

# World at a 'tipping point' in climate change talks, COP27 delegate says

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The world is at a "tipping point" in its commitment to take action, says an expert on the impact of climate change on human health, as leaders from 195 countries gather at the 2022 United Nations Climate Change

Conference in Egypt.

"The [discussions](#) are literally, undeniably, a discussion of life and death," says Sherilee Harper, associate professor in the School of Public Health and Canada Research Chair in Climate Change and Health, who is a delegate at COP27.

"Climate change is killing people and that's very clear now. The scientific reports clearly show that evidence."

Harper was a lead author on one of the key scientific reports underpinning the meetings, which started Sunday and will run until Nov. 18.

[Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability](#) was released in February by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It outlines how the impact of [climate change](#) is unevenly distributed across the globe and even within communities, where socio-economic factors such as poverty and the effects of colonialism mean some are more vulnerable than others.

"People are starting to see and feel the impacts. They're starting to understand the urgency. And we're seeing the public place pressure on decision-makers and politicians to talk about how we can all come together to do more," says Harper, who is also a member of the Women and Children's Health Research Institute.

Harper is presenting at or moderating four sessions at COP27 summarizing key findings from the IPCC reports, including how the Arctic and coastal communities are changing due to climate pressure, and how to ensure that Indigenous and other knowledge systems are integrated into assessing climate damage. On Tuesday she moderated a panel on how climate change is undermining progress toward achieving

the United Nations' 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

## **Urgent mental health needs**

Harper expects to see progress made at this year's conference in three areas: first, on climate change finance and equity—in other words, who should pay for the loss and damage caused by climate disasters such as the recent flooding in Pakistan. Second, how to monitor adaptation—all the steps, big and small, from setting up cooling stations during [heat waves](#) to permanently moving communities away from climate danger. And finally, health—including short- and long-term damage to [mental health](#) caused by climate change events.

In a recent paper published in *PLOS Climate*, Harper and colleagues state that "widespread mental health responses are urgently needed now. The choices made at COP27 and the choices we all make in the next decade will determine our future and our mental wellness."

While the physical [impact of climate change](#) can be immediate and disastrous—for example, asthma exacerbated by inhaling smoke when wildfires run rampant—the mental health effects such as fear, anxiety and depression are layered on top and can last even longer, she points out.

Harper is encouraged by examples around the world where mental health adaptations have worked. In Australia during the extreme bushfire season of 2019–20, the government extended the hours of helplines and started new, free programs for youth. In China, temporary housing was set up for people after storms, and it was found that those who used the shelters experienced less post-traumatic stress. In Europe, plans are in place to respond to heat waves that include opening cooling centers, having volunteers deliver water and sending out public service campaigns with warnings to stay indoors and to check on neighbors.

Harper says Canada is stepping up with a [National Adaptation Strategy](#), expected to be released before the end of the year, possibly during COP27. In October, Canada's chief public health officer released her annual report with a focus on climate change: [Mobilizing public health action on climate change in Canada](#). And [Climate Science 2050: Advancing Science and Knowledge on Climate Change](#) was recently created as well. Harper was consulted on all of them.

"I'm hoping that Canada will play a really important leadership role," she says.

## **Worldwide research and co-operation**

The University of Alberta has been selected to take a leadership role in a COP27 side event to explore how universities can contribute to global climate change efforts. President and vice-chancellor Bill Flanagan will present on behalf of the Worldwide Universities Network, an international network of 24 universities on six continents, on "Universities as key solutions providers: Leveraging our local and global networks for innovation."

Flanagan's goal is to demonstrate how universities are at the center of many of the technological, policy and societal innovations that are needed to combat climate change, building partnerships across disciplines and with local and global governments, industries and non-profits.

For example, the U of A is a global leader in green energy solutions through its Future Energy Systems program. Launched in 2016, it has 121 interdisciplinary projects on the go, all aimed at helping the world transition to a low net-carbon economy.

The university is also home base for an ambitious multinational,

Indigenous-led research program, The Ǻrramăt Project, which examines links between the loss of biodiversity and the decline in Indigenous health worldwide.

The U of A also recently launched a graduate certificate in climate change and [health](#), open to students from across faculties.

"Climate change is the ultimate transdisciplinary challenge," Harper says, noting solutions will be found only when researchers leave their disciplinary silos. "You need to work with climate change modelers, environmental scientists, economists and epidemiologists like me."

"At COP27, the hot topics are going to be the social topics about how [climate](#) change is impacting people and what we're going to do about it. It's not just about technology—it's about society. It's about humanity."

**More information:** Sherilee L. Harper et al, Including mental health as part of climate change impacts and adaptation assessment: A critical advance in IPCC AR6, *PLOS Climate* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pclm.0000033](#)

Provided by University of Alberta

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