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Editorial

Climate Change as a Global Public Health Emergency: Lessons from Nepal's Devastating Flash Floods

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Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global public health challenges of the twenty-first century. Its consequences extend beyond environmental degradation, threatening human health, livelihoods, food security, and the resilience of healthcare systems. Increasingly frequent and intense extreme weather events, including heatwaves, floods, droughts, and wildfires, demonstrate that climate change is no longer a distant environmental concern but an immediate threat requiring coordinated international action. Recent events in Nepal provide a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of climate-related disasters and the urgent need to strengthen global preparedness. The devastating flash floods in Nepal on August 26, 2026, illustrate the intersection of climate-related hazards and human vulnerability. Following a glacier collapse near the Nepal–Tibet border, enormous volumes of water and debris swept through downstream valleys, destroying settlements, infrastructure, schools, and essential facilities. According to United Nations (UN), the disaster resulted in more than 1,500 deaths, with thousands of people still missing and approximately 100,000 affected.[1] The destruction of bridges, hydropower facilities, and educational institutions further disrupted essential services and complicated humanitarian assistance. Recovery requirements were estimated at US$4.8 billion, highlighting the substantial economic consequences for a country with limited resources. However, the magnitude of this disaster cannot be understood through climate change alone. The interaction between environmental hazards and human-induced vulnerabilities significantly intensified its consequences. Agarwala (2026) described the disaster as a compound socio-environmental event in which climate-related instability intersected with unplanned settlements, infrastructure development in vulnerable geographical areas, and weaknesses in transboundary early-warning systems.[2] Similarly, Khadka (2026) reported substantial expansion of built-up areas in high-risk Himalayan zones between 2016 and 2023, particularly in locations exposed to glacial lake flooding.[3] These findings highlight an important lesson: climate adaptation must extend beyond responding to disasters and include appropriate land-use planning, climate-resilient infrastructure, and effective risk assessment before development takes place.

Nepal's experience also exposes the profound inequity of the global climate crisis. Despite contributing only approximately 0.08% of global greenhouse gas emissions, Nepal faces disproportionately severe consequences from climate-related hazards.[1] This imbalance reflects a broader climate justice concern: countries with relatively low emissions

and limited financial and institutional capacity frequently experience some of the greatest climate-related health and socioeconomic burdens. Vulnerable populations, particularly women, children, older adults, and communities living in geographically exposed areas, face increased risks from displacement, disrupted healthcare services, food insecurity, and infectious disease outbreaks. The disproportionate effects of climate change on lower-income populations further emphasize the need for equitable international financing and technical support. From a public health perspective, these circumstances demand a shift from reactive disaster management towards anticipatory and coordinated global action. Brink et al. (2026) argue that climate change should be recognized as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), emphasizing that its immediate and cross-border consequences require stronger international coordination.[4] Such recognition could strengthen surveillance, emergency preparedness, resource mobilization, and international collaboration while positioning health protection at the centre of climate policies. Importantly, early-warning systems must also be strengthened through reliable cross-border communication, particularly in mountainous regions where disasters can develop rapidly and affect communities far downstream.

The international community must therefore move beyond declarations of concern towards measurable commitments. Developed countries should fulfil their climate-financing obligations, while governments must prioritize emissions reduction, disaster preparedness, and investments in resilient healthcare and infrastructure. Nepal's recovery should not be regarded solely as a national responsibility but as a shared international commitment reflecting the unequal distribution of climate-related risks and responsibilities. Ultimately, the lessons from Nepal extend far beyond its geographical borders. Climate change threatens collective health security, and no country can adequately address its consequences in isolation. Recognizing climate change as an urgent public health priority, strengthening international cooperation, and ensuring climate justice are essential steps towards protecting present and future generations. The time for global awareness must translate into decisive action before preventable environmental hazards become even greater humanitarian and public health catastrophes.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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