

Clean ups are not enough: Government policy incoherent on climate change

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Farnaz Pourzand, Marnie Prickett, Michael Baker, Simon Hales



Summary

Events like the recent storm on the East Coast demonstrate our communities' vulnerability in the face of climate change. But given what is known about our changing climate, it is important not to simply try to maintain or return to what was. Instead, we need the Government of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) to use evidence to support communities to rebuild for increased resilience in the face of climate change. Additionally, we need central Government to recognise that policies that increase greenhouse gas emissions put communities in this country and internationally at increased risk from climate change impacts.

However, the current Government appears not to be making these connections, bringing in a range of policies likely to increase the country's emissions as well as the Fast-track Approvals Bill which will reduce the rigour applied to new developments. Yet there are potentially huge public health, social, and economic benefits in an evidence-informed, coherent mitigation and adaptation policy response to climate change.

Our climate change challenges in stark relief

The recent storm in Tairāwhiti and Hawkes Bay left hundreds of homes damaged, many severely.¹ The Minister for Emergency Management, Mark Mitchell, said it was “another tough blow for these communities who are still recovering from the impacts of Cyclone Gabrielle last year”.¹

While many factors can increase the impact of storm events on communities, we know a warmer climate is our “new normal”, bringing with it more frequent and intense storms, floods, and other extreme weather events.² Such events are now not single blows but rolling, compounding challenges. This means it is unlikely that many impacted communities will fully “recover” from the blows. Instead of speaking of recovery, we need to reduce our emissions and take integrated actions to reduce risk and adapt in the face of climate change. It is essential the Government does not aim to simply return communities to what was, but instead support communities to build resilience in the face of predicted climate change impacts. This is hard and complex work, undoubtedly, but the Government has a profoundly important leadership role in making it happen.

Incoherence in Government climate change policies

It is evident that the current Government is failing to make the connection between their climate change policies and increasing negative impacts on communities and the country. The Government is promoting more mining for fossil fuels,³ weakening existing protection for wetlands (key to effective flood mitigation and carbon sequestration),⁴⁻⁶ focusing on large-scale roading projects while reducing spending on public transport,⁷ and continuing to delay action on reducing agricultural emissions.⁸

In the wake of damage to homes in East Coast communities, it must also be remembered that the Government’s Fast-Track Approvals Bill proposes to reduce the rigour with which major housing (among other) developments are considered and approved. In his submission on the Bill, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Simon Upton, told the Select Committee: “If a housing development were to be applied for under this Bill, it could be approved without waiting to update the modelling thereby placing existing houses downstream at increased flood risk. If all you have to focus on are the benefits of development and the process is all about speed, risks are going to be missed and there are going to be disasters.”⁹

These incoherent policies in the face of climate change are deeply troubling as its impacts on the country come into stark relief. NZ communities are already experiencing increased risks from rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and rising sea levels.¹⁰ We see these changes leading to more frequent and severe events in NZ like heavy rainfall, droughts, and floods.^{11,12} Climate change is impacting NZ citizen’s health and well-being by increasing risks from polluted drinking water¹³ and displacement.^{14,15} The economic consequences such as infrastructure damage¹⁶⁻¹⁸ and interrupted supply chains,¹⁹ further highlight the urgent need to address NZ’s climate risks.

Our recent paper¹⁶ described direct and indirect health risks to NZ communities from climate change. These are summarised in the Appendix.

Importantly, climate change impacts are not felt equally across our population. Some communities, especially rural, Māori and low-income populations, are particularly at risk

and require focused actions to protect their health and well-being. A clear and present example of this concentration of disadvantage is summed up by Wairoa Mayor Craig Little's comment in the aftermath of the most recent storm, "I don't know how we're going to get through this one, to be honest. We are a poor community, and this is just another big kick."¹

The need for a coherent mitigation and adaption response to climate change

Policy responses to climate change are too often separated into prevention (mitigation) and improved management of the consequences (adaptation). In reality, we need an integrated approach covering both. Increasingly, leading policy agencies like the OECD are promoting the importance of policy coherence.²⁰ This means policies across government are developed to ensure they do not undermine each other and instead achieve co-benefits of mitigation and adaptation measures.^{21,22}

The benefits of policy coherence are obvious. For example, intense storm events not only impact people's health and risk lives, but the damage they cause is expensive. Cyclone Gabrielle was estimated to have cost the country more than \$14 billion.²³ New or re-development that recognises future risks of flooding not only prevents harm to people, but reduces further costs by avoiding or reducing future damage.

With regards to public health, we recommend the Government adopt a comprehensive Health National Adaptation Plan that is fully integrated with other adaptation and mitigation actions and planning. Importantly, current national efforts regarding health primarily focus on enhancing the resilience of healthcare facilities, but this narrow perspective is insufficient. A more inclusive strategy is needed to address the diverse pathways through which climate change impacts health. In particular, the Government can improve health outcomes by:

- Strengthening coordination and knowledge about climate health impacts, integrating Indigenous perspectives and improving the evidence base for policy development;
- Prioritising climate resilience for vulnerable communities through improved infrastructure and social systems, emphasising low-carbon solutions that enhance well-being.
- Being an international exemplar by leading in emissions reductions to achieve climate resilience, ensuring health and equity benefits while avoiding social harm and maximising co-benefits across sectors.²⁴⁻²⁶

What this Briefing adds

- Yet another recent storm in Tairāwhiti and Hawkes Bay so soon after Cyclone Gabrielle is a stark indication of the compounding challenges, especially for more vulnerable communities, from climate change.
- The Coalition Government's policy changes demonstrate they are not acting to address the severe and potentially irreversible impacts on communities from climate change.

Implications for policy and practice

- Government policies must become more coherent and evidence-based in the approach to climate change, supporting communities to adapt to a changing climate rather than simply cleaning up after each event.
- The Government must not implement policies that will increase greenhouse gas emissions (eg, coal mining, destruction of wetlands) and instead it should drive the reduction of emissions across sectors (eg, agriculture and transport, particularly, as our largest sources of emissions).
- Improved public health must be a key outcome sought by adaptation measures and mitigation efforts. Our recent submission on the Government's adaptation inquiry provides more details.

Authors details

Dr Farnaz Pourzand, Health Environment Infection Research Unit, Department of Public Health, University of Otago Wellington

Marnie Prickett, Department of Public Health, University of Otago Wellington, and Public Health Communication Centre

Prof Michael Baker, Department of Public Health, University of Otago Wellington, and Public Health Communication Centre

Prof Simon Hales, Department of Public Health, University of Otago Wellington, and Public Health Communication Centre

Appendix

Examples of direct and indirect risks to people's health and well-being from climate change. Adapted from Pourzand et al. 2023.

Examples of direct risks to people's health and well-being from climate change

Climate change poses significant direct health risks, including increased injuries and fatalities due to heightened intensity and frequency of natural hazards such as heat waves, floods, droughts, and fires. Rising temperatures elevate the risk of heat-related illnesses like heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and dehydration. Specifically, an estimated 14 heat-related deaths occur annually in Auckland and Christchurch, with projected increases to 28, 51, and 88 deaths per year as global temperatures rise by 1°C, 2°C, and 3°C, respectively.²⁷

Vulnerable populations, including the elderly, young children, outdoor workers, and individuals with mental health conditions, are particularly susceptible to high temperatures. Additionally, elevated temperatures have been linked to increased aggression, violence, and suicide.²⁸⁻³⁰

Empirical research in NZ highlights these impacts, demonstrating direct effects of heat on mortality in Christchurch and cold weather's influence on hospital admissions for respiratory diseases in Auckland.³¹

There will be an increase in fire risk, including the length of fire weather conditions during the season and the intensity of fires that could occur, until at least mid-century. Areas that are prone to seasonal drought and arid conditions have been identified as having the highest levels of fire danger. Wildfires pose a range of direct and indirect health risks such as presentations to emergency departments with respiratory and cardiovascular conditions, mental distress, contamination of water supplies, loss of livelihoods, etc.

Examples of indirect risks to people's health and well-being from climate change

Climate change affects health indirectly through changes in rainfall and extreme weather, impacting water quality and increasing the risk of waterborne diseases. Flooding and agricultural runoff can contaminate drinking and recreational water, leading to outbreaks like the campylobacteriosis one in Havelock North in 2016, which led to an estimated 6,000-8,000 illnesses, 24 hospitalisations and four deaths.³²

Extreme precipitation events raise the likelihood of wastewater treatment failures and sewer overflows, contaminating water supplies. Weather variations have been linked to increased notifications of salmonellosis,³³ cryptosporidiosis, and giardiasis,³⁴ as well as higher hospital admissions for enteric diseases in children.³⁵

NZ has not seen local transmission of mosquito-borne diseases, and modelling suggests that risks for dengue and malaria will stay low.^{36,37} However, arboviruses like Ross River virus from Australia could become a threat if suitable vectors become established.³⁸

Droughts and floods can often reduce agricultural productivity, leading to crop failures, food shortages, and ultimately increased food prices. These factors contribute to food insecurity, malnutrition, and inadequate access to nutritious food, which can have long-term consequences on population health and development.

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