4 degrees hotter? Australian Governments must act

Australia is not alone in facing an increased bushfire threat.

According to the 2019 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change published this week, more than 75 per cent of all countries have had an increase in daily population exposure to wildfires since the turn of the century.

And if you think our current bushfire crisis only affects people in Queensland and New South Wales, it doesn’t.

Earlier this month, Australia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Marise Payne opened climate resilient and cyclone standard classrooms at Banaban primary school in Vanuatu. In recent days, air pollution from Australia’s bushfires has been wafting over the Pacific nation, more than 2,500 kilometres from Sydney.

Threats to the health of children here, and around the world, from climate change are already with us. Air pollution from bushfires exacerbating heart and lung diseases is only one example.

A child born today could face life in a world up to 4 degrees hotter than pre-industrial times.

This would bring with it increased risk of infectious diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, more deaths from extreme heatwaves, more diarrhoeal disease caused by bacteria that thrive in warmer conditions, malnutrition due to lower crop yields, and greater risks to the mental health of the coming generation by exposing them to more uncertainty, risk and conflict.

These projections are just some of the potential threats to future health identified by the Lancet Countdown which is tracking progress across 41 key indicators, and draws on collaborative research by 120 experts from 35 institutions around the world.

Many of the threats are already taking a heavy toll in our neighbourhood. During a recent drought in Tuvalu, infants aged under 2 years were the most affected in a diarrhoeal outbreak because of low household water reserves and decreased hand washing.

Climate change disproportionately affects the health of women. Research has shown that women are at a higher risk of death from natural disasters because they more likely to be inside houses during emergencies and are more likely to be with their children.

In contrast to some recent domestic political messaging that talking about climate change is only for “raving inner-city lunatics”, the Australian Government has been signalling to the region that it wants to help address climate change impacts.
The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade recently released its Climate Change Action Strategy. The strategy highlights some of the Government’s work on climate change in the Pacific.

The primary response has been the redirection of $500 million from the current aid budget to build climate change preparedness in the Pacific, including $140 million of that for the Australian private sector mobilisation climate fund to encourage private sector investments in low emissions, climate-resilient solutions for the Pacific and South-east Asia.

This seems a very modest investment by comparison with recent HSBC estimates of climate-related health costs in cities across the 11 members of the G20 considered ‘emerging markets’ that could be as high as $14.5 trillion a year by 2050.

If Australia is to effectively respond to the health impacts of climate change in our region, part of the response needs to be for our country to urgently transition from burning coal to making energy. We also need to urgently wean ourselves off coal as a major source of export income.

In doing so, our governments certainly need to work with affected regions to ensure that new economic opportunities come with these transitions. In his new book Super-Power: Australia’s low-carbon opportunity, economist Ross Garnaut makes a compelling case for the economic advantages if Australia embraces renewable energy now.

These economic advantages from renewable energy are available to the very regions that currently rely on coal-fired energy and coal export income.

While it is already too late to prevent some of the health impacts from climate change, there is much more we could be doing right now to invest in limiting the rise in global temperatures, and in preparing for the multiple health challenges ahead.

There is no time to waste.

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