

# 68<sup>TH</sup> COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

## *The Commonwealth – A Global Partner*

### WORKSHOP RESEARCH BRIEFING

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## Executive Summary

Climate change presents an urgent and multifaceted threat to global health, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new public health challenges worldwide. The Commonwealth, a diverse family of 56 nations, finds itself at the forefront of this crisis, with its Small Island Developing States (SIDS) facing particularly existential risks. This report examines the profound health impacts of a warming planet across the Commonwealth, from the rising burden of vector-borne diseases to the devastating mental health consequences of extreme weather events. It underscores that climate change is not merely an environmental concern but a critical public health emergency demanding integrated, cross-sectoral responses. New data from the 2024 Lancet report highlights the severe economic consequences, including 4.4 billion lost labour hours in 2023 due to heat, and highlights the critical link between transparent governance and the urgent need for climate adaptation in SIDS.<sup>57</sup>

Parliaments across the Commonwealth are uniquely positioned to serve as pillars of resilience in this global challenge. Through their legislative, oversight, and representative functions, they possess the power to drive systemic change. Key parliamentary actions include enacting robust, legally binding climate change legislation that explicitly integrates public health considerations, as exemplified by Australia's Climate Change Act 2022 and Fiji's Health National Adaptation Plan. Effective parliamentary oversight, conducted through dedicated committees and public reporting mechanisms, is crucial for holding governments accountable for climate commitments and ensuring that policies translate into tangible health outcomes. Furthermore, Parliaments should strategically allocate domestic budgets and strengthen national capacities to access international climate finance, ensuring equitable and gender-responsive investments in health system resilience. Fostering cross-party collaboration and empowering affected communities in policy development are also paramount to building enduring solutions.

The report highlights compelling case studies from Australia, Fiji, and the Maldives, illustrating both the severity of impacts and the evolving parliamentary responses. While challenges persist, these examples demonstrate the potential for Parliaments to learn from one another and adapt successful strategies. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and through its networks like the CPA Small Branches network (as it relates to smaller jurisdictions), as well as other international parliamentary bodies play a vital role in facilitating capacity building, knowledge sharing, and collective advocacy, amplifying the voices of the most vulnerable nations.

Ultimately, securing a healthier, more sustainable future for the Commonwealth's 2.5 billion citizens requires bold, far-reaching action. This report concludes with actionable recommendations for Parliaments and supporting organisations, emphasising the imperative for integrated, parliamentary-led solutions to build climate-resilient health systems. Business as usual is no longer an option; the time for proactive, comprehensive parliamentary engagement is now.

## Introduction

The global community faces an unprecedented challenge as climate change intensifies, transcending its traditional classification as a purely environmental issue to emerge as a profound and immediate threat to human health and well-being.<sup>1</sup> The pathways through which a changing climate affects health are complex and often indirect, exacerbating existing health vulnerabilities and creating entirely new public health challenges.<sup>1</sup> Understanding these intricate connections is paramount for developing effective, and sustainable solutions.

### **Global Context: The Urgency of the Climate-Health Nexus**

The scientific consensus is unequivocal: rising global temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, and increasing climate variability are dramatically reshaping the health landscape worldwide.<sup>2</sup> This transformation is evident in the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme heat events, heavy storms, and the changing epidemiology of infectious diseases.<sup>1</sup> The recognition that climate change constitutes a "public health emergency" signifies a critical evolution in global understanding, shifting it from an isolated environmental concern to a central issue for health ministries and, consequently, for Parliamentary Health Committees.<sup>2</sup> This re-categorisation necessitates urgent, coordinated action that extends beyond traditional environmental policy, demanding the active involvement of health ministries, emergency services, and social welfare agencies, all under the comprehensive oversight of Parliaments. The complex interplay of environmental, institutional, social, cultural and behavioural factors further influences individual and community vulnerability to these health effects, making a holistic, integrated approach indispensable.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Commonwealth's Unique Vulnerability and Opportunity**

The Commonwealth, a diverse association of 56 member states, is disproportionately affected by the escalating climate crisis. Home to 2.5 billion citizens, it includes 33 Small States, 25 of which are Small Island Developing States (SIDS), that face an existential threat from rising sea levels, intensifying storms, and prolonged droughts.<sup>4</sup> These nations, despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, bear the brunt of climate impacts, often losing between 1% and 8% of their GDP annually to natural disasters.<sup>4</sup>

The Commonwealth's inherent diversity, encompassing both highly vulnerable SIDS and larger economies like Australia, India, and Nigeria, means that climate-health solutions should be adaptable and context-specific. However, this diversity also presents a unique opportunity for shared learning and collective advocacy within an established network of shared values and governance principles.<sup>5</sup> The CPA and other Commonwealth entities, through their various programmes and initiatives, provide a vital platform for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and amplifying the voices of those most at risk.<sup>9</sup> This network is uniquely positioned to translate international climate

agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, into localised, health-centric national legislation and policy, fostering resilience across its member states.

## **Purpose and Scope of the Report**

This report undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted threats posed by climate change to global health, with a specific emphasis on the experiences and challenges within Commonwealth nations. It aims to identify sustainable solutions, highlighting the critical role of Parliaments in enacting effective legislation, providing robust oversight, and ensuring accountability for climate-resilient health outcomes. Designed as a research briefing for Commonwealth Parliamentarians and their staff, this document seeks to offer benchmarks of good governance and present new policy options that can be adopted or adapted to strengthen national responses to the climate-health emergency.<sup>10</sup>

## **Section 1: The Intertwined Crises: Climate Change and Global Health**

Climate change impacts human health through a complex web of direct and indirect pathways, creating a cascading series of effects that threaten well-being across the globe.

### **1.1 Direct Health Impacts of a Warming Planet**

The most immediate and discernible health consequences of a changing climate stem from extreme weather phenomena and altered environmental conditions.

#### **Extreme Heat Events and Heat-Related Illnesses**

Rising global temperatures are increasing the frequency and severity of heatwaves, which pose a direct and escalating threat to human health.<sup>3</sup> Exposure to extreme heat can lead to a range of illnesses, from mild heat stress to life-threatening conditions such as heat stroke and hyperthermia.<sup>3</sup> Beyond acute impacts, prolonged heat is linked to acute kidney injury, reduced sleep quality, and complications during pregnancy, including low birth weight and pre-term birth.<sup>3</sup> Critically, high ambient temperatures can exacerbate pre-existing cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, leading to increased hospitalisations and mortality.<sup>3</sup> Heat-related deaths have risen significantly worldwide between 2000 and 2019, particularly in tropical and low-income countries.<sup>3</sup> The "urban heat island effect," where densely built urban areas experience higher temperatures than surrounding rural areas, compounds these risks, especially for vulnerable populations residing in cities.<sup>3</sup> This combination of environmental and social factors means that parliamentary solutions should extend

beyond general health advisories to encompass urban planning, housing standards, and social support systems that address the unique vulnerabilities of urban residents.

### **Extreme Weather Events: Injuries, Death, and Infrastructure Damage**

Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as floods, hurricanes, droughts, and wildfires.<sup>3</sup> These events directly cause injuries and fatalities. However, their impact extends far beyond immediate harm. The destruction of critical infrastructure, including hospitals, sanitation services, and transportation networks, creates a cascading failure effect.<sup>3</sup> When these essential services are compromised, the capacity to respond to initial health crises is severely diminished, leading to secondary public health emergencies, such as the spread of infectious diseases due to contaminated water or lack of medical care.<sup>3</sup> This disruption also impacts supply chains for vital medicines and vaccines, and can lead to food spoilage, further endangering public health.<sup>14</sup> The damage to homes and livelihoods often results in significant psychological distress, increasing the risk of adverse mental health consequences, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>1</sup> The profound impact on infrastructure means that legislatures should prioritise budgeting and regulations for resilient infrastructure investment and robust emergency preparedness in their policy frameworks, moving from reactive disaster relief to proactive, preventative design.

### **Air Quality Degradation and Respiratory Health**

The warming climate also contributes to degraded air quality, which directly affects respiratory health. Extremely hot days can accelerate chemical reactions in the atmosphere, leading to increased production of smog and ground-level ozone.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, more frequent and intense wildfires, often linked to hotter and drier conditions, release vast amounts of smoke and particulate matter into the air, significantly impacting respiratory health and exacerbating conditions like asthma.<sup>1</sup> These pollutants contribute to a rise in respiratory diseases and can worsen existing cardiovascular conditions, posing a continuous threat to public health.

## **1.2 Indirect Health Impacts: Cascading Effects on Well-being**

Beyond direct physical threats, climate change triggers a series of interconnected indirect impacts that undermine human well-being.

### **Food and Nutrition Insecurity: Yield Declines, Contamination, and Dietary Shifts**

Climate change profoundly affects food systems, leading to decreased crop yields, reduced availability of fish and livestock, and increased food contamination.<sup>16</sup> For instance, altered environmental conditions can promote the growth of mold fungi, leading to higher levels of



mycotoxins in crops, which are carcinogenic and mutagenic, posing serious long-term health risks, including various types of cancer and chronic diseases.<sup>16</sup> The spread of pathogens in food is also anticipated to increase with rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns, leading to more foodborne and waterborne diseases.<sup>16</sup> This complex challenge extends beyond mere food scarcity to encompass food safety and nutritional quality.

In developed countries, while food shortages may be uncommon, the nutritional quality and safety of food remain primary concerns.<sup>17</sup> Rising food prices, often a consequence of climate-induced disruptions to agricultural production, can force individuals, particularly those with lower incomes, to shift towards cheaper, potentially less nutritious food items, exacerbating issues like obesity and micronutrient deficiencies.<sup>17</sup> This dynamic means that parliamentary action should address not only agricultural output but also food safety regulations, supply chain resilience, and public health surveillance for foodborne illnesses, ensuring systemic food system resilience.

### **Water-Borne and Vector-Borne Diseases: Changing Epidemiology and Geographic Spread**

Climate change significantly alters the epidemiology\* and geographic distribution of infectious diseases, particularly those transmitted by water or vectors like mosquitoes and ticks.<sup>18</sup> Warmer temperatures and changing rainfall patterns create more favourable conditions for infectious diseases to thrive and expand into new areas previously too cold for them.<sup>2</sup> The potential for dengue fever transmission has increased by 33% since the 1950s.<sup>57</sup> Heavy rains can create stagnant water, providing ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes, leading to increased transmission of diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, Lyme disease, West Nile virus, chikungunya, and Zika virus.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, rising water temperatures prolong the season for bacteria like *Vibrio*, which causes vibriosis, allowing it to expand into previously uncontaminated waterways and increasing the risk of illness from consuming raw seafood or exposing wounds to seawater.<sup>19</sup>

The expansion of these diseases into previously non-endemic areas creates a "shifting map of disease," challenging existing public health infrastructure and expertise, particularly in regions unprepared for new pathogens.<sup>2</sup> This situation demands that Parliaments consider proactive surveillance, cross-border health collaboration, and adaptive public health systems, shifting from reactive outbreak responses to predictive prevention strategies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Mental Health Impacts: From Acute Disasters to Chronic Stress**

The psychological toll of climate change is profound and far-reaching. Climate- and weather-related disasters, such as floods, droughts, and wildfires, significantly increase the risk of adverse mental health consequences.<sup>1</sup> These impacts can range from minimal stress and distress symptoms to

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\* Epidemiology is the study and analysis of the distribution, patterns and determinants of health and disease conditions in a defined population, and application of this knowledge to prevent diseases

severe clinical disorders like anxiety, depression, and PTSD, especially when they result in damage to homes, loss of livelihoods, or the death of loved ones.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond acute trauma, prolonged environmental degradation, such as extended periods of drought, contributes to chronic stress and anxiety, particularly for farmers and rural communities facing financial insecurity and the loss of generational history and community structure.<sup>15</sup> Studies in Australia, for example, have shown a substantial increase in suicide risk for rural males during drought periods.<sup>15</sup> This indicates that mental health support should be integrated into broader climate adaptation strategies, not merely confined to post-disaster response. This requires sustained budgetary funding for community mental health services and economic resilience programmes that address the underlying stressors of climate change. Parliamentarians also have a community and advocacy role to reduce stigma and raise awareness around mental health.

### **Exacerbation of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) and Existing Health Inequalities**

Climate impacts can worsen the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular and respiratory conditions.<sup>3</sup> Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which already face a disproportionately high risk of premature death from NCDs (with eight of the 15 countries globally with over 30% risk in 2019 being SIDS), are particularly vulnerable to these compounding effects.<sup>7</sup> Climate change also amplifies existing health inequalities, as vulnerable populations, such as those with low incomes, minority groups, women, children, older adults, people with chronic diseases or disabilities, and those in urban or remote environments, are disproportionately affected due to differences in exposure, sensitivity, or adaptive capacity.<sup>1</sup>

## **1.3 Disproportionate Impacts on Vulnerable Populations**

The effects of climate change are not felt equally across populations. Certain groups bear a disproportionate burden due to a confluence of factors that increase their exposure, sensitivity, or limit their ability to adapt to climate-related stresses.<sup>1</sup> These vulnerable populations include, but are not limited to, older adults (over 65 years old), very young children, pregnant women, individuals with low incomes, minority groups, and people with chronic diseases or disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Those living in urban environments are often more susceptible to extreme heat due to the urban heat island effect, while outdoor workers face direct occupational hazards.<sup>3</sup> Geographically remote communities and those experiencing social isolation also face heightened risks due to limited access to resources and emergency services.<sup>14</sup>

The intersectionality of these vulnerabilities—for example, a low-income elderly person with a pre-existing medical condition living in an urban area with limited access to air conditioning—creates compounding risks that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to climate-health adaptation cannot adequately address.<sup>1</sup> Marginalised communities, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander



peoples in Australia, have been found to be at higher risk of home inundation and displacement, further compounding existing social disadvantages.<sup>15</sup> This complex interplay underscores the necessity for Parliaments to enact equity-focused policies that specifically address the needs of these compounding vulnerabilities, ensuring that climate action does not inadvertently widen existing health disparities but rather promotes inclusive resilience.

The following table summarises these key climate change health impacts and the populations most at risk:

**Table 1: Key Climate Change Health Impacts and Vulnerable Populations**

<b>Climate Impact Category</b>	<b>Specific Health Outcomes</b>	<b>Key Vulnerable Populations</b>
Extreme Heat	Heat stroke, hyperthermia, acute kidney injury, low quality sleep, cardiovascular/respiratory disease exacerbation, mental health issues, fatalities	Elderly, children, low-income individuals, people with chronic diseases, outdoor workers, urban populations, pregnant women, minority groups, those on certain medications, socially isolated, geographically remote, people with disabilities <sup>1</sup>
Extreme Weather (Floods, Droughts, Wildfires)	Injuries, death, spread of infectious diseases (due to infrastructure loss), mental health (PTSD, anxiety, depression), financial/psychological stress, suicide risk, food production impacts, water contamination, population displacement	People whose homes are inundated/displaced, marginalised communities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), farmers, rural communities, people in receipt of income support, people with disability <sup>1</sup>
Air Quality Degradation	Respiratory diseases, exacerbation of pre-existing conditions	People with pre-existing respiratory conditions, general population <sup>1</sup>
Food Insecurity	Malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, obesity (due to dietary shifts), chronic diseases, cancer (from mycotoxins), weakened immune system, oral health problems, iron deficiencies, diabetes	Global population, particularly developing areas, low-income individuals <sup>16</sup>
Water-borne Diseases	Diarrhoeal disease, vibriosis, increased morbidity and mortality	Children (especially under 15), people consuming raw/undercooked seafood, those exposed to contaminated water, communities with damaged sanitation <sup>3</sup>

Vector-borne Diseases	Malaria, dengue fever, Zika virus, Lyme disease, West Nile virus, chikungunya, Japanese encephalitis, Rift Valley fever	General population, particularly in new geographic areas, regions with weak health infrastructure, urban density, deforestation <sup>1</sup>
Mental Health	Stress, distress, anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidality	Individuals affected by disasters (loss of homes/livelihoods/loved ones), farmers, rural communities, males aged 30-49 in rural areas, marginalised communities <sup>1</sup>
NCD Exacerbation	Cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, diabetes, chronic kidney disease	Older adults, people with chronic diseases, SIDS populations <sup>3</sup>

## Section 2: Commonwealth on the Frontline: Case Studies of Climate-Health Impacts

The diverse membership of the Commonwealth provides a compelling illustration of the varied and severe health impacts of climate change, as well as the evolving national and parliamentary responses.

### 2.1 Small Island Developing States (SIDS): An Existential Health Threat

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) represent a unique and acutely vulnerable group within the Commonwealth. Despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, these nations are among the hardest hit by climate change and natural disasters.<sup>4</sup> Their inherent characteristics—small land masses, remote geography, high population density, and heavy reliance on fragile marine and land ecosystems—make them extremely susceptible to rising sea levels, intensifying storms, and other climate hazards.<sup>4</sup> The threats they face are often existential, jeopardising not only human health and livelihoods but also the very existence of their communities and cultures.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Fiji: Addressing Dengue, Diarrhoeal Disease, and Malnutrition through Policy and Health System Resilience**

Fiji, is acutely vulnerable to climate change, experiencing significant health impacts including dengue fever, diarrhoeal disease, and malnutrition.<sup>25</sup> In response, the Fijian government has developed a comprehensive policy framework, including the Fiji National Climate Change Policy (2018–2030) and the Climate Change Act 2021.<sup>29</sup> These instruments aim to provide a robust national

response, safeguard development priorities, and ensure Fiji meets its international climate obligations.<sup>30</sup> The Act also establishes crucial governance structures for implementation, including a system for the measurement, reporting, and verification of greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>29</sup>

Initially, policies revealed that health impacts were only indirectly or minimally considered within these broader climate policies.<sup>25</sup> This finding highlighted a common gap in early climate legislation, where the direct link to public health was not explicitly prioritised. Recognising this, Fiji has since demonstrated a critical learning curve and a growing understanding of health as a distinct and central pillar of climate action. This evolution is evident in the development of its dedicated Health National Adaptation Plan (HAP).<sup>32</sup> The HAP builds upon previous strategies, such as the Climate Change and Health Strategic Action Plan (CCHSAP 2016-2022), and is closely aligned with the Climate Change Act 2021 and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Strategic Plan.<sup>32</sup> This plan articulates a vision for a climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable health system, integrating both adaptation and mitigation actions. It includes specific commitments for undertaking vulnerability and adaptation assessments, developing a low-carbon health system, and achieving net-zero health sector emissions by 2050.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Fiji has developed Guidelines for Climate Resilient and Environmentally Sustainable Health Care Facilities (CRESHCF) in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), focusing on critical areas such as the health workforce, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), waste management, energy efficiency, and resilient infrastructure.<sup>33</sup> This progression from broad climate policies to a dedicated health adaptation plan, driven by parliamentary review and policy refinement, underscores the importance of ongoing policy assessment and the active integration of health considerations into climate governance.

### **Maldives: Coastal Vulnerability, Water Security, and Health Adaptation**

As a low-lying atoll nation, the Maldives faces extreme vulnerability to climate change, particularly from sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and saltwater intrusion, which directly threaten its limited freshwater resources and critical infrastructure.<sup>34</sup> Projections indicate that a 0.5 to 0.8-meter rise in sea level by 2100 could lead to the loss of most of the country's land area, posing an existential threat to its population.<sup>34</sup> Beyond direct inundation, the nation's vital coral reefs are at severe risk from rising seawater temperatures and pollution, impacting marine ecosystems and the livelihoods dependent on them.<sup>34</sup>

In response, the Maldives has undertaken various climate-responsive development planning and adaptation processes, including a National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) and a Strategic National Action Plan that integrates disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.<sup>34</sup> Human health is explicitly identified as a key vulnerability area within the NAPA, alongside land, human settlements, critical infrastructure, tourism, and food security.<sup>35</sup> Despite these efforts, significant barriers remain, including weak institutional and coordination mechanisms for climate change adaptation planning, limited technical capacity for climate risk assessment, and uncoordinated access to international climate finance.<sup>34</sup> The direct threat to freshwater, land, and infrastructure

from sea-level rise creates a complex feedback loop where environmental degradation directly undermines the foundations of public health, such as access to clean water and stable housing. The lack of transparent governance and "climate-ready" health systems is a major barrier, as only 5 of 59 SIDS have national health and climate strategies.<sup>57</sup> This situation highlights the critical need for Parliaments to enact integrated land-use planning, water management, and public health regulations, recognising the profound existential threat and the urgent necessity of securing and effectively utilising adaptation finance.

### **Caribbean SIDS: Intersecting Threats to Livelihoods and Public Health**

Caribbean Small Island Developing States share many of the climate-related vulnerabilities faced by their Pacific counterparts, including severe threats from sea-level rise, increasingly heavy rainfall events, tropical cyclones, and storm surges.<sup>6</sup> These climate hazards directly impact human health, livelihoods, and habitable space, often compelling populations to consider relocation, though resources for such drastic measures are frequently lacking.<sup>6</sup>

Climate change poses significant risks to food security in these islands, affecting both fisheries and agriculture. Rising sea levels increase the risk of coastal arable land degradation and salinisation, making it difficult to cultivate staple crops and severely impacting the agricultural and commercial sectors.<sup>6</sup> Warmer ocean temperatures and increased ocean acidification threaten marine species, affecting local fisheries that are vital for food and livelihoods.<sup>6</sup> Water supplies and critical ecosystems like mangroves are also jeopardised.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, changes in sea levels, temperature, and humidity are projected to increase the prevalence of mosquitoes and the diseases they carry, such as malaria and Zika virus.<sup>6</sup> The economic vulnerability of Caribbean SIDS, exacerbated by climate impacts on key sectors like tourism and agriculture, directly limits their capacity to invest in health adaptation. This creates a challenging cycle where climate impacts undermine economic stability, which in turn weakens already strained health systems. Parliaments in these nations should therefore consider not only health-specific policies but also broader economic diversification strategies and robust national disaster risk finance mechanisms to build comprehensive resilience. Projections indicate average annual GDP losses of 5% by 2025, escalating to 20% by 2100 without regional mitigation strategies.<sup>6</sup>

## **2.2 Diverse Challenges in Larger Commonwealth Nations**

While SIDS face unique existential threats, larger Commonwealth nations also grapple with severe and diverse climate-health challenges, often at a vast scale.

### **Australia: Managing Heatwaves, Bushfire Smoke, and Mental Health Crises**

Australia has experienced a significant warming of 1.4°C since 1910, leading to higher temperatures and more extreme heatwaves that have claimed more lives than any other natural hazard in the country.<sup>14</sup> These heatwaves cause fatalities and heat-related illnesses, exacerbate pre-existing medical conditions, and place immense strain on emergency services, ambulances, and hospitals.<sup>14</sup> Beyond direct health impacts, extreme heat disrupts critical infrastructure, leading to power supply disruptions, compromised vaccine and medicine supply chains due to refrigeration loss, and food spoilage.<sup>14</sup> It also results in substantial economic productivity loss, estimated at \$7 billion in 2013–2014 due to lost workdays and impaired efficiency.<sup>14</sup>

Mental health is another profound concern. Studies in Northern New South Wales (NSW) have shown significantly increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression following major floods and prolonged droughts, particularly among marginalised communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and financially insecure farmers.<sup>15</sup> The mental health burden of drought is particularly acute in regional and rural areas, with projections indicating an 84% increase in drought-related suicides for rural males aged 30–49 under the driest climate change scenarios.<sup>15</sup>

The detailed Australian experience reveals that climate impacts like heat, floods, and droughts create multi-sectoral failures encompassing health, infrastructure, mental health, and the economy.<sup>14</sup> This necessitates a comprehensive, "whole-of-government" parliamentary approach, where committees across various portfolios—health, environment, finance, and infrastructure—collaborate and integrate climate risk into their oversight and legislative functions. Australian Parliaments have initiated various inquiries, such as the Senate Select Committee on the Impact of Climate Risk on Insurance Premiums and Availability, which made recommendations on disaster risk mapping and mitigation funding.<sup>36</sup> The NSW Parliament's Education and Health Standing Committee has inquired into the response of schools to climate change, and another inquiry is examining the planning system's impacts on the environment and communities.<sup>37</sup> The Climate Change Act 2022, a significant legislative step, outlines national greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets and mandates annual climate change statements, anchoring climate goals in domestic law and providing stability against political shifts.<sup>39</sup>

### **Nigeria: Food Insecurity, Infectious Diseases, and Flood-Related Health Risks**

Nigeria, despite being responsible for only 0.26% of global emissions, is highly vulnerable to climate change, ranking as the 53rd most vulnerable country globally.<sup>41</sup> The nation faces rising temperatures, more intense and frequent extreme weather events, and sea-level rise, which exacerbate existing challenges like water and food insecurity, increase heat stress, and alter the transmission patterns of infectious and vector-borne diseases.<sup>22</sup>

Flooding, both coastal due to sea-level rise and inland river floods, poses a major health threat. Projections indicate that hundreds of thousands of people could be affected annually by flooding,

leading to direct deaths from drowning, as well as extensive indirect health effects including impacts on food production, water provision, ecosystem disruption, infectious disease outbreaks, and mental health issues like post-traumatic stress and population displacement.<sup>22</sup> Diarrhoeal deaths in children under 15, already a significant public health burden, are projected to increase due to climate change, with the proportion of such deaths attributable to climate change rising to approximately 14.2% by 2050 under a high emissions scenario.<sup>22</sup>

While Nigeria has developed a National Health Adaptation Strategy <sup>22</sup> and a National Agricultural Resilience Framework <sup>41</sup>, issues around governance and limited stakeholder engagement remain significant barriers to effective climate resilience.<sup>41</sup> This situation highlights that the mere existence of national strategies is insufficient; effective governance is paramount for successful implementation. Parliaments have a critical role in strengthening governance structures, ensuring transparency, and legislating for inclusive stakeholder participation in climate-health policy development and implementation, thereby ensuring that policies are not only passed but effectively translated into action.

### **India: Heatwave Vulnerability and Hindrances to Sustainable Development Goals**

India is experiencing deadly heatwaves, intensified by climate change, which in 2022 made almost 90% of its population vulnerable to public health issues, food shortages, and increased risks of death.<sup>23</sup> Long-term predictions suggest that heatwaves will affect over 300 million people by 2050 and significantly lower the quality of life for almost 600 million Indians by 2100.<sup>23</sup>

These extreme heat events are not only a direct health threat but also hinder India's progress across multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Zero Hunger (SDG 2), Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 9), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), and Life on Land (SDG 15).<sup>23</sup> This demonstrates that climate change acts as an amplifier of existing development challenges. A critical gap identified in India's national Climate Vulnerability Indicator (CVI) is the absence of a physical risk indicator for heatwaves, which would significantly aid policymakers in understanding and addressing the actual impacts of extreme heat on the population.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that parliamentary legislation and oversight should explicitly link climate-health policies to SDG achievement, ensuring a holistic approach to sustainable development that prioritises human well-being and mandates climate impact assessments for all new policies and projects.

### **Kenya: The Rising Burden of Vector-Borne Diseases**

Kenya, like many other regions in Africa, is significantly affected by vector-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and Rift Valley fever, and is experiencing firsthand the profound impact of climate change on health outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Warmer climates extend the breeding seasons and



geographical range of disease vectors, while increased rainfall or poor water management in urban settings provide ideal conditions for their spread.<sup>2</sup>

Compounding factors in Kenya include urban density, deforestation, weak surveillance systems, and overstretched health infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> The experience in Kenya highlights that climate change exacerbates existing public health vulnerabilities rather than creating problems in a vacuum. This means that legislative action needs to focus not only on climate-specific interventions but also on strengthening foundational health system resilience, including sustained investments in public health infrastructure, workforce development, and robust data systems, to cope with both current and emerging threats. There is an urgent need for integrated surveillance and early warning systems that connect climate and health data, stronger community engagement, and cross-border and multisectoral collaboration to keep pace with accelerating risks.<sup>2</sup>

### **New Zealand: Cyclone Gabrielle's Health Impact and Community-Led Response**

The Health National Adaptation Plan 2024–2027 Report highlights that extreme weather events, such as the floods and storms in early 2023, clearly demonstrate the health-damaging effects of climate change in New Zealand. Māori communities face greater risks and impacts from these events due to their geographic locations and socioeconomic circumstances. For example, 86% of Māori households are in flood-exposed areas, and increased flooding is likely to worsen existing health inequities. Health Challenges and Impacts:

- **Direct Impacts:** Extreme weather events cause direct health impacts, including injury, illness, and mental health issues.
- **Disrupted Services:** Damage to roads and other infrastructure can disrupt access to essential health care services.
- **Mental Health:** Navigating and anticipating the cascading effects of these events can negatively affect mental health and well-being. For Māori, losing their connection to the land (whenua) is a particular mental health risk.<sup>55</sup>

## **2.3 Lessons from Commonwealth Experiences: Shared Vulnerabilities, Unique Contexts**

The case studies across the Commonwealth reveal a compelling pattern: despite vast differences in geography, economic capacity, and governance structures, member nations share fundamental climate-health vulnerabilities. From the direct impacts of heat stress and extreme weather to the indirect challenges of infectious disease shifts, food and water insecurity, and mental health crises, these common threads underscore the universal nature of the climate-health emergency.

While the specific manifestations and severity of these impacts vary, and national responses range from comprehensive climate acts to specialised sectoral health adaptation plans, there is immense potential for peer-to-peer learning and the sharing of best practices in parliamentary approaches. The Commonwealth, through its established networks, can serve as a "living laboratory" for climate-health solutions. Parliaments can learn from each other's successes, such as Australia's framework climate act or Fiji's integrated health adaptation plan and adapt these models to their unique local contexts. This reinforces the vital role of entities like the CPA in facilitating such exchanges, accelerating adaptation efforts, and building collective resilience across the entire Commonwealth.

The following table provides a comparative overview of climate-health challenges and national/parliamentary responses across selected Commonwealth nations:

**Table 2: Commonwealth Case Studies: Climate-Health Challenges and National/Parliamentary Responses**

Commonwealth Country	Key Climate-Health Challenges	National/Parliamentary Responses/Policies	Key Barriers/Gaps
Fiji	Dengue fever, diarrhoeal disease, malnutrition, tropical cyclones, sea-level rise, inundation, health infrastructure damage <sup>25</sup>	Fiji National Climate Change Policy (2018–2030), Climate Change Act 2021, Health National Adaptation Plan (HAP), Guidelines for Climate Resilient and Environmentally Sustainable Health Care Facilities (CRESHCF) <sup>29</sup>	Health impacts initially considered indirectly in policy <sup>25</sup>
Maldives	Sea-level rise, coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion (freshwater threat), critical infrastructure damage, coral reef degradation, human health vulnerability <sup>34</sup>	National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA), Strategic National Action Plan, Climate Trust Fund <sup>34</sup>	Weak institutional/coordination mechanisms, limited capacity for risk assessment, uncoordinated access to finance <sup>34</sup>
Caribbean SIDS	Sea-level rise, heavy rain, tropical cyclones, storm surges, food	Barbados Programme of Action (BPoA), Mauritius Strategy, SAMOA Pathway	Limited financial/human capital to mitigate risk, reliance on international aid <sup>6</sup>

	insecurity, water contamination, vector-borne diseases (malaria, Zika), economic losses (tourism, agriculture) <sup>6</sup>	(international frameworks) <sup>28</sup>	
Australia	Heatwaves (fatalities, illness, infrastructure disruption), bushfire smoke (respiratory), floods/droughts (mental health, PTSD, anxiety, depression, suicide risk), productivity loss <sup>14</sup>	Climate Change Act 2022, Parliamentary Inquiries (Climate Risk on Insurance, Schools, Planning System, Net Zero Commission) <sup>36</sup>	Translating inquiry recommendations into concrete action, fragmented responses <sup>44</sup>
Nigeria	Food/water insecurity, heat stress, infectious/vector-borne diseases, coastal/inland flooding (drowning, disease outbreaks, mental health), diarrhoeal deaths in children <sup>22</sup>	National Health Adaptation Strategy, National Agricultural Resilience Framework <sup>22</sup>	Poor governance, weak stakeholder engagement, limited collective action <sup>41</sup>
India	Heatwaves (public health, food shortages, death risk, hinders SDGs), vector-borne disease spread <sup>23</sup>	National Climate Vulnerability Indicator (CVI) <sup>23</sup>	Missing physical risk indicator for heatwaves in CVI, need for improved measurement and partnerships <sup>23</sup>
Kenya	Vector-borne diseases (malaria, dengue fever, Rift Valley fever)	Broader climate-health efforts (solar power for clinics, waste management), need for integrated surveillance,	Weak surveillance, overstretched health systems, post-pandemic fatigue <sup>2</sup>

	amplified by climate change <sup>2</sup>	community engagement, cross-border collaboration <sup>2</sup>	
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## Section 3: Parliaments as Pillars of Resilience: Legislative and Oversight Solutions

Parliaments hold a pivotal position in addressing the climate-health crisis, possessing unique powers to shape national responses through legislation, oversight, budgetary control, and fostering collaboration.

### 3.1 Strengthening Legal Frameworks for Climate-Health Action

The foundation of effective climate-health action lies in robust legal frameworks that provide clarity, mandate action, and ensure long-term commitment.

#### Enacting Comprehensive Climate Change Legislation

Parliaments play a critical role in translating international climate agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, into binding national law.<sup>8</sup> Such legislation provides a stable and predictable framework for climate action, moving it from discretionary policy to mandatory obligation. For example, Australia's Climate Change Act 2022 outlines ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets—a 43% reduction from 2005 levels by 2030 and net zero by 2050.<sup>39</sup> This Act also mandates the minister to prepare and table an annual climate change statement and assigns an advisory role to the Climate Change Authority.<sup>40</sup> This legal codification anchors climate goals in domestic law, providing crucial stability against political shifts and ensuring continuity of policy beyond electoral cycles.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Fiji's Climate Change Act 2021 establishes a comprehensive national response to climate change, providing for the regulation and governance of this response, and introducing a system for the measurement, reporting, and verification of greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>29</sup> Its objectives include safeguarding Fiji's future and enabling the nation to meet its international obligations.<sup>30</sup> The UK's Climate Change Act 2008 has been instrumental in achieving a more than 50% reduction in UK emissions since 1990, setting ambitious targets like a 68% reduction by 2030.<sup>46</sup> These examples demonstrate that legally binding targets and clear reporting mechanisms are essential for ensuring policy continuity and accountability, providing long-term predictability for investment and action in climate mitigation and adaptation.

## **Integrating Health Considerations into National Climate Policies**

While comprehensive climate acts are vital, an initial common gap is the insufficient explicit integration of health considerations.<sup>25</sup> The evolution of Fiji's policy response illustrates how this gap can be addressed. Fiji's Health National Adaptation Plan (HAP) serves as a commendable example of a sectoral plan that aligns with the broader Climate Change Act 2021.<sup>32</sup> This plan specifically outlines adaptation and mitigation actions for the health sector, including commitments for vulnerability assessments and the development of a low-carbon health system.<sup>32</sup> This approach demonstrates the "Health in All Policies" principle, which acknowledges that health outcomes are influenced by policies across various sectors.<sup>25</sup> The progression from indirect to explicit health integration in Fiji's climate policies reveals that initial climate legislation may not adequately address health nuances. Parliaments can proactively address this by mandating that governments develop Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) for all new climate-related legislation and reviewing existing laws to ensure that health co-benefits and potential adverse impacts are systematically considered. This approach helps mainstream health into climate governance from the outset, rather than treating it as an afterthought.

## **Developing Laws for Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate-Resilient Infrastructure**

Beyond immediate disaster response, legislatures should enact laws that foster proactive, long-term resilience. This includes developing and enforcing robust land-use planning laws and building regulations that explicitly account for future climate risks and promote resilient infrastructure.<sup>33</sup> For instance, recommendations from parliamentary inquiries in Australia have highlighted the need to pursue land-use and planning laws that include the feasibility of prohibiting future development in high-risk areas.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Fiji has developed guidelines for climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable healthcare facilities, providing structural and functional design requirements for new construction and renovations.<sup>33</sup> This legislative shift from reactive recovery to preventative design is crucial for reducing future health burdens and economic costs associated with climate-induced disasters. By embedding these considerations into legal frameworks, Parliaments can ensure that communities and critical services are better prepared for the inevitable impacts of a changing climate.

## **3.2 Enhancing Parliamentary Oversight and Accountability**

Legislative oversight is a cornerstone of good governance, ensuring that government actions align with national objectives and serve the public interest.

## **The Role of Parliamentary Committees in Scrutinising Climate-Health Policies**

Parliamentary Committees are instrumental in investigating policy matters, government administration, and performance, including in the context of climate change and health.<sup>48</sup> In Australia, various Parliamentary Committees have undertaken inquiries into climate-related issues. For example, the Senate Select Committee on the Impact of Climate Risk on Insurance Premiums and Availability made recommendations on establishing a national disaster risk map, increasing transparency in insurance premiums, and boosting investment in disaster mitigation.<sup>36</sup> The New South Wales Parliament's Education and Health Standing Committee has inquired into the response of schools to climate change, while another inquiry is examining the planning system and its impacts on the environment and communities.<sup>37</sup> In the UK, the Climate Assembly UK provided detailed recommendations to Parliament on achieving net-zero emissions, highlighting fairness, improved information, and strong government leadership.<sup>49</sup> The UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) also provides statutory reports on emissions reduction progress and adaptation, offering critical scrutiny.<sup>46</sup>

While these committee inquiries are vital, a persistent challenge lies in ensuring that government recommendations are accepted and effectively implemented.<sup>44</sup> Studies indicate that government acceptance of recommendations can be low, particularly for those calling for significant policy change.<sup>44</sup> To enhance their oversight power, Parliaments can legislate for mandatory government responses to committee reports, establish robust follow-up mechanisms, and empower committees with greater investigative powers and resources. Research suggests that repeated, specific recommendations with clear addressees and action points are more likely to be accepted, providing a practical strategy for committees to increase their impact.<sup>44</sup>

## **Holding Governments Accountable for Climate Commitments and Health Outcomes**

Parliaments have a fundamental responsibility to hold governments accountable for their climate commitments and the resulting health outcomes. This involves ensuring that the provisions of international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, are not only translated into national legislation but are also backed by adequate budget allocations for their implementation.<sup>8</sup> Parliamentary oversight is crucial for assessing whether governments are meeting their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and adapting effectively to climate impacts.<sup>8</sup> This includes examining the effectiveness of government policies in protecting public health from climate threats and ensuring that vulnerable populations receive appropriate support.

### **Ensuring the effective implementation of climate change legislation through post-legislative scrutiny**

Post-legislative scrutiny is the process by which Parliaments, review and evaluate the implementation, effectiveness, and impact of laws after they have been enacted. This process aims



to ensure that legislation achieves its intended objectives, is properly enforced, and delivers tangible benefits. It often involves committees examining how laws are functioning in practice, identifying challenges or gaps, and making recommendations for improvements or amendments to better meet policy goals. To reflect the most recent scientific findings and industry best practices in climate and environmental policy making, post-legislative scrutiny must be data and evidence driven. Therefore, the collaboration between legislators themselves (cross party), legislators and the executive, legislators and CSOs, legislators and the public, and legislators and international climate organisations must be strengthened. This will ensure access to broader data sources, the adequate allocation of resources for climate commitments to be implemented and accelerate progress towards achieving the objectives of the Paris Agreement.<sup>58</sup>

### **Promoting Transparency and Public Reporting on Climate Action**

Transparency in government reporting on climate action is a powerful tool for accountability, enabling public scrutiny and informing parliamentary debate. Legislation that mandates annual climate change statements, such as Australia's Climate Change Act 2022, ensures that progress towards emissions targets is regularly reported to Parliament.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the European Parliament's commitment to transparent environmental management through annual Environmental Statements demonstrates how detailed information can be provided to the public on environmental performance.<sup>52</sup> Parliaments can enhance this transparency by mandating standardised, accessible public reporting metrics that include health-specific indicators. This makes it easier to track progress, identify gaps, and hold governments to account, thereby fostering greater public engagement and strengthening the democratic process around climate action.

## **3.3 Budgetary Allocation and Accessing Climate Finance**

Effective climate-health initiatives require substantial financial investment, and Parliaments play a critical role in ensuring these resources are secured and employed efficiently.

### **Ensuring Adequate Domestic Funding for Climate-Health Initiatives**

Parliaments control the national purse strings and should exercise this power to ensure sufficient budget allocations for climate adaptation and mitigation, with a dedicated focus on health system resilience.<sup>8</sup> This includes funding for climate-resilient healthcare facilities, enhanced disease surveillance systems, and expanded mental health services to address the psychological impacts of climate change.<sup>32</sup> For example, in Australia, parliamentary recommendations have called for increasing the Disaster Ready Fund to \$400 million per annum for investment in disaster mitigation and resilience measures.<sup>36</sup> Legislatures can go beyond simple allocation by mandating climate-sensitive budgeting frameworks, ensuring that all public spending considers climate risks and potential health co-benefits. This institutionalises climate considerations into the financial heart of

government and also involves scrutinising the economic costs of inaction, such as the significant productivity losses from heatwaves.<sup>14</sup>

### **Leveraging International Climate Finance**

Many vulnerable Commonwealth countries, particularly SIDS, rely heavily on international aid and climate finance but often struggle to access these funds due to limited institutional capacity.<sup>6</sup> The Commonwealth has established vital mechanisms to address this. The Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH), for instance, helps countries unlock available climate finance by assisting small and vulnerable member states in bidding for and gaining increased access to funds.<sup>5</sup> As of September 2023, the CCFAH had secured approximately US\$310 million for adaptation, mitigation, and cross-cutting projects in beneficiary countries.<sup>5</sup> The CommonSensing Project, a partnership with Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, employs satellite remote sensing technology to enhance decision-making for climate resilience and improve access to climate finance.<sup>9</sup> Parliaments can play a crucial role in strengthening national capacities for proposal development, financial management, and oversight of climate finance utilisation, ensuring that funds translate into tangible health outcomes and are not lost to inefficiencies or corruption. This requires Parliaments to legislate for robust national frameworks to absorb and effectively use international finance.

### **Gender-Responsive Climate Budgeting**

Climate change disproportionately impacts women and girls, who often face heightened vulnerabilities due to existing social and economic inequalities.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, integrating gender considerations into climate policy and programs is not merely an equity issue but a strategic imperative for effective climate-health adaptation.<sup>9</sup> Legislatures can mandate gender impact assessments for all climate policies and allocate specific funds to address gender-differentiated vulnerabilities. This includes empowering women in climate decision-making processes and ensuring that climate-related budgetary allocations include specific provisions or targets for addressing gender inequalities, thereby ensuring that funds reach and benefit all segments of the population equitably.<sup>9</sup>

## **3.4 Fostering Cross-Party Collaboration and Public Engagement**

Addressing the long-term, systemic challenges of climate change requires a departure from short-term partisan politics and a concerted effort to build broad societal consensus.

### **Building Consensus and Non-Partisan Approaches to Climate-Health**

The long-term nature and severity of climate change demand sustained action that transcends typical political cycles.<sup>40</sup> Legislatures can foster cross-party consensus on climate-health issues

through formal mechanisms such as dedicated all-party parliamentary groups, joint committee inquiries, or by enshrining bipartisan climate targets in law. Such approaches help to depoliticise the core response, ensuring policy continuity and avoiding the "start-stop" approach that undermines effective long-term adaptation.<sup>45</sup> This ensures that climate action remains a national priority regardless of changes in government.

### **Empowering Vulnerable Groups and Local Communities in Policy Development**

Effective climate-health solutions should be community-driven and inclusive, particularly for those most affected by climate impacts.<sup>2</sup> Parliaments can mandate formal community consultation processes in climate and health policy development, ensuring that local knowledge, needs, and priorities directly inform national strategies. This moves away from top-down policy imposition towards participatory governance. Examples include establishing community-embedded action research partnerships to facilitate sharing of ideas and concerns.<sup>18</sup> Parliaments can legislate for mechanisms like citizen assemblies, public hearings in affected areas, or dedicated community advisory boards, ensuring that the voices of those on the frontline directly shape policy and resource allocation.<sup>49</sup>

### **Climate Change Education and Awareness for Parliamentarians and the Public**

A fundamental barrier to effective climate action is often a lack of scientific understanding among policymakers.<sup>45</sup> Parliaments can address this by mandating climate-health literacy training for all Members and parliamentary staff, utilising resources from expert bodies like the CPA.<sup>12</sup>

#### ***CPA Parliamentary Academy Online Course – 301 Parliamentary Action on Climate Change in Small Jurisdictions***

*This course is designed for elected or appointed Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. The course explores the basics of climate change and how it impacts small jurisdictions. It focuses on the science of climate change, disaster risk management and the importance of international frameworks. In addition, it examines how to mitigate against and adapt to the effects of climate change as well how to engage with the local community on the important topic. Register [here](#).*

Furthermore, Parliaments can support public education campaigns to build societal awareness and support for necessary policy changes, fostering a more informed citizenry capable of engaging with and advocating for climate solutions.<sup>49</sup> A good approach is for Members to use their opportunities in the parliamentary chamber to organise and contribute to topical debates. Members in many jurisdictions will ask to have an adjournment or topical debate to coincide with World Health Day, World Mental Health Day, or around the time of a UN Climate Change Conference of State Parties

(COP). In addition, Members could encourage individuals to sign petitions to debate related climate change and health matters.

### 3.5 The Role of the CPA and Other Bodies

International parliamentary networks and alliances are vital force multipliers, enabling peer-to-peer learning, sharing best practices, and collective advocacy, particularly for smaller states that may lack extensive resources.

#### **Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing Initiatives**

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) plays a crucial role in connecting, developing, promoting, and supporting Parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and new policy options.<sup>10</sup> The CPA has partnered with organisations like the UN Environment Programme and GLOBE to offer training on climate change, and provide a platform to advocate internationally for change. Importantly seeing opportunities to enhance legislators' capacities in handling climate concerns and strengthening their ability to pass legislation and scrutinise government actions.<sup>12</sup> CPA UK, for instance, undertakes projects funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to facilitate Commonwealth Parliaments in holding their governments accountable on sustainability and climate security.<sup>51</sup> These initiatives are essential for equipping Parliamentarians with the knowledge and tools needed to effectively address the complex climate-health nexus.

#### **Advocacy for Small and Vulnerable States**

The Commonwealth actively supports its small and vulnerable states by amplifying their calls for greater climate action on the international stage.<sup>5</sup> Initiatives like the Commonwealth Blue Charter, an agreement by all 56 member countries to cooperate on tackling ocean-related challenges, and the Living Lands Charter, which seeks to safeguard global land resources and promote sustainable land management, are examples of collective agreements aimed at building resilience.<sup>5</sup> These platforms allow the Commonwealth to advocate for international policies, mechanisms, and rules that are more responsive to the development needs of SIDS and other vulnerable countries, ensuring their unique challenges are recognised and addressed.

#### **Other Global Parliamentary Alliances**

Beyond the CPA, other global parliamentary alliances contribute significantly to advancing the climate-health agenda. The Global Parliamentary Alliance for Health, Rights and Development (GPA) provides a flexible platform for Parliamentarians from over 80 countries to advocate for better healthcare and to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 on "health

and well-being".<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the G20 Health and Development Partnership's Parliamentary Council works to enlighten Parliamentarians about global health trends and challenges, promoting the view of health as an investment into national economies rather than merely an expenditure.<sup>54</sup> These alliances foster peer-to-peer learning, share best practices, and enable collective advocacy, allowing Parliaments to leverage global expertise and amplify their national climate-health agendas on the international stage, thereby enhancing their national impact.

The following table provides a concise overview of parliamentary mechanisms for climate-health action across the Commonwealth:

**Table 3: Examples of Parliamentary Mechanisms for Climate-Health Action Across the Commonwealth**

<b>Parliamentary Mechanism</b>	<b>Specific Example (Country/Body)</b>	<b>Description of Action</b>	<b>Impact/Benefit</b>
Legislation	Australia's Climate Change Act 2022	Sets legally binding GHG emission reduction targets (43% by 2030, net zero by 2050), mandates annual ministerial statements, establishes advisory role for Climate Change Authority. <sup>39</sup>	Provides policy stability, anchors climate goals in domestic law, ensures long-term predictability.
Legislation	Fiji's Climate Change Act 2021	Establishes comprehensive response to climate change, provides governance for national response, introduces GHG measurement/reporting/verification. <sup>29</sup>	Safeguards Fiji's future, meets international obligations, creates institutional framework.
Legislation	UK's Climate Change Act 2008	Instrumental in driving significant GHG emission reductions (over 50% since 1990), sets ambitious targets (68% by 2030). <sup>46</sup>	Demonstrates effectiveness of legally binding targets, drives decarbonisation.
Oversight (Committees, Scrutiny)	Australian Parliamentary Inquiries (e.g., Climate Risk on Insurance,	Investigate policy matters, government administration, and performance related to climate impacts and responses. <sup>36</sup>	Identifies policy gaps, informs debate, provides recommendations for improvement.

	Schools, Planning System)		
Oversight (Committees, Scrutiny)	UK Climate Assembly UK	Gathers representative public views on how to reach net zero, with detailed recommendations to Parliament. <sup>49</sup>	Strengthens parliamentary democracy, provides evidence on public preferences, informs government policy.
Oversight (Committees, Scrutiny)	UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) reports	Provides statutory overview of UK government's progress in reducing emissions and adaptation. <sup>44</sup>	Drives accountability, highlights areas for improvement, informs parliamentary scrutiny.
Budgetary Allocation	Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH)	Assists small and vulnerable member states in bidding for and gaining increased access to climate finance. <sup>5</sup>	Unlocks available climate finance (approx. US\$310 million secured), builds capacity for finance access.
Cross-Party Collaboration	All-party parliamentary groups, joint committee inquiries	Facilitate consensus-building and long-term policy continuity on complex issues like climate change. <sup>45</sup>	Ensures sustained action beyond political cycles, leverages diverse perspectives.
Public Engagement	Community-embedded action research partnerships (e.g., Cornell's C-CHANGE)	Establish processes for sharing community ideas, issues, and needs with researchers and policymakers. <sup>18</sup>	Grounds policy in local knowledge, builds trust, empowers communities to reduce risks.
Capacity Building	CPA Training and Toolkits	Offer training on climate change to enhance legislators' capacities in handling climate concerns. <sup>12</sup>	Strengthens Parliamentarians' ability to pass legislation, scrutinise



			government, and formulate policy.
Advocacy	Commonwealth Secretariat's amplification of SIDS' calls for action	Supports small and vulnerable states by advocating for greater climate action in international forums. <sup>5</sup>	Amplifies voices of disproportionately affected nations, pushes for responsive international policies.
International Alliances	Global Parliamentary Alliance for Health, Rights and Development (GPA), G20 Health & Development Partnership's Parliamentary Council	Provide platforms for Parliamentarians worldwide to advocate for better healthcare and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). <sup>53</sup>	Fosters peer-to-peer learning, shares best practices, promotes health as an investment.

## Case Studies

This section provides more detailed examinations of parliamentary responses to climate-health challenges within specific Commonwealth contexts, offering deeper insights into their approaches and effectiveness.

### Case Study 1: Australia's Legislative Framework and Inquiry Responses to Climate Impacts

Australia's experience with climate change underscores the multi-sectoral nature of its impacts, from deadly heatwaves and bushfires to floods and droughts that devastate communities and livelihoods.<sup>14</sup> In response, the Australian Parliament has enacted significant legislation and conducted various inquiries to address these escalating risks. The Climate Change Act 2022 is a landmark piece of legislation, codifying Australia's greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets of a 43% reduction from 2005 levels by 2030 and net zero by 2050.<sup>39</sup> This Act also mandates the minister to prepare and table an annual climate change statement, providing a mechanism for regular reporting and accountability.<sup>40</sup> This legislative framework is crucial for providing policy continuity and

stability, anchoring climate goals in domestic law to ensure they are not easily diverted by political shifts or competing priorities.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond overarching legislation, Australian Parliamentary Committees have delved into specific climate-related challenges. The Senate Select Committee on the Impact of Climate Risk on Insurance Premiums and Availability, for instance, made recommendations concerning national disaster risk mapping, greater transparency in insurance costs, and increased investment in disaster mitigation measures.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the New South Wales Parliament's Education and Health Standing Committee has inquired into the response of schools to climate change, examining co-benefits of climate action, mitigation/adaptation efforts, and barriers faced by schools.<sup>38</sup> Another inquiry by the NSW Parliament is focusing on the planning system and its impacts on the environment and communities in the face of climate change.<sup>37</sup>

While these robust inquiry mechanisms are critical for identifying policy gaps and informing debate, a significant challenge lies in translating committee recommendations into concrete government policy and action, particularly when those recommendations challenge the status quo.<sup>44</sup> Analysis of government responses to recommendations from bodies like the UK Committee on Climate Change indicates that only a small percentage are accepted in full, with a notable proportion of rejections for calls for large policy change.<sup>44</sup> This highlights the need for legislatures to strengthen mechanisms that enforce or incentivise government adoption of committee findings, perhaps by mandating substantive responses and follow-up actions, thereby ensuring that parliamentary scrutiny leads to tangible policy improvements.

## **Case Study 2: Fiji's Integrated Approach to Climate and Health Policy**

Fiji's journey in addressing the climate-health nexus demonstrates an evolving and increasingly integrated policy approach. As a Small Island Developing State, Fiji is acutely vulnerable to climate impacts, which manifest in significant health challenges such as dengue fever, diarrhoeal disease, and malnutrition.<sup>25</sup> The nation's foundational response is articulated in the Fiji Climate Change Act 2021, a comprehensive framework designed to safeguard Fiji's future, provide for the governance of its national climate response, and ensure compliance with international obligations.<sup>29</sup>

Initially, a policy analysis of Fiji's National Climate Change Policy and the corresponding National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy revealed that health impacts were only considered to a minor extent, often indirectly.<sup>25</sup> This finding underscored a common oversight in early climate legislation, where the direct human health dimensions were not explicitly prioritised. Recognising this gap, Fiji has demonstrated a proactive adaptation of its policy framework. The subsequent development of the Health National Adaptation Plan (HAP) is a testament to this learning process.<sup>32</sup> The HAP functions as a sectoral plan under the broader National Adaptation Plan and aligns seamlessly with the Climate Change Act 2021 and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Strategic Plan.<sup>32</sup> It sets out a clear vision for building a climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable health system,

integrating both adaptation and mitigation actions. Key commitments include undertaking climate change and health vulnerability assessments, developing a sustainable low-carbon health system, and aiming for net-zero health sector emissions by 2050.<sup>32</sup>

Further reinforcing this integrated approach, Fiji has developed Guidelines for Climate Resilient and Environmentally Sustainable Health Care Facilities (CRESHCF) in partnership with the World Health Organization.<sup>33</sup> These guidelines provide practical requirements for health workforce development, WASH facilities, energy efficiency, and resilient infrastructure within healthcare settings.<sup>33</sup> This iterative nature of policy development, where initial broad climate legislation is refined and deepened through sectoral plans that explicitly integrate health, often driven by a recognition of initial gaps, highlights the importance of ongoing policy review and adaptation. Fiji's experience provides a valuable blueprint for other nations on how to mainstream health into climate governance effectively.

### **Case Study 3: Parliamentary Engagement in Climate Adaptation in the Maldives**

The Maldives, a nation composed of low-lying atoll islands, faces an extreme and existential threat from climate change, particularly from sea-level rise.<sup>6</sup> Projections indicate that even a modest sea-level rise could lead to the loss of most of its land area, threatening freshwater resources, critical infrastructure, and the very habitability of the islands.<sup>34</sup> This unique vulnerability places public health at the forefront of adaptation efforts, as environmental degradation directly undermines the foundations of human well-being.

In response, the Maldivian government has undertaken several climate-responsive planning processes. Its National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) identifies human health as a key area of vulnerability, alongside land, critical infrastructure, and water resources.<sup>35</sup> The country has also signed the world's first Strategic National Action Plan that integrates disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, formulated through broad consultations with key sectors including health.<sup>35</sup> These plans aim to increase the resilience of vulnerable systems against climate hazards and risks to achieve sustainable development outcomes.<sup>35</sup>

However, significant barriers to effective adaptation persist, including weak institutional and coordination mechanisms for climate change adaptation, limited technical capacity for climate risk vulnerability assessment, and uncoordinated access to international climate finance.<sup>34</sup> The Maldives' reliance on external resources and its internal institutional barriers highlight the critical role of parliamentary diplomacy and capacity building in accessing and effectively utilising international climate finance for health adaptation. Parliaments can play a crucial role in strengthening national coordination mechanisms through legislative frameworks. Furthermore, parliamentary advocacy for initiatives like the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH) becomes vital, as such hubs assist vulnerable member states in unlocking and gaining increased access to climate funding, which is essential for implementing adaptation measures that directly

protect public health and ensure the survival of communities.<sup>5</sup> The Maldivian case underscores the profound need for legislative bodies to engage in long-term, multi-sectoral planning and international advocacy to secure the necessary resources for national survival and health resilience.

#### **Case Study 4: UK Parliament's Scrutiny of Climate Change and Health Preparedness**

The UK Parliament, through the work of the Climate Change Committee (CCC) and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), has identified a critical gap between the growing health threats from climate change and the national health system's preparedness. This case study synthesises findings from two recent reports to illustrate the current situation and the urgent call for action.

##### The Growing Health Threat

A May 2025 report from the POST highlights that climate change is "the biggest health threat facing humanity" (WHO) and a major risk to UK health (UKHSA). The report provides concrete evidence of this impact:

- **Financial Cost of Heat:** Heat-related mortality in England currently costs £6.8 billion annually. This is projected to more than double, reaching £14.7 billion by 2050.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** The effects are not distributed equally. The report found that vulnerable groups, including the elderly, ethnic minorities, and disabled people, are disproportionately affected by climate-related health issues.

This analysis underscores that climate change is not a future problem but an existing threat to public health and economic stability.

##### The Inadequate National Response

Despite the clear and present danger, a 2025 statutory progress report from the CCC to Parliament concludes that the UK's adaptation efforts are inadequate. The report, which assesses the Third National Adaptation Programme, found that most outcomes scored poorly. It criticises the lack of effective delivery and coordination in adaptation planning, particularly within health systems, which are not adequately prepared for threats such as heatwaves, poor air quality, and emerging diseases. This report serves as a strong parliamentary critique, highlighting that the government's current plans are insufficient to protect the population from escalating climate risks.

#### **Case Study 5: Post-Legislative Scrutiny of Climate Change and Public Health Policies**

Across various jurisdictions, post-legislative scrutiny<sup>58</sup> plays a crucial role in assessing the effectiveness of climate change legislation, especially regarding its impact on public health. In the United Kingdom, Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee<sup>61</sup> routinely evaluates how climate policies influence health outcomes, examining issues such as air quality improvements and

heatwave resilience. The UK Climate Change Act and associated strategies are scrutinised to ensure they deliver not only emission reductions but also tangible health benefits, such as lower respiratory illnesses and heat-related risks.

Similarly, in the European Union, evaluations of climate directives like the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) include assessments of health co-benefits, such as reduced air pollution and associated respiratory diseases. The European Parliament's reviews aim to align climate and health objectives, emphasising integrated policy approaches. In the United States, agencies like the CDC conduct ongoing analyses of climate impacts on health, and congressional hearings scrutinise legislation designed to bolster climate resilience, particularly concerning heatwaves, vector-borne diseases, and air quality deterioration.

Australia also engages in this integrated approach, with parliamentary and health agencies examining how climate change—through bushfires, heatwaves, and pollution—poses direct health threats, especially to vulnerable populations. Independent academic and policy reports further contribute by evaluating the health benefits inherent in climate mitigation strategies, highlighting the importance of co-benefits such as improved air quality and reduced disease incidence.

Overall, these evaluations underscore a growing recognition that effective climate legislation should also consider public health outcomes. Parliaments cannot resolve critical issues through legislation alone. Laws need to be properly implemented and frequently assessed to determine whether policy and implementation adaptations are required. Overall scrutiny ensures accountability, promotes policy integration, and helps maximise co-benefits, ultimately fostering healthier, more resilient communities in the face of climate change.

### **Case Study 6: India's Parliamentary Work on Climate Change, Pollution, and Public Health**

India's Parliament has actively addressed the intertwined issues of climate change, air pollution, and public health through various reports, debates, and committee reviews. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment and Forests has played a significant role in scrutinising policies affecting air quality and health. Its **Sixth Report (2018-19)** highlighted the severe health impacts of rising air pollution, such as respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and called for stricter enforcement of pollution control laws and comprehensive action plans across states. The committee emphasised integrating health considerations into environmental policies, urging measures to improve air quality monitoring and public awareness.

Debates within Parliament have frequently focused on the health consequences of pollution, with Members raising concerns about increasing disease burdens linked to poor air quality. These discussions underscore the need for stronger emission standards for vehicles and industries, aligning pollution mitigation efforts with health protection goals. Parliament's questions and discussions regularly assess the progress of programs like the **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)**, which aims to reduce urban air pollution, and the **Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP)** for Delhi and surrounding areas.

Furthermore, Parliament has examined India's climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, recognising that climate actions can generate significant health co-benefits, including reduced air pollution. Several reports have called for an integrated approach—linking climate policies with health interventions—to foster resilient and healthy communities.

In summary, India's parliamentary work reflects an increasing awareness of how pollution and climate change impact public health, advocating for stronger regulations, implementation, and integration of health considerations into environmental strategies. Continued scrutiny aims to ensure that policy measures effectively address both climate mitigation and health protection, especially in urban and vulnerable populations.

## Policy Recommendations

Drawing from the comprehensive analysis of climate-health impacts and parliamentary responses across the Commonwealth, the following actionable recommendations are presented for individual Commonwealth Parliaments.

### Legislate for Resilience:

- **Enact and Strengthen National Climate Change Acts:** Legislatures should prioritise the enactment and strengthening of national climate change acts that explicitly integrate public health considerations. These acts should set ambitious, legally binding emissions reduction targets and robust adaptation goals, providing a clear and stable policy direction.<sup>29</sup>
- **Mandate Health Impact Assessments (HIAs):** To ensure that health is systematically considered across all climate actions, Parliaments should legislate for mandatory Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) for all major climate-related policies, projects, and infrastructure developments. This will help identify potential health co-benefits and adverse impacts from the outset.<sup>25</sup>
- **Develop and Enforce Resilient Infrastructure Laws:** Parliaments should develop and rigorously enforce land-use planning laws and building codes that account for current and future climate risks. This includes promoting the construction of climate-resilient infrastructure, particularly healthcare facilities, and potentially prohibiting development in high-risk areas to minimise future health burdens and economic losses.<sup>33</sup>

### Enhance Oversight:

- **Mandate Cross-Committee Inquiries:** Parliaments should establish and mandate regular, cross-committee parliamentary inquiries (bicameral or multi-committee approaches – for example, Climate Change and Health-related committees working collaboratively) into the impacts of climate change on health and the effectiveness of government responses. These



can be post-legislative inquiries or general governmental scrutiny inquiries. This fosters a "whole-of-government" approach to climate-health challenges.<sup>36</sup>

- **Ensure Government Accountability for Recommendations:** Implement legislative mechanisms that require substantive government responses to Parliamentary Committee reports and recommendations, including clear timelines for action and follow-up mechanisms. This ensures that parliamentary scrutiny translates into concrete policy changes, especially for repeated and specific recommendations.<sup>44</sup>
- **Require Comprehensive Public Reporting:** Mandate comprehensive, accessible public reporting on climate action and its health outcomes. This reporting should include disaggregated data for vulnerable populations, enabling greater public scrutiny, informing parliamentary debate, and fostering accountability.<sup>39</sup>

#### **Prioritise Funding:**

- **Allocate Sufficient National Budgets:** Advocate for and allocate adequate national budgets for climate adaptation and mitigation, with a dedicated focus on building health system resilience. This includes investments in climate-resilient healthcare facilities, enhanced disease surveillance, and expanded mental health services.<sup>8</sup> Parliaments should also mandate climate-sensitive budgeting frameworks to ensure all public spending considers climate risks and health co-benefits.
- **Strengthen Access to Climate Finance:** Strengthen national capacities for identifying, developing proposals for, accessing, managing, and transparently utilising international climate finance. This involves leveraging mechanisms like the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH) to ensure funds translate into tangible health outcomes.<sup>5</sup>
- **Implement Gender-Responsive Climate Budgeting:** Given the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and girls, Parliaments should implement gender-responsive climate budgeting. This involves allocating specific funds to address gender-differentiated vulnerabilities and empowering women in climate decision-making processes.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Foster Collaboration:**

- **Establish Cross-Party Parliamentary Groups:** Encourage and support the establishment of formal cross-party parliamentary groups on climate and health. This helps build political consensus and ensure long-term policy continuity, transcending short-term electoral cycles.<sup>45</sup>
- **Engage Stakeholders and Communities:** Legislate for mandatory and meaningful consultation processes with civil society organisations, health experts, scientific bodies, and particularly affected local communities in climate and health policy development and oversight. This ensures that policies are community-driven and grounded in local knowledge and needs.<sup>2</sup>

- **Promote "Health in All Policies":** Ensure that health ministries and experts are systematically consulted and integrated into policy development across all relevant sectoral policies, including agriculture, water, energy, and urban planning. This mainstreaming of health considerations is critical for holistic climate action.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Invest in Capacity:**

- **Support Climate-Health Literacy Training:** Invest in ongoing climate-health literacy training for Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. This should utilise resources from organisations like the CPA and other expert bodies to enhance legislators' understanding of climate science and its health implications.<sup>12</sup>
- **Strengthen Public Health Surveillance:** Allocate resources to strengthen national public health surveillance systems to effectively track climate-sensitive diseases and monitor health outcomes related to climate change. This data is crucial for evidence-based policy making and adaptive responses.<sup>2</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Climate change is undeniably the defining public health crisis of our era, presenting an urgent and multifaceted threat that demands immediate, integrated, and sustained action. The health of populations is inextricably linked to the health of the planet, and the escalating impacts, from extreme heat and infectious disease surges to food insecurity and profound mental health burdens, underscore this fundamental connection. Within the Commonwealth, a diverse family of nations, these challenges are particularly acute, with Small Island Developing States facing existential threats that necessitate innovative and comprehensive responses.

Parliaments across the Commonwealth possess unique and indispensable power to drive the necessary systemic changes. Through their core functions—enacting robust laws, ensuring government accountability, strategically allocating resources, and fostering broad collaboration—Parliaments can shape a healthier, more resilient future for their citizens. By legislating for ambitious emissions reductions, mandating health impact assessments, investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, and strengthening oversight mechanisms, Parliaments can translate international commitments into tangible national progress. Furthermore, by prioritising equitable access to climate finance, implementing gender-responsive budgeting, and empowering local communities, they can ensure that climate action is inclusive and addresses the disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations.

The experiences of Commonwealth nations, from Australia's legislative frameworks and parliamentary inquiries to Fiji's integrated climate and health policies and the Maldives' urgent adaptation efforts, offer valuable lessons. While challenges such as policy implementation gaps and

limited access to finance persist, these case studies demonstrate the potential for learning, adaptation, and collective action within the Commonwealth network.

This report serves as a resounding call for bold, far-reaching action. "Business as usual is not an option".<sup>5</sup> The time for proactive, parliamentary-led solutions is now. By embracing their critical role, Commonwealth Parliaments can not only mitigate the devastating health impacts of climate change but also champion a pathway towards a more sustainable, equitable, and healthier world for current and future generations.

## Additional Information

### Further Reading List

- U.S. Global Change Research Program's 2016 Climate and Health Assessment <sup>1</sup>
- WHO publications on climate change and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) <sup>7</sup>
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports <sup>8</sup>
- CPA Parliamentarian's Toolkit on Climate Change and Small States <sup>8</sup>
- Fiji's Health National Adaptation Plan <sup>32</sup>
- UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) reports <sup>46</sup>
- GLOBE Climate Legislation Study <sup>45</sup>
- World Bank's "Turn Down The Heat" reports <sup>45</sup>
- Climate Change Laws of the World <sup>56</sup>

### Relevant Organisations

- Commonwealth Secretariat <sup>5</sup>
- Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH) <sup>5</sup>
- Climate Parliament
- GLOBE – The Global Legislators Organisation
- World Health Organization (WHO) <sup>7</sup>
- UN Environment Programme (UNEP) <sup>12</sup>
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) <sup>2</sup>
- Global Parliamentary Alliance for Health, Rights and Development (GPA) <sup>53</sup>
- G20 Health & Development Partnership's Parliamentary Council <sup>54</sup>
- Climate Change Authority (Australia) <sup>40</sup>
- UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) <sup>44</sup>
- Parliamentarians for Global Action
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
- ParlAmericas and Parliamentary Network on Climate Change and Sustainability

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## About the CPA

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) connects, develops, promotes and supports Parliamentarians and their staff to identify Benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth. The CPA collaborates with Parliaments and other organisations, including the intergovernmental community, to achieve its statement of purpose. It brings Parliamentarians and Parliamentary staff together to exchange ideas among themselves and with experts in various fields; to identify Benchmarks of good practices and new policy options they can adopt or adapt in the governance of their societies.

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