

Opening of the high-level segment of the Sixth Session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, high-level session: “Effective, inclusive and sustainable multilateral actions to tackle climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution

Nairobi, Kenya

29 February 2024

Your Excellency President William Ruto,

Excellencies Heads of State and Government,

Honourable Minister Leila Benali, President of the UN Environment Assembly,

My sister Inger Andersen,

Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

Good morning, it’s an honour to be here, and I thank Inger and UNEP for the invitation to address you today.

The health of humans, animals and our environment are woven together in a bond that is inextricable, yet fragile.

This is not a new realisation.

The father of medicine, Hippocrates, said, “The physician treats, but nature heals.”

We are now re-learning what humans have always known, but which, since the industrial revolution, we have forgotten or ignored – that when we harm our environment, we harm ourselves.

For centuries we have plundered our planet in the name of progress.

Now we are paying the price, with a triple planetary crisis: climate, change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

If our planet were a patient, it would be admitted to intensive care. Its vital signs are alarming.

It is running a fever, with each of the last nine months the hottest on record, as we hurtle towards the 1.5 degree threshold.

Its lung capacity is compromised, with the destruction of forests that absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen.

And many of the earth's water sources – its lifeblood – are contaminated.

Most concerning of all, its condition is deteriorating rapidly.

Is it any wonder, then, that human health is suffering, when the health of the planet on which we depend is in peril?

More frequent and severe weather events cause deaths and injuries, and damage to health facilities and other essential infrastructure.

More heatwaves contribute to more cardiovascular disease;

Air pollution drives lung cancer, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease;

Chemicals such as lead cause intellectual disability, cardiovascular and kidney disease;

And drought and water scarcity affect food production, making healthy diets less affordable.

Meanwhile, climate change is leading to shifts in the behaviour, distribution, movement, range, and intensity of mosquitoes, birds and other animals that are spreading infectious diseases such as dengue and malaria to new areas.

Illegal wildlife trading also increases the risk of zoonotic spillover that can trigger a pandemic, highlighting the importance of primary prevention to reduce risk.

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The threats to health from climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss are not hypothetical risks in the future. They are right here and right now, which makes health the most compelling reason for climate action.

And yet COP28 in Dubai last year was the first COP to include a day dedicated to health.

The causes of this crisis are multisectoral. So too are its impacts, and so too must be our response.

Collectively, we got ourselves into this mess. Collectively, we must get ourselves out of it.

No single country, and no single agency can do this alone.

That's why the work of the quadripartite is so important.

Together, we recently launched the Implementation Guide of the One Health Joint Plan of Action, to support countries to design, implement and operationalise a One Health approach.

One Health is one of the important issues that WHO Member States are now discussing as part of their negotiation of the new pandemic agreement, ahead of the World Health Assembly in just 12 weeks' time.

I urge you all to voice your support for the agreement.

Your work this week will have a direct bearing on the realisation of a One Health approach.

I welcome the six areas the Executive Director has outlined in her report in which countries can take more effective, inclusive and sustainable multilateral action.

In particular, the resolutions on air quality and chemicals, waste and preventing pollution are important for driving sustained, multisectoral action to protect the health of people and planet.

We would also like to see health reflected strongly in the new agreement on ending plastic pollution.

In these and many other areas, WHO remains committed to supporting all countries with evidence-based technical tools, including our air quality guidelines, the Global Framework on Chemicals, and the WHO Chemicals Roadmap.

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Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

The patient is in peril. Band-Aid solutions will not do. We need transformative action.

We must transform our energy and transport systems, our food systems, our health systems, and we must transform ourselves, to break out of our siloed mindsets and work for effective, inclusive and sustainable multilateral action.

We have no other choice.

For everything that makes us different, we are one species, sharing the same DNA, and the same planet. We have no future but a common future.

I thank you.

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