

Beyond COVID-19: Toward healthy people, a healthy planet, justice, and equity

A statement by the Health Care Without Harm Global Network



As the world responds to COVID-19 and the intertwined social, political, and economic crises it has spawned, we find ourselves at a crossroads. One path takes us back in the direction we came, propping up old structures and systems that have led to this crisis in the first place. The other leads in the direction of an unprecedented set of opportunities and the urgent need to forge a just transition to equitable, resilient societies that provide decent work for all, universal health care, and contribute to a healthy climate.

For our civilization to survive and thrive, we must choose this second path and change systems that place profit over ecological sustainability, health, and wellbeing. We must build structures that benefit all people, especially the vulnerable and the poor. As part of this effort, we must recognize and address the political, social, and economic factors that govern how health or illnesses move through our communities. As many around the world rise up against systemic racism and discrimination, we must also forge a broad, interconnected agenda for change that fosters health equity, ecological sustainability, and social justice.

As part of this vision, the Health Care Without Harm network - our offices and partner organizations around the world - supports the [WHO Manifesto for a Healthy Recovery](#) and its prescriptions for a healthy, green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe it is essential to build a

global movement for health and environment that contributes to, and becomes part of, the broader social movements for structural change necessary at this critical juncture. We see many hopeful signs of this movement emerging all around the world, taking initiative to forge positive social and environmental change locally, nationally, and globally. This statement is, in many ways, a reflection of that emergent movement, the key issues we believe it must tackle, and the fundamental actions it is already beginning to support.

Health care leadership is essential

Health care leadership, health systems preparedness, and investment in systems change through a [Health in All Policies](#) approach can help reduce the prevalence of both pandemics and environmental harm, mitigate their negative impacts, and, in collaboration with other sectors of society, forge a more equal world.

Health in All Policies

The response to pandemics such as COVID-19 in every geography, sector, and level of government should be critically evaluated with the lens of Health in All Policies, characterized by WHO as “an approach to public policies across sectors that systematically takes into account the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful health impacts in order to improve population health and health equity.”

Action: As the world reels in reaction to unprecedented economic and social disruptions caused by COVID-19, we must speak up during recovery planning for a Health in All Policies approach that prioritizes

the health and well-being of people and communities, not toxic industries like fossil fuels that harm the public and the planet.

Health professionals: Messengers of change

While health care professionals have always been among society's most trusted spokespeople, the vacuum of political leadership in many countries combined with the denial of science, the prioritization of premature economic recovery over human health, and the deluge of misinformation around COVID-19 make the role of trusted health messenger more important than ever.

Action: By speaking out to patients, colleagues, the media, and policy makers at all levels on the connections between COVID-19, climate change, environmental health and justice, health professionals can help lead the way toward a better, healthier world.

Low-carbon, climate-resilient, pandemic-prepared health care

Health care can also lead by directly addressing climate change, as well as its own shortcomings, including inequality in its own operations.

Action: By preparing for both the impacts of climate change and the next pandemic, health care systems can lead in developing resilient infrastructure. By decarbonizing their own facilities and supply chain, they can reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and make important contributions to a healthy climate. By investing in local solutions like an energy efficient, climate friendly cold-chain for vaccine delivery; microgrids that run on clean, renewable energy; sustainable and healthy food production, together with a series of preventative health protection and promotion measures; health care can help foster community health and resilience to future disasters.

Systems change is critical

We need to avoid siloed approaches to recovery and forge systems change by advocating and organizing for a regenerative global economy based on sustainable production and consumption, and a fair society based on human rights,

community resilience, disease prevention, and planetary health.

Health equity, climate justice, and secure work

If we are to have healthy people living on a healthy planet, the world's economic systems and policy frameworks need to transform to be based on principles of equity and justice that secure public health, generate robust employment, and tackle the climate crisis.

A new model must emerge from this crisis that protects people's health, the climate, and ecological resources - the forests, the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the soil we cultivate. This model must strive to foster sustainable production and consumption, to be equitable and just, meeting all people's basic needs, leaving no one behind. It must address the connection between racism, as well as all other forms of discrimination, including gender inequality, and environmental harm. It must provide redress to those historically and disproportionately impacted.

It is in this context that we can bring those working for health equity, those advocating for climate justice and those striving for secure work together to work hand in hand for disease prevention, economic security, and climate mitigation.

Action: We must advocate to policymakers to foster health and economic security in the short-, medium-, and long-term by investing in measures to establish a regenerative, rather than an exploitative, economy in the post-pandemic world. This regenerative economy should value and prioritize rights for workers and families and tackle systemic inequity and injustice. We must encourage building green economies by establishing a pipeline of projects that create secure, healthy, sustainable jobs and lead to a cleaner, healthier, safer, more just world.

Health systems strengthening and ensuring access to health care for all

Health systems in most countries were unprepared for the coronavirus. Most are also unprepared for other disasters such as those caused or exacerbated by climate change. Health workers

are on the front lines, often without the necessary protective equipment, and often underpaid. The coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated the importance of investing in Universal Health Coverage and health systems strengthening at all levels of government. Health care reform that moves away from a privatized health model and generates significant future investment in strengthening public health systems is necessary in many countries.

Action: The capacity of health authorities from local public health departments, to national ministries of health, to international organizations such as the World Health Organization should be bolstered. Health systems strengthening should focus on community engagement and participation, including building collaboration between hospitals and community based organizations. It should focus on supporting health workers, while providing access to health care for all and achieving Universal Health Coverage. Investment in robust disease surveillance and information systems is also essential. We must build health systems that can withstand both pandemics and climate disasters, making health facilities anchors for community resilience.

Clean, renewable energy and sustainable transportation

Air pollution has deepened the morbidity and mortality from past coronaviruses like SARS by compromising respiratory health. It is likely making the impact of COVID-19 worse than it otherwise would be. This pandemic provides yet another important argument for all countries to transition from a reliance on burning coal, oil and gas for energy and transportation – a reliance that is driving the climate and air pollution crises - and embrace solar, wind, and other renewables, along with clean, sustainable transportation solutions. Recently, for instance, the World Federation of Public Health Associations [issued a call to ban the use of coal for electricity production](#).

At the same time, the fossil fuel and chemical industries are using the economic crisis created and exacerbated by the pandemic to advocate for deregulation of their polluting model that is

harmful to human health and the environment. Such rollbacks will only have the effects of accelerating the crises of climate and global health, more severely impacting the most marginalized communities around the world: Those who are least responsible for the global climate crisis and the deterioration of planetary health, and those who suffer its impacts most severely.

Action: As governments prepare trillions of dollars in economic stimulus investments to respond to the severe economic fallout of this pandemic, we must oppose efforts by the fossil fuel and other polluting industries to roll back environmental controls and capture these resources. Instead, we must work to save lives and livelihoods in the future while ensuring global ecological stability by investing in a rapid and thorough transition to clean, renewable energy, and sustainable transport systems based on principles of equity and justice.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

Two billion people rely on health care facilities that lack basic water services, and 1.5 billion people rely on facilities without sanitation facilities. Meanwhile about half the world's population is exposed to the negative health impacts of medical waste. This leaves much of the world's population extremely vulnerable to infectious disease, including pandemics, and the spread of disease in the wake of extreme weather events.

Action: Significant investment in WASH - including basic infrastructure for safe and hygienic sanitation, running water in health facilities, and sustainable health care waste management (while protecting health care waste workers) can build both pandemic and climate resilience.

Forest and ecosystem conservation and sustainable agriculture

In 2018, the UN Convention for Biological Diversity Executive Secretary, Cristiana Paşca Palmer, warned that the loss of biodiversity is a silent killer as dangerous as climate change and the world has to protect nature or we could face our own extinction. Deforestation for logging, industrial agricultural expansion and mining is a leading

driver of biodiversity loss, climate change, and new disease emergence in humans. The world's forests are also an important source of genetic resources for medicine. The global food system, from fertilizer manufacture, to food storage and packaging, is responsible for roughly one-third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. Transformation of our food and land-use systems is imperative.

Action: Regulate the public health, environmental, and social impacts of the current extractive model of food production. Redirect public funds away from industrial agriculture, to rural communities and regenerative agroecology. Ecosystem-based approaches and transformative changes in land and agriculture sectors are, in addition to encouraging innovative land-use models that promote carbon sinks, crucial to build resilience, reduce carbon emissions, and limit the risk of future pandemics. Key actions must also include strengthening indigenous and

community land rights, as well as restoring forests, peatlands, grasslands, and other ecosystems.

Our commitment

In these unprecedented times where global climate change, a devastating pandemic, and severe economic disruption have converged, Health Care Without Harm's global network - our offices and country partners around the world - reaffirm our collective vision to create an ecologically sustainable, equitable, and healthy world.

We are committed to working with our health care colleagues to mobilize our sector's ethical, economic, and political influence to realize this vision. We are committed to nurturing positive change that is sprouting forth everywhere in this time of crisis from the ground up and from the top down. We are committed to work in collaboration with other parts of society to foster a world where healthy people are living on a healthy planet, embracing principles of justice and equity.



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The Health Care Without Harm Global Network

The Health Care Without Harm Global Network is composed of regional offices in Europe, South East Asia, and the United States / Canada; a Latin America regional team; strategic partner organizations in Australia, Brazil, China, India, Nepal, and South Africa; and a global secretariat. Health Care Without Harm and its partners also lead Global Green and Healthy Hospitals, a worldwide network of hospitals and health systems with more than 1,300 members in 72 countries.

Australia: Climate and Health Alliance of Australia | **Brazil:** Projeto Hospitais Saudáveis | **China:** Rock Environment and Energy Institute | **Europe:** Health Care Without Harm Europe | **India:** Center for Chronic Disease Control, Healthy Energy Initiative India, Lung Care Foundation India | **Latin America:** Salud sin Daño en América Latina | **Nepal:** Health Environment and Climate Action Foundation (HECAF 360) | **South Africa:** groundWork | **South East Asia:** Health Care Without Harm South East Asia | **United States and Canada:** Health Care Without Harm U.S. and Canada