Public Health Institutes of the World

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POSITION PAPER FROM THE IANPHI THEMATIC COMMITTEE IN CLIMATE CHANGE AND PUBLIC HEALTH:

The Role of National Public Health Institutes in Advancing Health and Wellbeing through Sustainable, Equitable and Resilient Systems

The International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI) Subgroup Planetary Health and One Health, under the IANPHI Thematic Committee in Climate Change and Public Health, has been working since 2022 to explore how National Public Health Institutes (NPHIs) can align their work with Planetary Health and One Health aims.

On 4 and 5 November 2025, the Thematic Committee met to discuss and refine recommendations identified by the Subgroup, which are presented in this position paper. These recommendations are addressed to health system leaders, collaborators of NPHIs, and NPHI leadership.

A paradigm shift is needed to protect health and wellbeing

Human activities are causing climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, and other environmental crises. These pressures have pushed the planet beyond seven of nine "planetary boundaries" – interconnected earth system processes essential for a safe and just existence (1). The impacts on the biosphere, on which humans and other animals depend, are long-lasting and uncertain. These planetary crises coincide with a human health equity crisis. They stem from systems that prioritise profit over natural resources and human wellbeing. Their causes and health impacts are unequally distributed: high-income countries and groups drive much of the damage, while lower-resource groups bear the greatest burdens.

Because these crises are interconnected and share common structural drivers, they must be addressed in an integrated way (2) – by improving health and wellbeing while protecting the planet and reducing inequalities. A paradigm shift is therefore needed to safeguard human, animal and planetary health and wellbeing (3).

The aim of transformation

This transformation aims to promote systems, including health systems, that are resilient, adaptive, regenerative, preventative, equitable and safe, while maintaining a reciprocal relationship with nature. It seeks to protect and promote health and wellbeing globally for all people and future generations. For health systems, this means generating positive impacts for both people and planet, for example, by achieving low-carbon systems or net zero emissions (4), and strengthening resilience to current and future threats. These aims align with the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission

on Planetary Health (5), the Lancet One Health Commission (6), and the Belem Health Action Plan for the Adaptation of the Health Sector to Climate Change (7).

This position paper outlines how public health, and NPHIs specifically, can contribute to this transformation.

National Public Health Institutes can lead the transition to sustainable and equitable systems

Public health already demonstrates the core skills needed to support this transformation. This includes addressing the wider determinants of health and wellbeing and highlighting the interaction between environment, social inequalities and non-communicable diseases, as illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Essential public health functions (EPHFs) provide a foundation for resilient and sustainable systems. They encompass health promotion, including efforts to address the wider determinants of health; health protection, which safeguards populations against health threats such as environmental hazards; and public health emergency management, which ensures health security (8). Public health actors can apply these functions to address planetary and societal crises and support the transition to sustainable and equitable systems.

NPHIs are described as "cornerstones" of public health practice and trusted voices in society, with a "unique humanitarian, scientific and institutional position" to act as "key climate actors" and leaders, as identified in IANPHI's "Roadmap for action on health and climate change" (9). In addition to the aforementioned EPHFs, NPHIs are public health actors and are particularly well placed to lead efforts towards equitable and environmentally sustainable health systems by carrying out the following EPHFs:

- **Multisectoral planning, financing and management for public health:** NPHIs can strengthen preparedness and response to planetary crises by promoting intersectoral action and acting as a bridge across disciplines and sectors (9-11). The National Public Health Institute of Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública, INSP), for example, has taken a comprehensive Planetary Health approach and established a Planetary Health network led by researchers from the INSP and is currently developing a Planetary Health Program (12) that incorporates this new vision to conduct transdisciplinary research with diverse sectors (13).
- **Health service quality and equity:** NPHIs are tasked with addressing health inequalities and can support the health system and wider systems by building resilience to climate change and other environmental crises while ensuring that equity, justice and prevention remain central.
- **Public health stewardship:** The health sector accounts for approximately 5% of global emissions (14). NPHIs can play a leading role in the transition towards low-carbon, sustainable and climate resilient health systems (15). The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), for example, has adopted Planetary Health as a guiding framework across its research, development, and innovation activities and is advancing environmental sustainability within the healthcare sector (16).

The process of transformation

Transforming NPHIs and the systems they operate within will not be without its challenges. It must take place as part of a broader societal shift towards sustainable and equitable systems. This requires bold health leadership – the vision and commitment to do things differently in complex contexts (17). It also requires new ways of thinking that prioritise natural systems and human wellbeing over profit, and the courage to lead through uncertainty and emerging tensions. This leadership must hold a clear long-term perspective while managing short-term pressures.

Transformation depends on an all-of-society approach. NPHIs must work closely with local stakeholders and affected communities and collaborate across disciplines and sectors (18), including ecology and anthropology. Internally, this requires investment in staff and skills, particularly in systems and complexity thinking, and decision making under uncertainty.

The introduction of new approaches inevitably creates tension between established systems and emerging alternatives, as older structures are challenged and new ones take shape. This period of instability is a natural feature of systemic transitions. The "X-curve framework" describes this process, including an inevitable "state of chaos" that NPHIs and other actors will experience (19). During this phase, continuous experimentation, learning and collaboration are essential. Bold, value-driven leadership is critical to maintain trust, institutional legitimacy, and equity throughout the transition.

Enablers for NPHI leadership

IANPHI supports NPHIs in navigating this transformation by promoting shared learning, offering global solidarity and momentum. IANPHI's 2025 'Maputo Declaration' affirms the role of NPHIs at the "heart of international efforts" to "steer health systems through uncertainties and crises" (20).

To enable NPHIs to fulfil this leadership role, we call for the following actions:

- **Health system leadership – *Bold leadership for long-term transformation*:** Leaders must adopt long-term perspectives and align systems, strategies and resources. These long-term perspectives are essential to enable NPHIs and other actors to promote and implement sustainable transformation. Examples of holistic strategies include the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 (21), the Scottish Good Places, Better Health: A New Approach to Environment and Health in Scotland (22), and the Dutch Green Deal on Sustainable Healthcare (23).
- **Collaborators – *All-of-society approach*:** NPHIs must work closely with communities, civil society, knowledge actors, and public and private sectors, and bridge disciplines and sectors, to foster sustained, meaningful collaborations and cooperation, shared learning, and coordinated action.
- **NPHI leadership – *Learning cultures and skills*:** NPHIs must cultivate safe, learning-orientated, accountable cultures within our own institutes and invest in staff competencies to enable sustainable, alternative systems to emerge and thrive.

Disclaimer:

The views and opinions expressed in this position paper are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of IANPHI or of the affiliated national public health institutes.

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