

Building Climate-Resilient Health Policy in South Asia: A Call for Urgent Action

Md. Salman Sohel*

1. Department of Development Studies, Daffodil International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Corresponding author*

Md. Salman Sohel

Department of Development
Studies, Daffodil International
University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Email: salman.ds@diu.edu.bd

Article info

Received: 6 June 2025

Accepted: 15 July 2025

Published: August 2025

Keywords

Climate Change, Environmental
Health, Health Policy, Health System



Copyright: © by the authors. This
article is an open access article
distributed under the terms and
conditions of the [Creative Commons
Attribution 4.0 \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)
[International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Introduction

South Asia, home to nearly 25% of the global population, is disproportionately vulnerable to climate-related health risks. Rising temperatures, severe floods, prolonged droughts, and tropical cyclones have intensified public health challenges across the region, ranging from heat-related mortality to the spread of vector-borne diseases. By 2030, the World Bank projects that nearly 800 million South Asians will be exposed to life-threatening heat waves annually, while over 20% of the region's population will face extreme flood risks (World Bank, 2025). Despite this growing crisis, national health policies remain fragmented, reactive, and underfunded, often failing to integrate climate adaptation into health system strengthening.

The Policy Imperative

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes embedding climate resilience across six health system building blocks: governance, financing, service delivery, workforce, medical technologies, and health information systems (WHO, 2023). However, implementation in South Asia varies widely:

- In India, the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) integrates environmental sustainability into policy frameworks, but health-specific interventions remain limited and uneven (Government of India, 2024).
- Bangladesh's Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) invests in cyclone shelters, community-based early warning systems, and disaster preparedness, yet continuity of essential health services during extreme weather remains a challenge (Bangladesh Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2023).
- Nepal's National Adaptation Plan (NAP) focuses on localized vulnerability assessments but faces resource constraints in translating plans into practice (Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal, 2023).

These examples demonstrate strong political commitment but reveal critical gaps in financing, governance integration, and climate-informed health planning.

Intersecting Vulnerabilities

Climate change compounds pre-existing social inequities across the region:

- Environmental migrants in Bangladesh's coastal belts have limited access to primary health care facilities.
- Urban heat islands in India and Pakistan disproportionately affect slum populations.
- Women, children, older adults, and informal laborers remain highly vulnerable to heat stress, disease outbreaks, and food insecurity, yet policy frameworks rarely incorporate equity-sensitive adaptation measures (Lancet Countdown, 2023).

Failing to address these vulnerabilities risks widening health disparities, undermining Universal Health Coverage (UHC) targets and Sustainable Development Goal commitments.

A Framework for Action

We propose a four-pillar policy framework to guide climate-resilient health policy in South Asia:

1. Governance Integration

Establish national climate-health coordination units within ministries of health, aligned with WHO's operational framework for climate-resilient health systems (WHO, 2023). These units should centralize planning, financing, and implementation.

2. Climate-Informed Surveillance

Develop real-time health surveillance systems that integrate meteorological data, disease trends, and community risk mapping. Early warning systems can enhance preparedness for heat waves, vector-borne diseases, and flooding events (Ansah et al., 2024).

3. Resilient Infrastructure and Energy Security

Health facilities must be redesigned for climate resilience, including passive cooling designs, decentralized cold-chain systems, and off-grid renewable energy sources. A recent UNICEF study estimated that scaling renewable-powered health facilities in Pakistan could prevent 175,000 avoidable deaths by 2030 (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024).

4. Regional Collaboration

Cross-border challenges—such as floods, droughts, and vector-borne disease transmission—require a South Asian Climate and Health Alliance to coordinate data sharing, pooled financing, and joint adaptation strategies (Asia Society, 2024).

Policy Opportunities

Several regional innovations demonstrate scalable models:

- In Ahmedabad, India, the Heat Action Plan integrates risk communication, cool-roof interventions, and workforce training, reducing heat-related mortality significantly (Knowlton et al., 2023).
- In Pakistan, UNICEF's Renewable Health Facility Program ensures uninterrupted vaccine storage and essential care during extreme climate events (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024).
- In Bangladesh, cyclone early warning networks now disseminate SMS-based health alerts, improving anticipatory action in disaster-prone regions (Bangladesh Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2023).

Conclusion

South Asia is at a climate-health crossroads. The region faces escalating risks of disease outbreaks, infrastructure breakdowns, and health inequities unless urgent action is taken. Health policy must shift from reactive responses toward systematic, equity-centered climate resilience—integrating climate data, multisectoral planning, and community-driven strategies. With the 2025 UNFCCC COP30 negotiations approaching, South Asian governments have a critical opportunity to advocate for global financing mechanisms and regional cooperation. Without transformative reforms, decades of

health gains risk being reversed.

References

- Ansah, S., Sharma, D., & Jain, R. (2024). Health systems response to climate change adaptation: A scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 24(1), 1294. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-19459-w>
- Asia Society. (2024). *Building sustainable futures: Advancing climate resilience in South Asia*. <https://asiasociety.org>
- Bangladesh Ministry of Environment and Forests. (2023). *Bangladesh climate change strategy and action plan (BCCSAP)*. Government of Bangladesh.
- Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. (2024). *National action plan on climate change (NAPCC)*.
- Knowlton, K., Shah, H., & Sharma, S. (2023). Developing climate-resilient health systems: Ahmedabad's Heat Action Plan. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 131(7), 077005. <https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP11648>
- Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal. (2023). *National adaptation plan on climate and health*. Government of Nepal.
- UNICEF Pakistan. (2024). *Powering progress: Renewable energy for primary health facilities*. UNICEF.
- World Bank. (2025, June 3). *Climate resilience in South Asia: A private sector approach*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/06/03/climate-resilience-in-south-asia>
- World Health Organization. (2023). *Operational framework for building climate-resilient and low-carbon health systems*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240081888>