How do we move from talk to action?

Bolstering community resilience through health-focused climate adaptation

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Outline

1. Context
2. Problem
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It's getting HOT in here
Climate stressors pose significant risk to human health.

- Displacement, injury, mental health consequences
- Exacerbation of respiratory illness
- Water- and vector-borne disease transmission
- Heat-related illness, increased mortality rates

“...the biggest health threat facing humanity.”

World Health Organization, 2021
Climate change impacts will result in decreased health outcomes and increased premature death rates, in the near- to long- term future *(high confidence)*.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022
The Government of Canada recognizes that climate adaptation is fundamental.

This involves the implementation of strategies to reduce risk and vulnerability.

Regardless of mitigation efforts, future projections indicate worsening climate stressors.
Health-Focussed Climate Adaptation

- Adaptation can effectively improve health outcomes associated with climate stressors.

- Implementation of adaptation should occur at the municipal level, with support from broader levels of government.

- Strategies fall into 6 categories: capacity building, planning/policy, practice/behaviour, information, observing systems, & vulnerability assessment.
Health-Focused Adaptation Strategies

- Early warning/response systems
- Increase potable water access
- Decrease flood risk
- Surveillance
- Education
- Access to mental health services
- Reduce heat island effect
- Air filtration systems
- Vehicle traffic reduction
Adaptation action targeted at preserving community health has been slow to commence, and is often disjointed between levels of governance.
Research Problem

To what extent are communities prepared for the health risks associated with anthropogenic climate change?
Methods

- Qualitative, case study methodology
- Criterion sampling approach
- Edmonton, Prince George, Surrey, Calgary & Vancouver
Methods

- 16 semi-structured, key actor interviews
- Informants from communities and public health sector
- Review and analysis of strategic community documents
  - MDPs, OCPs, and climate adaptation plans
Overview of Findings

- Communities are generally underprepared for the health risks associated with climate change.

- Although progress has been made to develop policy/plans, implementation appears to lag.
Reported Stressors & Health Risks

- Heat, wildfire, variable precipitation and extreme weather events are immediate threats.
- Stressors are increasing in severity.
- Health impacts are evident, and expected to worsen.
Reported Stressors & Health Risks

- high mortality rates, heat-related illness
- exacerbation of preexisting respiratory conditions, increased use of medical services
- water-borne disease, illness related to mixing of overflow and sewage water
- risk of injury, mental health consequences
Current Response
Strategic Documents

+ High-level focus on health
+ Understanding of the health impacts associated with relevant climate stressors
+ Commitment to mitigating risks
+ Social equity lens

- Strategies are often vague, lack specificity
- Non-committal language common
Implementation lags in practice
Adaptation efforts remain within the planning phase, or the planning has been finished, but they have not yet moved into action
Actualization of the plans is weak, implementation is ambiguous
"Better at developing plans than implementing them"
When asked directly, the majority of respondents describe their communities as "not prepared".

"We can plan all we want, but if we can't actually implement those plans, it doesn't really impact anything that we do."
Capacity
Interview Themes

Enabling
- Strong knowledge base/expertise
- Partnerships
- General awareness of climate change & support for action

Constraining
- Lack understanding of health consequences
- Lack of resources
  - time, funding and personnel
Governance
Interview Themes

Enabling
- Political will at the municipal level
- Climate champions, motivated decision-makers

Constraining
- Jurisdictional boundaries stagnating action
- Reactionary decision-making processes
Implications

- To avoid negative health outcomes, adaptation is critical.

- While health-focused adaptation planning has been initiated, efforts must be bolstered to ensure prepared and resilient communities.

"We had the heat dome last year. There was... I think 600 or some odd deaths across BC... 60 people passed away within our community, to heat related illness."
How do we move from talk to action?
Bolstering Health-Focused Adaptation

- Reframing the issue
  - Shifting climate change from an environmental issue to a public health issue
- Improving multi-level government coordination
  - Clarifying roles and responsibilities
- Addressing gaps in plans
  - Including steps for implementation and monitoring
References


