

# The Kuala Lumpur Statement on Planetary Health from the Association of Pacific Rim Universities Global Health Program

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The inequitable, inefficient, and unsustainable exploitation of the planet's natural resources has led to dramatic changes to our climate and ecosystems, with devastating impacts on human health. The Global Health Program of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities, a non-profit network of 50 universities, fosters research, education, and advocacy around health. In 2018, the 12<sup>th</sup> annual conference was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, with the theme of planetary health. The conference convened 167 participants from 10 economies and 21 disciplines. A special workshop was held to develop a policy statement to be used to better promote environmental sustainability and reduce threats to human health. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Planetary Health urges universities and individuals to adopt sustainable development practices, and to capitalize on their educational and research expertise to generate data on planetary health and communicate this research to policymakers and the public. This declaration highlights the important role of universities in building awareness and evidence to help shape policy to prevent and mitigate environmental degradation and its associated risks to human health. Member universities and individuals are called upon to serve as powerful advocates for environmental sustainability.

## I. INTRODUCTION

While unparalleled improvements were made in living conditions, poverty reduction, and life expectancies in the last century, population growth and unsustainable development have altered our global environment in ways that undermine our health and threaten our survival. The inequitable, inefficient, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources has led to environmental degradation and dramatic changes to our climate and ecosystems, with devastating impacts on human health (Whitmee *et al.*, 2015). In the past few years, we have increasingly witnessed forest

fires, floods, extreme weather events, outbreaks of infectious diseases, pollution, and drought. Researchers highlight that these effects are likely to become more common and more devastating soon (Whitmee *et al.*, 2015; Myers, 2018). In addition to the direct risks, indirect risks such as forced migration, mental health problems, conflict, declining labour productivity, and poverty are anticipated (Myers, 2018). Furthermore, there is increasing recognition that the consequences of the global climate crisis will be greatest on the most marginalized and vulnerable populations and nations (Berry *et al.*, 2018; Hobbhahn *et al.*, 2019; Pascal *et al.*, 2019).

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Planetary Health focuses on the interdependencies of human and natural systems that is fundamental to protecting and promoting population health as the environment changes over coming decades. Present systems of knowledge generation and management are inadequate to address the current and future threats to the planet. The 17 SDGs were adopted in 2015 to promote concrete actions targeting poverty, health, inequality, justice, and environmental protection (Pascal *et al.*, 2019). To achieve these goals, drastic action must be taken now. The health sector has been largely absent within climate change policy making processes at international and national levels. Policymakers will benefit from additional resources and partnerships that generate evidence about the impacts of climate change on health and effectively translate this evidence into needed actions to build health resilience (Berry *et al.*, 2018). Global health practitioners can play an important role in providing and disseminating such evidence to advocate for action.

#### *A. Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) Global Health Program*

The Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) is a non-profit network of leading research universities in the Pacific Rim region, representing 17 economies, 200,000 faculty members and more than two million students. As the network of leading universities linking the Americas, Asia and Australasia, APRU is the voice of knowledge and innovation for the Asia-Pacific region. It brings together thought leaders, researchers, policymakers, and communities to exchange ideas and collaborate on effective solutions to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Launched in 2007, the APRU Global Health Program (GHP) includes approximately 2,000 faculty, students, and researchers who are actively engaged in global health. The main objective of the GHP is to advance global health research, education and training in the Pacific Rim, as APRU member institutions respond to global and regional health challenges. The network has a key role to play in improving the creation, synthesis, and application of transdisciplinary knowledge to strengthen planetary health.

Each year, about 300-350 APRU GHP members gather at the annual global health conference, which is hosted by a rotating member university. The 12<sup>th</sup> annual APRU Global Health Conference was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 28-30 October 2018. The theme of planetary health was motivated by the profound changes in our global environment, including climate change, biogeochemical

flows, ozone, biodiversity loss, and ocean health. A total of 314 delegates from 20 economies attended. The conference highlighted the importance of ecological systems for human health and well-being, and how to prevent and mitigate these effects from multiple disciplinary perspectives, and to direct research and action where they are most needed (Gagne and Lapalme, 2019). The theme promoted systems-based approaches to prepare for and manage the health risks of global environmental change. The three-day conference consisted of keynote speeches by Professors Tony Capon and Kristie Ebi, as well as more than 20 plenary and concurrent panels on topics related to human health and the environment. On the second day, interactive, small working group workshops were held on a range of topic, one of which was planetary health. This workshop convened university professors, students, university administrators, government officials, and employees of non-governmental organizations (NGO), from environmental health, ethics, international relations, medicine, and public health from throughout the region. The objectives were to: 1. Provide an overview of the issue, including the social and public health implications; 2. identify appropriate methods and strategies for members to contribute to solving the problem; 3. collaboratively develop a policy statement outlining these strategies. The subsequent Declaration was intended as a call to action to be disseminated to member universities, as well as health professionals and workers, academics, researchers, students, health rights advocates, and policy makers within the network, as well as the region and globally.

Based on the conference presentations and the special workshop, the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Planetary Health was drafted by the co-authors of this paper. The statement was then sent to workshop participants for review and comments. The comments were reviewed and incorporated into the final version, which is presented below.

#### *B. Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Planetary Health*

##### **We, the participants of this workshop**

- Recognize the fundamental role of natural systems in protecting health.
- Appreciate the interconnectedness of our global community.
- Acknowledge the indisputable evidence that human activities impact current and projected environmental changes.

- Recognize the irreversibility of these impacts.
- Appreciate that marked inequalities and short-sided economic strategies benefitting the most privileged are at the root of this crisis.
- Express deep concerns about the future of our planet and human health.
- Acknowledge the importance of protective measures to reduce both current impacts and future risks.
- Highlight the large gap between those who have capacity to mitigate or adapt and those populations impacted the most.
- Recognize the mission of universities in advancing transdisciplinary knowledge of the interactions among natural, managed, and human systems in ways that influence human health.
- Recognize that creating solutions to climate change and other threats to human health will require immense collaboration across disciplines and borders.
- Affirm the role of APRU universities as role models and potential demonstration sites for community-based sustainability initiatives.
- Advocate for leadership and investment in sustainability, strong policies, research and practices by our members.

**We call on our universities to** fulfil their obligations to advance transdisciplinary knowledge about planetary health by taking the following actions:

- **Value and promote** a culture of sustainability in their activities and business practices.
- **Dedicate resources** towards transdisciplinary research and education to advance understandings on the interdependencies between complex systems (e.g. land, water, energy, biodiversity, and health).
- **Adopt planetary health education** into core curriculum at the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- **Facilitate transdisciplinary research forums** focused on complex natural and managed systems.
- **Forge collaborations to share expertise and best practices** among APRU member universities

in sustainability with a focus on protecting the most vulnerable and promoting equity.

- **Work towards** being role models for best practices in sustainability in their communities and beyond.
- **Support global and national policies** aimed at promoting resilience and protecting the environment and human health.
- **Leverage their expertise** to advocate for stronger policies to effect long-term change.

**Call on the individual members of the APRU Global Health Program to**

- **Identify and share opportunities** for related educational and internships/practicum experiences
- **Reduce their own ecological footprints** and sustainably use resources.
- **Adopt and promote greener living** through practices such as recycling, eating less meat, using public transportation system, reducing waste, and being energy efficient.
- **Consider alternatives** to international travel or purchase carbon offsets.
- **Become advocates for urgent investment** in planetary and human health protection measures at their universities, in their communities, as well as nationally, and internationally.
- **Incorporate topics relating to planetary health** in all of the courses.
- **Support policies and legislation** to address this crisis.

In conclusion, this declaration highlights the important role of universities in building awareness and evidence to help shape policy to prevent and mitigate environmental degradation and its associated risks to human health.

## II. REFERENCES

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