

Address by Ms Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly

Your Excellency, President of the World Health Assembly, my very good friend the Director-General Dr Margaret Chan, ministers, ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

First let me truly thank Margaret Chan and all of you for the kind invitation to join you here today at your Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly. May I also thank WHO for its leadership in the awareness campaign you organized, where there were a most impressive 1700 health organizations, 8000 hospitals and 13 million – may I say that again, 13 million – health professionals making their voice heard prior to the Paris Agreement and expressing their support for such an ambitious agreement. Thank you so very much to the health community of the world.

So with your help and the help of the health community here today, what did we accomplish in Paris? Was the work worth it? Was it what we expected? Well, may I tell you that the Paris Agreement broke every single record of the United Nations and every record, in fact, of multilateral negotiations in the history of our institution.

We had, for the first time ever, 155 Heads of State under one roof on one day on one topic – never achieved before, not even at the United Nations General Assembly, when so many Heads of State come over several days.

We had, at the end, 195 Governments unanimously agree – when was the last time anyone agreed anything unanimously in the multilateral process? There were 195 countries that unanimously agreed to intentionally change the course of the economic development of this world in order to protect the most vulnerable.

We have now 177 signatures to the Paris Agreement – 175 on opening day for signatories alone – and we have already 17 instruments of ratification, meaning that we can reasonably expect the Paris Agreement to enter into force possibly even two years ahead of its originally intended entry, which was for 2020. We think at this rate, the Agreement may actually go into force either next year or by 2018.

Numbers aside, my dear friends, let me say that I think the most important thing that was broken in Paris, other than many records, was the myth that all the world together was able to break. This is the myth that addressing climate change is more expensive than doing nothing.

The risk-reward equation has now been corrected, in particular in the relationship between climate change and health. That link is made explicitly in the preamble of the Paris Agreement.

We know that there are two links between health and climate change. The first is that in addressing climate change, by reducing emissions, we prevent the worsening of health conditions around the world. And the second is that by improving the many different conditions that can be improved through climate measures, such as food security and water safety, we are actually improving health conditions.

Let us look at those two links. To the first link, the prevention of worsening health conditions. You know that unless we do what we need to do on climate change, by the year 2030 the direct damage to health will cost between 2 and 4 billion dollars per year. You know that one sixth of all illnesses and disabilities are currently due to vector-borne diseases and that the number will rise astronomically with climate change if it is not checked. You know, better than anyone else, that the burden is highest in developing countries where the mortality rate for these vector-borne diseases is 300 times that in developed countries.

Now I have a little bit of good news because I know that for most health budgets, 95% or 97% of resources are currently invested in treatment and only 3% in prevention. I argue that working on climate change is your best prevention strategy. The good news is that the funds for this prevention can also come from other sectors of the budget. The resources for this prevention are going to come from transportation, from energy, from cities and from infrastructure budgets. That is how we will address climate change.

The second link that I want to put before you is the fact that we are actively improving health conditions by addressing climate change. Having cleaner air through the reduction of local pollution is very well known to you. Improving and restoring degraded lands for better food security and for water safety is also well known to you, and certainly improves health conditions.

Thus from those two very clear links I draw two conclusions.

The first is that we cannot – particularly in developing countries, and I come from one myself – pursue climate change targets for their own purpose. Developing countries and industrialized, but more particularly developing countries, will pursue their climate targets via sustainability planning linked to what every country wants to accomplish with the Sustainable Development Goals. That is how we are going to achieve the climate targets – by implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Those two things are completely linked. So my first conclusion is: let us very quickly bring down the silo between Sustainable Development Goal 3 and Goal 13, because they are so intimately related, they cannot be separated.

My second conclusion is – and Margaret Chan was the first one who said many, many years ago – that a global climate agreement would be a global agreement on health. It was many years ago, Margaret, but you were the first one to say this. I am here to inform you that we now have a Paris Agreement on climate change, which is actually an agreement on public health. Thank you very much for your leadership on that.

So what do we do? What do we do now that we have the Paris Agreement? We have a legal framework, but that is not the end of it. That was a very difficult process and one the results of which we are all grateful for, but it is still not yet making a difference on the ground. Now we must move

from the vision that the Paris Agreement holds to actually making a difference on the ground. We have to move from the vision to a markedly different reality.

Making this vision a reality requires accomplishing several items on our “to do” list. I know that WHO organized a health and climate conference in 2014 and you launched country profiles that were very helpful to different ministers and to different countries at the same time. I therefore welcome your second global conference on health and climate to be held in July 2016 in Paris.

The fact is, however, that the health community now needs a climate agenda, and I know my Executive Committee is going to look closely at this. You will not be surprised that the Secretariat of WHO and the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have been working very closely together. I warmly endorse three areas that have already been suggested for work.

The first, help us to translate. If you do a survey in almost any country about what is the most urgent issue surrounding climate change, what factor would you guess comes out on top? Health, absolutely by far, so you are in a privileged position. Your microphone is therefore one of the loudest. So please use your microphone. Help us translate why we need to work on climate change – because of the health implications. Please help us mobilize awareness of the link between the health of the planet and the health of those who live on it, because they are one and the same.

You have already quantified the health benefits of reducing short-lived pollutants. You have recently published the statistics for air pollution in 3000 cities worldwide. You will have to strengthen climate resilience of health systems, but this all calls for that translation using your extraordinary “bully pulpit” that you have in the health sector to translate what climate change actually means for people and their own experience. Abstract discussions on the issue do not motivate anybody. Climate change is about how it affects me, how it affects my health, how it affects the health of my children. That is where you can make a huge difference.

The second area that you have already contemplated is to strengthen the evidence base in your country profiles. At this point, 189 countries have presented national climate change plans. Sadly, only 15% of them mention health. That is our homework: 100% of those countries should have national climate change plans that show the very close link with health. And they should be pursuing climate objectives through the urgency of protecting health conditions and improving health conditions.

Thirdly, you have already talked about how you will help to monitor progress. The Framework Convention on Climate Change will be looking at progress because we know the current national climate change plans will not get us to where we need to be. The Paris Agreement, however, is not static. It is a dynamic framework that will evolve and will be under constant improvement over the next few decades.

Every five years, there will be a checkpoint. Every five years countries are going to come together and ask “what we have done?” and determine how much more we have to do. That checkpoint process, which we call a “global stocktake”, should include the positive influence and impact that climate measures have on health. If health is left out of the global stocktake, we are not properly putting human beings at the centre of climate change, which is where they belong.

Finally, could I raise a little voice of alarm? The fact is that if over the next five years we do not fundamentally change what we are doing in the energy sector, in the transportation sector, in the building sector and in all of those sectors that are emitting greenhouse gasses, we are in danger of

reaching the tipping point in the atmosphere that will have a direct negative and profound impact on health around the planet for many, many decades – an impact from which many scientists believe we would not be able to recover.

We have, my dear friends, five years to make an extraordinary difference. This is why, when Margaret called me and said, “Christiana, will you come to the World Health Assembly?”, I said, “Margaret, I have a problem. I am negotiating in Bonn with all of my good friends there.” Ministries of the Environment are right now negotiating how they are going to implement the Paris Agreement. Because of the importance of this issue, because of the urgency and because of the huge impact that the health community can and must make, I said, “Yes, Margaret, I will come.” And I will certainly invite the health community, through you Ministers, to take up the flag and help us with this planetary emergency.

Let me close by thanking you, the health community. From where I stand you are one of the bravest in the climate change community. You are the ones in the forefront. I thank you for everything you have done and I thank you in advance because I know you will do more.

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