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Indicators to monitor policy progress in health adaptation to climate change: do they really do the job?

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There is a need for urgent adaptive action to protect human health against climate change. Overall assessments based on a selection of indicators suggest that we are unable to cope with current climate impacts on health and unprepared to respond to increased pressures on climate-sensitive exposures and outcomes.

The health sector has been addressing climate adaptation to health, through siloed approaches limited to the health system, which reduces their capacity and effectiveness. Successful strategies for addressing climate and environmental degradation challenges to health, and related issues such as environmental health, nutrition or equity, require integrated adaptation approaches among the health systems, social protection systems, water and sanitation systems, urban planning, environmental health and climate services among others. For example, integrated monitoring and surveillance (human-animal-environmental-ecosystems health) is critical for the early identification of emerging risks, diseases or trends, and for resource planning and evaluation of the adaptation and control strategies. In addition, when climate and health indicators are put to use for prevention, and eventually adaptation, they are also frequently used in isolation, disregarding interactions. For example, early warning systems for the prevention of climate-influenced impacts on health, such as Heat Health Action Plans, air pollution warnings or allergenic pollen information systems are usually activated individually commonly fail to address the synergies across various climate-related or climate-aggravated exposures. Since various of those exposures tend to occur concurrently (e.g. heat, anthropogenic air pollution from thermal inversions, and Saharan dust intrusions), failure to integrate them in prevention efforts could affect their effectiveness and reach. Thus, there is a need to carry out an integrative approach for the multiple effects that climate change has on population health.