COP27: Three Outcomes for Healthy Cities

Dr Katherine Maxwell, Visiting Fellow

Kellogg College
University of Oxford

GCHU
Global Centre on
Healthcare & Urbanisation

INTRODUCTION

In November 2022, thousands of delegates from around the world descended on Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt for the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27). Countries came together to act on achieving global climate goals as agreed under the Paris Agreement and the Convention. At COP27 this year, there was a distinct shift from mitigation (decarbonisation) towards adaptation and enhancing resilience of countries, cities, and communities.

Increasingly, the impacts of climate change are felt at local level, with cities exposed to extreme weather events, increasing temperatures, sea-level rises, and biodiversity loss. In turn, cities are continually contributing to climate change and produce around 70% of global carbon emissions; they are also directly impacted by a changing climate. Urban areas play a critical role in addressing climate mitigation and adapting to better manage climate impacts.

Debate at COP27 on climate change and its impact on urban populations must consider the importance of global public health and how this is directly linked with our climate and wider environment. Within cities, the environment-health nexus requires urgent attention within climate action plans. Both global north and south cities are starting to include health considerations within climate actions (e.g., the strength of health systems) especially after the impact of COVID-19.

This paper summarises the key findings from COP27 discussions and explores what these mean for developing 'Healthy Cities' – urban areas that positively improve health and well-being of residents, whilst reducing carbon emissions and strengthening urban resilience.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'HEALTHY CITIES'?

A recent report published by the Healthy Cities Commission and the Global Centre for Healthcare and Urbanisation (GCHU), University of Oxford, defined the term as an urban area that considered public health and well-being with low carbon, accessible transport and mobility options (e.g. advocating active travel), proactive planning within the built environment (e.g., energy efficiency measures) with good governance approaches (e.g., civic engagement and devolution to local government).

OVERVIEW OF COP27 OUTCOMES

The implications of COP27 will be felt for years to come, despite mixed responses on decarbonisation commitments and breakthrough funding for emerging economies to address loss and damage. This summary of COP27 outcomes explores how key decisions made will impact the likelihood of the development of Healthy Cities – here are the top three outcomes.

KEY OUTCOME 1: COMMITMENT TO A 'JUST TRANSITION' BY FUNDING LOSS AND DAMAGE WITHIN EMERGING ECONOMIES

It has been established that countries that don't tend to contribute as much to climate change are often the ones that are impacted by it the most. At COP27, the issue was finally addressed, and an historic agreement was reached on a fund to compensate lower income countries for the loss and damage caused by climate change. Wealthier countries (e.g., the USA) reversed previous stances on loss and damage, providing finance to vulnerable countries who face a variety of climate impacts. This was a pivotal moment as loss and damage was a central matter of climate justice.

The economic loss and damage on homes or infrastructure from climate change further exacerbates poverty and inequality issues in emerging economies. For example, recent floods in Pakistan and drought in the Horn of Africa has spurred on a major food crisis. In addition, the non-economic impacts of loss and damage such as harm to human health, biodiversity, and the displacement of communities.

What does this mean for healthy cities?

For a start, additional funding to address loss and damage will increase the access to finance (a significant barrier for urban areas in emerging economies) and will enable local governments to future-proof critical infrastructure in response to extreme events and to protect the local environment (e.g., green space that can provide an urban cooling effect during heatwaves, for example). Urban areas that can access funding to strengthen health infrastructure, this enhances their ability to prepare and respond to the impacts of climate change such as heatwaves. In addition, climate change can impact environmental determinants of health (e.g., air quality, increasing temperatures, etc). Cities must protect green space, such as parks, riverbanks and coastlines crucial for health and well-being, particularly for lower income groups.

KEY OUTCOME 2: SUPPORT FOR ACCELERATING THE CLEAN ENERGY TRANSITION WITHIN CITIES

COP27 highlighted the widespread support to shift away from fossil fuels. Despite an agreement made to phase out fossil fuels altogether, cities and regions are exploring to securing sustainable energy in a just and inclusive manner.

Climate change directly impacts fuel supplies, energy production, energy consumption and the resilience of energy systems and infrastructure more broadly. The climate talks built on Glasgow COP26, by demonstrating how clean energy is an attractive option for power generation, outlining the investment needed and accelerating implementation of clean energy projects.

Many initiatives such as the US Government's Inflation Reduction Act that has committed over $360 billion of government funding for climate and clean energy tax credits. National government commitments to clean energy regulations pave the way for cities to make the switch and realise the environmental and economic benefits associated with clean energy (e.g., air pollution). Transition to renewable energy within cities will cost less, create new jobs and upskilling opportunities and result in less pollution for burning fossil fuels (which impact urban residents significantly).

What does this mean for healthy cities?

Although no decision on fossil fuels was reached, the momentum for clean energy implementation at national and local level was evident. Cities are increasingly implementing clean energy solutions (e.g., with Copenhagen and Munich are committing to 100% clean energy by 2050 or before). Access to energy is critical for the functioning of healthcare facilities and the quality and reliability of health services delivered within cities. Failure to transition to clean energy will result in poor air quality that impacts all aspects of urban residents' health (e.g., resulting in premature births and asthma cases, and many more adverse health outcomes). Cities that do not make the clean energy transition will face the economic costs of the additional health burden because of fossil fuel use. COP27 did result in more vocal support to phase out fossil fuels at the national government level, which will enable local governments to prioritise renewable energy technologies and solutions within urban areas and realise the benefits.

KEY OUTCOME 3: STRENGTHENING THE COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING BIODIVERSITY AND NATURE

The COP27 Summit refocused attention on protecting biodiversity and nature by including food, rivers, and nature-based solutions in an overarching COP 'cover decision' for the first time and through the publication of the Sharm-El-Sheikh Adaptation Agenda outlining a series of actions across five impact areas such as food, nature, and coastal ecosystems.

There was a clear push from national governments and non-state actors for protecting nature to protect the global economy, with almost half of the global economic output dependent on nature. Realising the economic value of nature, is critical to measure and price the risks of ecosystem and habitat decline.

One success of COP27 was the launch of the group 'Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership' which comprised more than 25 countries who committed to holding each other accountable to end deforestation by 2030. There was increasing awareness that protecting forests is essential to avoid climate tipping points. For example, global deforestation accounts for 11% of carbon emissions, therefore countries need to halt deforestation to reach net zero targets. However, to implement nature conservation measures, access to international finance or carbon markets will be critical. Driving private capital investment into nature-based solutions and setting clear targets for protecting nature will make or break future climate targets.

What does this mean for healthy cities?

The commitment to adaptation agendas that prioritise protecting nature and draw on both state and non-state actors, enables pooling together resources and to implement measures in cities. The impacts of climate change are acutely felt at the local level, with urban density exacerbating issues such as increased precipitation (where manmade urban infrastructure results in less natural drainage) or heatwaves (with few measures to naturally cool the surrounding areas). Nature-based solutions such as green space can enable cities to both address the impacts of climate change by reducing dangerous heat waves (creating a local microclimate cooling affect), and absorbing floodwaters (acting as a 'sponge' to absorb flood water) as well as supporting local biodiversity. Furthermore, nature brings a host of benefits such as improved air quality, improved health, and well-being (e.g., both mental and physical health) and provides social benefits (e.g., community interaction).

CONCLUSION

COP27 emphasised for the first time, the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the impacts of climate change and global health. Although climate change is felt unequally, cities are vulnerable to climate risks as they are home to over half of the global population and are nodes of key economic, social, and political activity. At the same time, urban areas provide a test bed to innovate and implement new climate solutions to mitigate these impacts.

For the first time at a COP, the focus shifted from mitigation of carbon emissions to adapting to climate change, committing to loss and damage funding, funding the clean energy transition, and protecting biodiversity and nature. The emphasis on nature specifically is an important component in any healthy city for the number of benefits it provides for humankind, nature, and the climate.

To realise the benefits at scale, urban areas there are various recommendations:

- Firstly, for any nature-based solution, it is critical to ensure that measures are inclusive and benefit all residents equally (e.g., encouraging participation and engagement with affected residents potentially affected by the measures).
- Secondly, local governments can explore partnerships with cross sectoral stakeholders to develop new innovative nature-based solutions and invest in them – accessing finance is challenging for cities particularly in emerging economies.
- Lastly, all climate planning decisions should undergo a health benefits assessment (going further than health impact assessments within spatial planning as seen in the UK). Climate change affects the critical social and environmental determinants of health and further widens health inequalities between and within urban populations.

Prioritising biodiversity and nature at COP27 is a positive start towards accelerating the commitment to global healthy cities, however, the focus must shift from climate action planning towards implementation. This will bring a host of opportunities and challenges around the right financing and governance systems to enable this transition.

Egypt's COP commitments to adaptation have paved the way for nation states to accelerate the implementation of protecting nature at COP28. However, cities are uniquely placed to get ahead of the curve and explore tried and tested adaptation measures much sooner and start to create the right conditions needed *now* to deliver them.

Kellogg College
University of Oxford

Global Centre on
Healthcare & Urbanisation