Climate change is the greatest health threat of the 21st century, according to a recent report. It stands to threaten the health of people across the globe, with the world’s poorest suffering the severest consequences, even though they have contributed least to the problem.

The report calls for an immediate and urgent response involving all sectors of society. Governments, international agencies, non-governmental organisations, communities and academics need to work together to develop and implement health strategies adapted to the effects of climate change. These efforts should be implemented alongside mitigation strategies to reduce GHG emissions. Public health systems should be strengthened to deal with the consequences of climate change, particularly in vulnerable countries.

The report suggests there are six major threats to health from climate change:

- **Disease.** Patterns of infection, insect and rodent-borne diseases and mortality will be affected by changing weather, not only in developing countries which already have populations with poor health, but also in developed countries. For example, heat waves were estimated to have killed up to 70,000 people in Europe in 2003.
- **Food.** Climate change affects health by causing changes in diet, leading to malnutrition and hunger from greater food insecurity, particularly in poorer areas.
- **Water and sanitation.** Clean water, suitable sanitation and drainage will be threatened. Increased droughts will cause water shortages and floods will increase the occurrence of water-borne diseases, such as diarrhoea.
- **Shelter and settlements.** People living in urban slums and poor conditions will be especially vulnerable.
- **Extreme events.** More and stronger cyclones, hurricanes and storm surges will cause flooding and injury.
- **Population and migration.** Migration is likely to occur on a large scale as people flee from inhospitable conditions.

Five key challenges have been identified for policy makers, scientists and health care professionals to prevent the catastrophic health consequences of climate change:

- A need to generate and disseminate more reliable, relevant and up-to-date information at global, national and local levels, on how to tackle the harmful health effects of climate change, particularly in developing countries.
- The harshest effects of climate change will be felt most by the poor. Inadequate health care systems in vulnerable and under-resourced countries must be strengthened and greater efforts must be made to address poverty and inequality.
- Many technological innovations need to be encouraged to address the impact of climate change on health. More funding is needed for climate science and related technological solutions, such as for food security, safe water supply and better buildings. Surveillance must be improved in the poorest countries and technological solutions need to be integrated across a wide range of social and cultural groups throughout the world.
- Political structures must be in place to encourage a switch to low carbon living, which will not only have global health benefits (less stress, obesity, diabetes and heart disease, better air quality) but would also ensure a more sustainable way of life which is fairer for all.
- As a priority, governments and international institutions should be better coordinated and more accountable for dealing with climate change.

Empowering poor countries, local governments and communities to understand and act on climate change is one of the most urgent steps to take.