

Integrating Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management to Protect Health and Build Resilience in Pacific Islands:

Aspen Global Change Institute Workshop

Background:

Climate change is affecting the Pacific Islands and their populations through rising temperatures, changing precipitation, sea level rise, and a growing number of extreme weather and climate events. Pacific Island countries are globally ranked among the most vulnerable to climate change. Entire populations can be affected when cyclones, storm surges, floods, droughts, and other extreme events hit a small island. Larger events can have long-lasting adverse consequences for recovery and overall development, presenting a threat to achieving development goals, such as poverty eradication and access to clean water and sanitation. There is a need to build resilient communities and health systems in the Pacific Islands that are able to prepare for and manage the risks of climate change in the context of limited resources, the inherent isolation of islands, and demographic and socioeconomic challenges.

Assessments of the vulnerabilities and adaptation priorities in 13 Pacific island countries (Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) concluded that the highest priority climate-sensitive health risks include trauma from extreme weather events, heat-related illnesses, compromised safety and security of water and food, insect-borne diseases, respiratory illnesses, psychosocial ill-health, noncommunicable diseases, population pressures, and health system deficiencies. The assessments concluded that adaptation is urgently needed to prepare for and manage the current and projected health risks of climate change.

Workshop goals

Health leaders and climate change experts participated in a workshop hosted by the Aspen Global Change Institute at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, May 20-25 2018. The goal of the workshop was to further the integration of adaptation to climate change with disaster risk management, focusing on the intersection of extreme weather and climate events with population health and health systems. Despite sharing common goals, efforts to promote climate change adaptation are often conducted independently of efforts to promote disaster risk management and sustainable development. The workshop took a holistic approach to promoting population health and health system resilience in a changing climate. Additionally, the workshop brought together experts on climate variability and change, population health, social science, epidemiology, disaster risk management, and communication to encourage multidisciplinary exchanges and building professional and institutional coordination and collaboration.

Workshop Leaders

- Kristie L. Ebi – Director, University of Washington Center for Health and the Global Environment, Seattle WA
- Nancy Lewis – Adjunct Senior Fellow, East-West Center, Honolulu HI
- Henry Diaz – Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Hawaii – Manoa, Honolulu, HI

Recurring Themes in the Workshop:

- Pacific Islanders are resilient; they are warriors
 - Pacific Islanders are facing multiple risks from climate change; they also have demonstrated resiliency from creatively coping with challenges for hundreds/thousands of years
 - There is country-level expertise and experience that can inform assessments of the health risks of climate change and implementation of policies and measures to manage risks
- Importance of using systems-based approaches for understanding and managing risks
 - There are different types of knowledge, including traditional knowledge, which can be utilized

- Diversity across the Pacific means that assessments need to be context-specific
- Focus on factors that promote successful adaptation and disaster risk management
 - Expansive geographies have implications for effective implementation
 - Link regional and national activities
 - Share lessons identified and best practices

Discussion Group Outcomes:

El Niño Experiment

There is a need for early warning systems combining health and climate information on monthly to seasonal timescales to reduce climate-related health risks. Implementing these systems requires skillful forecasts based on monthly outlooks that combine climate predictions and associated health risks; quantification of weather and health associations, including thresholds for action; and building local capacity and awareness to effectively use early warnings to prevent adverse health outcomes. The next steps are to finalize a framework for building a regional network based on national engagement by meteorologists and health professionals; formulate forecast products and models; develop risk communication packages; conduct training; and identify evaluation metrics.

Implementation Science and Monitoring and Evaluation

There are many adaptation-related projects planned or underway in the region. In addition, there is a need for evaluation, both near and long-term, to measure the process and benefits of adaptation and progress in building resilience, along with ethical guidelines to ensure that monitoring and evaluation meets country needs and that countries maintain ownership of their data. Potential barriers to moving forward include reporting overload, limited human resources, governmental and administrative bureaucracies, lack of an adequate baseline against which to measure progress, and lack of longer-term follow-up after projects are completed. The next steps are to develop mechanisms for capturing and sharing information, develop practical guidance documents, create an ethical review board, promote communities of practice, identify a set of indicators to track longer-term progress, and training and capacity building.

Funding: Mechanisms, Processes, and Opportunities

A major challenge is the low level of funding for climate change and health research and implementation, with even less funding for technical consultations to build national and local expertise. This means a lack of funding for projects, capacity building, education and training, and for community engagement in the process of adaptation. Discussions focused on engaging with a wide range of potential funders, including the private sector, and on creating an alliance, such as a ClimHealth Pacific group (similar to ClimHealth Africa), as a platform for sharing experience and knowledge.

Building Climate and Disaster Resilient Health Systems in the Pacific Islands

In the Pacific Islands, actions are required in workforce development; service delivery; governance, policy, and planning; and information systems to increase health resilience to a changing climate. Building regional collaborations would facilitate achieving the recommendations in the World Health Organization Operational Framework for Building Climate-Resilient Health Systems.

Conclusions

The North-South partnerships built will inform efforts to integrate adaptation and disaster risk management nationally and regionally, as well as support efforts to increase the resilience of Pacific Islands in a changing environment.