiratory diseases, and through changes in the distribution of some infectious disease vectors.

3. In the Region of the Americas, major areas of concern relate to an increase in extreme weather events, subsequent changes in food supply and nutritional security, as well as changes in water supply, in the range and distribution of vector-borne diseases, and in rising sea levels. The impacts of climate change on cities will become increasingly important, and in some countries will be made worse as a result of rapid and poorly planned urbanization.

4. In light of the strong, global scientific consensus that warming of the climate system is unequivocal and is affecting human health, the World Health Assembly in 2008 adopted a resolution (WHA61.19) requesting, inter alia, the Director General " to consult Member States on the preparation of a workplan for scaling up WHO's technical support to Member States for assessing and addressing the implications of climate change for health and health systems, including practical tools and methodologies and mechanisms for facilitating exchange of information and best practice and coordination between Member States, and to present a draft workplan to the Executive Board at its 124th session."

5. The Pan American Health Organization is in the process of developing a plan of action, which is based on a Regional Workshop on Climate Change and its Effects on Health in the Americas, held in Brazil from 9 to 11 April 2008, a series of country consultations, and regional country profiles prepared during March 2008. The objective of the White Paper on Climate Change and Public Health is to present the *evidence* that climate change is a phenomenon that is increasingly affecting human health and to describe a set of *actions* that are needed in order to protect people from current and expected climate related health impacts.

6. The goals of the proposed plan would seek to empower, equip, and strengthen the capacity of health systems locally and nationally to protect human health from risks related to climate change, ensuring that concerns about public health security are placed at the center of the response to climate change. It should support the development and implementation of adaptation strategies at local, national, and regional levels to minimize the health impacts of climate change, and encourage the adoption of energy measures to mitigate climate change and avoid further and potentially disastrous impacts on health.

7. The strategic objectives to be achieved can be summarized as Evidence, Sensitization, Resources, Adaptation, and Partnerships. There are numerous actions needed to facilitate the achievement of these objectives, most of which need to be carried out with the participation of other sectors.

8. PAHO and WHO are closely collaborating on the topic of climate change in the Americas and worldwide, in an effort to increase awareness of its health consequences, assess country-specific risks, strengthen health systems to ensure adequate protection from climate-related risks, and enhance the inclusion of a public health perspective on climate change decision-making in other sectors.
9. The most relevant themes analyzed during the three discussion groups of the roundtable are presented in the following points:
 - (a) Most of the countries of the Region participated in group discussions. There was consensus among these countries that climate change is already causing health impacts. This makes the proposed Regional Plan of Action relevant and timely for the Member States.
 - (b) Moral and ethical questions were raised related to the causes of climate change, where the largest effects are being seen, and compensation for the impacts. Issues of environmental justice and human rights mean that mitigation and adaptation actions need to be undertaken.
 - (c) The development and economic models followed by some of the countries of the Region are unsustainable. Lack of planning, deforestation, waste management (including the lack of recycling), and infrastructure development all have impacts on the environment, agriculture, tourism, and health.
 - (d) Current production and consumption patterns, and the reliance on fossil fuels, impact the environment and exacerbate climate change. These are the central causes of the problem. However, because climate change is a long-term phenomena, countries need to take actions to minimize the problem and allocate necessary resources. The proposed Plan of Action addresses these concerns.
 - (e) The proposal of a Regional Observatory on climate change and health was supported. Further research, including vulnerability assessments, should be conducted where this information currently does not exist. It was emphasized that this observatory should include not only health information but also data from other related sectors in order to make comprehensive assessments and promote preventive action.
 - (f) Education and information programs, targeted to different groups, should focus on raising public awareness and the actions which individuals should take to minimize their impacts on the environment and on how they can protect themselves from climate change.

- (g) Green ecological strategies need to be implemented at every level.
- (h) PAHO needs to work with countries in the identification and mobilization of resources for action on climate change and health. The creation of a regional fund was suggested.
- (i) The proposed Regional Plan of Action is very comprehensive in its lists of actions, and these need to be translated into national plans of actions focused on individual country priorities and local needs using the national profiles on climate change and health. The proposal to establish focal points on climate change within the ministry of health was supported. The tools mentioned in the proposed Plan of Action are still under development.
- (j) Alignment and integrated cooperation within the national ministries and also within the areas and programs of PAHO is needed for a comprehensive response to the proposed Plan of Action.
- (k) It is suggested that indicators be developed for evaluating the achievement of the goal of the proposed Plan of Action.
- (l) Partnerships need to be expanded and supplemented to share the existing expertise and experiences of countries. Skills that are currently lacking can also be developed through such partnerships.
- (m) Current population movements spread diseases into areas now susceptible to their transmission. Large-scale population movements can also be a result of climate change.
- (n) Although National Plans of Actions need to be developed, there are aspects of the proposed Regional Plan of Action that can be put into implementation immediately.