

## **“Perceptions of the Impacts of Climate Change on Public Health: Results of a Knowledge, Attitude and Practice Survey Conducted in the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States”**

*(This is a summary of the study done on behalf of the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU) of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Secretariat by Reynold S. Hewitt B.Sc. (Hons), M.P.H., August 2009)*

The nine island nations of the OECS and the people who live there, are vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Hotter temperatures, sea-level rise and increased hurricane intensity threatens lives, property and livelihoods throughout the OECS. As temperatures rise and storms become more severe, tourism the life-blood of many Caribbean economies will be affected. These devastating impacts will occur regardless of the fact that OECS Member States have contributed little to the release of the greenhouse gases that drives climate change.

Against this backdrop, a knowledge, attitude and practice survey was carried out, as part of a six week internship in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Masters degree in Public Health (M.P.H.) of the University of the West Indies, to determine the level of knowledge of Environmental Health, Public Health and Vector Control Officers on the impacts of climate change on public health. Given that the research time was limited and hence a comprehensive analysis of all the data could not be done, this report is seen primarily as point of departure for further discussion.

The survey was conducted in the nine Member States. A sample size of eight health workers were envisaged from each country, which should have provided an overall sample size of seventy-three. In the final analysis, nine responses were lost to follow-up and there was one refusal. The respondents were between twenty and fifty-nine years of age. There were 66% males and 33% females in the survey, the distribution of the occupation were 48% Environmental Health Officers and 52% Vector Control Officers. These two categories of workers were selected because they are employed with the Ministries Health, which have responsibility for environmental protection, and this group interacts with the general public on a daily basis.

In terms of knowledge, the data indicated that 76% of these health workers have not received training on the impact of climate change, 60% of respondents are not familiar with their government's response to/policy on climate change issues, in general 76% are not familiar with their government's climate change programme and 30% are not familiar with government programme to reduce impact of climate change on public health in particular.

With regard to attitudes, 40% of respondents strongly disagree that climate change is having a negative impact on public health while 35% agree that it is. 40% strongly disagree with the thought that climate change is not their responsibility while 19% agree that it is not. Thirty-seven percent agree that the government is responsible for the prevention of the impact of climate change while five percent strongly disagree.

In term practices, the data indicates that 24% of respondents spoke to someone in the community about climate change while 23% spoke to no one. In addition, within the six month period immediately prior to the survey, 2% spoke to Industry owners and 11% spoke to family members. 56% of respondents indicated that they had made personal changes to reduce impacts of climate change while 44% have not made any changes. The changes made by those who had made any include the use of environmentally friendly products by 37%, reduced burning of solid waste by 14%, and planting of trees by 2% of respondents.

The survey suggests that Environmental Health Officers and Vector Control Officers have some level of awareness about climate change and its impact on Public Health; however this needs to be strengthened and erroneous information be removed. This makes the need for capacity building across all sectors mandatory and urgent. If health officers' knowledge is so limited, it begs the question whether this phenomenon is widespread across other sectors including the public at large.

A project to enhance capacity in the Eastern Caribbean for adaptation to climate change had previously been proposed; there is need to revise this proposal to address new environmental management developments and having done this, to implement it particularly since it includes a component dealing with improving awareness and public education.

Consideration needs to be given to retraining of Environmental Health and Vector Control Officers to ensure that all have the most recent up to date information on climate change and its impact on public health. Supplementary to this government strategies and programmes related to the impact of climate change on public health should be shared with all sectors in Member States.

A regional policy on the impact of climate change on public health needs to be formulated. The promulgation of such a policy will demonstrate to firms, public sector and individuals, the urgent need and attention required for reduction of green house gases and implementation of adaptation strategies to enhance coping mechanisms. The regional policy could provide the framework for the development of individual national policies. This should be coupled with the development of strategic environmental and public health management/planning models to address existing and emerging health effects related to climate change and the conduct of simulation exercises in each member state for probable health disasters and implementation of mitigation strategies to reduce impact on vulnerable populations.

Finally, it is suggested that numerous activities need to be undertaken to ensure that climate change is linked with other planning processes. Weather, climate and physical hazard information needs to be incorporated into the physical planning processes, and any planning needs to be linked to other planning processes