Addressing global health crises through environmental interventions

As an Australian living on Indigenous Lands, it is first appropriate that I acknowledge the Ku-rin-gai and Darug Nations, whose lands I am currently situated. I recognise their enduring connection to the lands, waters and skies of Country, the leadership and wisdom of their Elders past and present, and the ongoing importance of centring Indigenous voices in environmental and health policies.

I am a young person from Australia. I was born in 1998 to a planet that had already experienced 0.7°C of global warming. Today, we draw ever closer to irreversible global tipping points at 0.85°C of warming.¹ I was raised during the Millennium Drought and became an adult during the 2019-2020 Black Summer Bushfires – which raged across my country, burning the environment and choking our lungs.

But I am not the only child or young person impacted by climate change and environmental degradation in the Asia-Pacific. In 2011, UNICEF studied the impacts of climate change on children, concluding that climate change would exacerbate the ‘main killers of children’ in our region, notably, extreme weather events, disease and thermal stress, water and food scarcity and forced displacement.²

In an era of climate and biodiversity crisis, it has never been more important to recognise our fundamental reliance on nature and our deep connections to ecosystems and non-human beings.³ Today I will therefore be discussing how we can address global health crises through environmental interventions. I will first discuss the environment-health nexus, generally and in our region, and, then how we can chart a bold vision for protecting our health through environmental interventions.

² Jill Lawler et al, Children’s Vulnerabilities to Climate Change and Disaster Impacts in East Asia and the Pacific (Report, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2011) 1.
The Environment-Health Nexus

We are ecologically embedded beings, we are a part of our environment and rely upon that environment for healthy and sustainable food, breathable air and clean water. We benefit from healthy ecosystems that are resilient against natural disasters and we are responsible for protecting and ensuring the thriving of non-human beings.4

We are both the beneficiaries, and guardians, of nature.

And just as we thrive when our environment thrives, we are at risk when our environment is at risk. A range of health concerns arise from, or are worsened by, environmental factors such as pollution and poor air and water quality.5 Marginalised and vulnerable populations are also more exposed to these environmental factors and disproportionately bear the subsequent health burden.

This is the environment-health nexus.

The Environment-Health Nexus in the Asia-Pacific

And that nexus is currently strained, with severe consequences for communities across the Asia-Pacific.

In relation to climate change, the Global Climate Risk Index 2021 has categorised the Asia-Pacific as the most disaster-prone region in the world.6 The Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change states that coastal areas, notably heavily-populated regions near mega deltas in Asia, will be at ‘greatest risk’ due to increased flooding from the ocean and rivers.7 This will increase mortality and injury from natural disasters and disrupt health systems across the region. A warmer globe contributes to the spread of vector-borne and diarrhoeal illnesses, risking the important progress that the Asia-Pacific has made in reducing the mortality from such diseases in recent decades.8

---

6 See David Eckstein, Vera Kunzel and Laura Schafer, Global Climate Risk Index 2021 (Briefing Paper, GermanWatch, January 2021) 15.
Climate change also increases the risk of forced displacement and migration across the Asia-Pacific. The World Bank estimates that there will be 40 million climate migrants seeking safety in South-East Asia alone by 2050.\(^9\) Across a range of axes, climate change ‘endangers the underlying determinants of health at every level’ threatening our human rights to health, and ultimately, to live in dignity.\(^10\)

Biodiversity loss represents another environmental factor that is degrading our health. The WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity outline, in their 2015 report on biodiversity and human health, how biodiversity underpins ecosystem functioning and services that are essential to our health, including food systems and non-toxic environments in which to live.\(^11\) But biodiversity decline risks these ecosystems, and as such, the biodiversity crisis is a human rights crisis. Degraded natural habitats threaten our right to health by increasing the risk of zoonotic diseases and without resilient ecosystems, our homes and community life are imperilled by more severe natural disasters.\(^12\)

As noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment:

> …[H]umanity faces a daunting and unprecedented global environmental crisis of its own making…There is much, much more work to be done to transform today’s unjust and unsustainable society into an ecological civilization where human rights are universally respected, protected and fulfilled.\(^13\)

The health of our environment is our health. The vitality of our ecosystems are the systems that sustain our children and the next generation. We must take urgent action.

---


\(^10\) Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Analytical study on the relationship between climate change and the human right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health*, HRC, 32\(^{nd}\) sess, Agenda Items 2 and 3, UN Doc A/HRC/32/23 (6 May 2016) [8].


\(^12\) See Dirk S Schmeller, Franck Courchamp and Gerry Killeen, 'Biodiversity loss, emerging pathogens and human health risks' (2020) 29 *Biodiversity and Conservation* 3095.

A Bold Vision for Protecting Our Health Through Our Environment

We need a bold vision for protecting our health through our environment, a vision that emphasises a rights-based approach to environmental interventions and policy that address climate change, biodiversity loss and unsustainable and insecure food systems across the Asia-Pacific.14

On 29 July 2022 the UN General Assembly recognised the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and further, that a healthy environment is vital to the promotion of other human rights, including the right to health.15 A similar resolution was promulgated by ESCAP in 2022, recognising the importance of a rights-based approach as part of One Health.

Such resolutions build upon the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which all recognise the fundamental role a safe environment plays in upholding our human right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.16

Across the Asia-Pacific, many countries have already enshrined the human right to a healthy environment in law. For example, the Philippines protects the rights of its people to a ‘balanced and healthful ecology’ in art II, s 16 of its Constitution,17 and Fiji constitutionally enshrines the right of ‘every person’ to ‘a clean and healthy environment’.18

The human right to a healthy environment is multi-faceted, with both procedural and substantive dimensions.19 The procedural dimensions of the right, such as ensuring public involvement in environmental decision-making and access to justice, allow people to enforce their human rights. The substantive dimensions of the right are what communities are seeking to protect, including freedom from toxic environments and a safe climate. Both components

---

15 The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, GA Res 76/300, UN GAOR, 76th sess, Agenda Item 74(b), Supp No 49, UN Doc A/RES/ (24 July 2022).
16 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Analytical study on the relationship between climate change and the human right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, HRC, 32nd sess, Agenda Items 2 and 3, UN Doc A/HRC/32/23 (6 May 2016) [46].
17 The Constitution of the Republic of Philippines, art II, s 16.
18 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji s 40(1).
are essential. The substantive elements serve as a vision for the healthy environment that we all need to flourish, whilst the procedural elements create a pathway for us to move towards that vision.\textsuperscript{20}

A rights-based approach to health and environmental policy requires the integration of human rights outcomes into those policies, accountability mechanisms and express consideration of population inequalities and vulnerabilities that impact upon a person’s human rights.\textsuperscript{21} This means express consideration of how a policy contributes to the achievement of the procedural and substantive dimensions of the human right to a healthy environment.

This dialogue, and the integration of the One Health approach into regional policy-making, is an important mechanism for prioritising a rights-based approach to environmental interventions, and therefore, to achieving the human right to a healthy environment in practice. This can be done by developing policies that allow the public to access environmental information that affects their health, such as air and water quality data, and by further establishing ways for the community to be meaningfully involved in environmental policies that impact upon human health, including vulnerable groups.\textsuperscript{22}

In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and the Environment outlined framework principles to realise the right to a healthy environment. In particular, principle 11, provides that:

\begin{quote}
    States should establish and maintain substantive environmental standards that are non-discriminatory, non-retrogressive and otherwise respect, protect and fulfil human rights.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Such environmental policies should take into account relevant health standards, and are a critical means by which Asia-Pacific States can fulfil the substantive dimensions of the human right to a healthy environment, strengthening the connections between environmental and health systems for the benefit of us all.


\textsuperscript{21} Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, \textit{Analytical study on the relationship between climate change and the human right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health}, HRC, 32\textsuperscript{nd} sess, Agenda Items 2 and 3, UN Doc A/HRC/32/23 (6 May 2016) [46]-[52].

\textsuperscript{22} UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, \textit{Right to a Healthy Environment: Good Practices}, UN GAOR, 43rd sess, 53\textsuperscript{rd} mtg, Agenda Item 3, UN Doc A/HRC/43/53 (30 December 2019) [14]-[37].

Conclusion

At their most extreme, the climate and biodiversity crises, kill. Our health is inextricably linked to the health of our broader environment, and we must ensure environmental actions taken by stakeholders across the Asia-Pacific recognise the environment-health nexus, and further, that such environmental interventions not only work towards protecting our health, but the full realisation of our human rights.

In 2002, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution *A world fit for children*, in which the international community affirmed ten principles and objectives including to ‘protect the Earth for children’.[24] This policy dialogue is a *critical* opportunity to work towards the fulfilment of that commitment.

Because addressing health crises through environmental interventions is fundamentally about building resilient, sustainable and productive communities whose rights to live in dignity are flourishing rather than threatened.

---