The British Academy

Journal of the British Academy, **9(s7)**, 1–5
DOI https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s7.001
Posted 14 October 2021

Climate change, public health and wellbeing: introduction

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Abstract: Climate change presents a serious threat to global public health and requires an immediate, internationally coordinated, response. There may be considerable value in introducing a public health frame into the ongoing public—and policy—dialogue about climate change. The articles presented here explore the connections between climate change, public health and wellbeing.

Keywords: Climate change, public health, wellbeing, access, equity.

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Climate change presents a serious threat to global public health and requires an immediate, internationally coordinated, response (Harmer *et al.* 2020). An effective public health response to climate requires an enhanced public health awareness and preparedness. Climate change, together with other natural and human-made health stressors, affects human health and disease in numerous ways. Some existing health threats will intensify, and new health threats will emerge. Risks do not affect all communities equally: salient factors for such vulnerability include age, economic resources, geographical location, and political process.

Globally, the human health impacts of climate change will continue differentially to challenge the world's poorest nations, where populations endemically suffer myriad health burdens associated with extreme poverty that are being further exacerbated by the changing climate. In 2009, a *British Medical Journal* editorial argued that a global commitment was necessary to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and prevent further impacts on health (Jay & Marmot 2009). The climate crisis is a threat multiplier, particularly for communities suffering from environmental injustice. These threats include exposure to air pollutants (such as particulate matter and soot produced from burning fossil fuels) or soil and water contamination (caused by dumping coal ash or lead in the water supply).

There may be considerable value in introducing a public health frame into the ongoing public—and policy—dialogue about climate change. Rapid and potentially irreversible climate change poses a direct threat to global public health. Andrew Harmer and colleagues (2020) argue that the World Health Organization (WHO) should recognise this in the same way as global threats from specific diseases. WHO could respond to that threat through its mechanism for declaring a health threat a public health emergency of international concern, which would strengthen a coordinated, international response by mobilising political will and funding.

The articles presented here explore the connections between climate change, public health, and wellbeing. Throughout, there is a common thread of concerns surrounding access and equity. In the first article, Tolu Oni *et al.* (2021) consider the benefits of community-based approaches to integrated governance for climate change and health, focusing on Lagos. In many low- and middle-income countries, urbanisation and urban development are characterised by hazards that conspire with climatic hazards and socio-economic vulnerability to influence population health inequality now and increasingly so in the future. A large part of the epidemiological profile across countries in the 'Global South' has been influenced by a rapid rate of urbanisation and the interlinked impacts of climate and ecology. This necessitates an integrated approach to governance for health and climate change. Through three case studies in Lagos, which analyse approaches taken and missed opportunities, they explore examples that demonstrate these interdependencies. They conclude by reflecting on these experiences,

as well as historical examples of comprehensive systems approaches to health, to propose a community-oriented model for integrated climate change and health action in rapidly growing cities.

In the second article, Stephanie Wilkie and Nicola Davinson (2021) explore whether nature-based interventions improved individual public health outcomes and health behaviours, using a conceptual framework that included pathways and pathway domains, mechanisms, and behaviour change techniques derived from environmental social science theory and health behaviour change models. A two-stage scoping methodology was used to identified studies published between 2000 and 2021. Peer reviewed, English-language reports of nature-based interventions with adults ($N = 9$) were included if the study met the definition of a health–behaviour change intervention and reported at least one measured physical/mental health outcome. Interventions focused on the restoring or building capacities pathway domains as part of the nature contact/experience pathway; varied health behaviour change mechanisms and techniques were present but environmental social-science-derived mechanisms to influence health outcomes were used less. Practical recommendations for future interventions include explicit statement of the targeted level of causation, as well as utilisation of both environmental social science and health behaviour change theories and varied public health outcomes to allow simultaneously testing of theoretical predictions.

Morten Byskov *et al.* (2021a) take a broad view on the politics of climate change. Recent years have seen a shift in focus from research that asks how adaptation to climate change can be achieved, to research that asks how *fair and equitable* adaptation to climate change can be achieved. This reflects a more general turn in the climate literature towards pathways for *just transitions* in the face of the climate crisis. Such an agenda requires not only empirical research, but also engagement with philosophical theories of justice (Byskov *et al.* 2021b). What, for example, are people owed as a matter of justice such that adaptation can be said to be fair? And how do structural inequalities affect what people are owed as a matter of justice in adaptation? In this article, the authors introduce the Multi-Dimensional Injustice Framework (MDIF). The MDIF provides a normative framework for understanding, articulating, and tackling issues of justice and fairness in climate impacts and climate adaptation. The MDIF holds (i) that the ethical challenges posed by many development issues are multi-dimensional in nature, in the sense that they cannot be reduced to a single primary indicator; (ii) that these dimensions are best conceptualised using the language of (in)justice; and (iii) that resolving development challenges requires recognising and addressing the underlying issues of injustice and inequality. Consequently, the MDIF introduces a set of indicators to identify distributive and procedural injustices that can be utilised within development and adaptation policy and planning. The authors show how the MDIF can be applied in

practice using the case study of climate-related health risks in the informal settlements of Lusaka, Zambia.

In the final article (which will be added to the issue a few weeks after the other articles), Anne Schiffer (2021) explores energy justice through the lens of collective capabilities. It is increasingly recognised that sustainable energy is a social or energy justice challenge. Here, community energy is seen an umbrella for collective participation in more democratic or just models that enable bridging of the energy access gap. This paper explores community participation and by extension energy justice through the lens of collective capabilities in relation to everyday sharing practices, tensions, and energy conflict. The research is based on a range of qualitative methods, including participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and participatory design workshops to facilitate discussion about the future of energy in a rural Gambian community. The findings suggest that everyday sharing practices help reduce energy injustices (for example, unequal infrastructure distribution), but that there are limits as to how far this translates into developing and sustaining community infrastructure. Here collective capability provides a useful tool to explore potential future modes of participation in energy democracy, such as shared ownership.

This issue forms part of the British Academy's COP26 series, which aims to raise awareness of the importance of the humanities and the social sciences in understanding the complex human and social dimensions to environmental challenges and their solutions. The authors are drawn from a range of Academy programmes, including the *Sustainable Development Programme*, which funds researchers working on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, *Urban Infrastructures of Wellbeing*, which supports interdisciplinary research that explores how formal and informal infrastructures interact to affect the wellbeing of people in cities across the Global South, and the *Knowledge Frontiers* scheme, which aims to enable different communities of knowledge and practice to illustrate the unique added value of international and interdisciplinary collaboration.

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To cite the article: Simon Goldhill and Georgie Fitzgibbon (2021), 'Climate change, public health and wellbeing: introduction', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s7): 1–5. DOI https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s7.001

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk