

Climate change

Still waiting for the African perspective

Chijioke Kaduru

Most people who claim to know Africa can still only describe Africa with two words: *poor continent*. Alas, leave no blame at their doorstep, as these words are true on a number of fronts. In Africa's strive to get rid of this description, the last two decades the level of industrialization has been intensified. Industrialization is considered key to combating poverty. However, considering that industries largely depend on fossil fuels, and that the use of fossil fuels is the main culprit of climate change, it doesn't take much to see where I am headed!

And then there is urbanization. Presently, sub-Saharan Africa is the least urbanized area in the world. However, although currently only 39% of the population lives in cities, it is projected to more than double by 2030. And 72% of those urban dwellers still lives in slums, which is the highest proportion in the world.

Over the coming decades, the effects of climate change and urbanization will be pro-

gressively felt across the African continent and increase the burden of disease.

Many wonder why fighting climate change in Africa should be considered looking at the urgent need for poverty reduction. However, the negative health effects stemming from increased global temperatures, altered patterns of infections, variable rainfall patterns and increasing natural disasters are already being felt across the continent. For example, the floods in Maputo (2000), Ouagadougou (2009) and Accra (2009), the droughts in some parts of Eastern Africa and the more recent floods and cholera outbreaks in some parts of Southern Africa. If lives and property are threatened to such a degree, does that not make climate change a problem that needs to be taken more seriously?

Climate change is expected to bring more frequent and longer droughts to Africa. It is also associated with more extreme forms of precipitation and rising sea levels. Therefore,

African countries will experience more severe and frequent flooding. Increasing disasters and production of climate change refugees will increase tensions across many states and could lead to conflicts and additional loss of lives and property. Bishop Desmond Tutu said, in association with the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen last year, that Africa will be the continent most affected.

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Complement this prognosis with the predicted food shortages in the continent, and you realize that climate change, which many Africans considered a problem for the future, is here today. The impact will be most severe in poor countries, which have contributed least to this global crisis. By 2020, up to a quarter of a billion Africans will experience increased water stress and crop yields which

in some African countries are expected to drop by half. Malnutrition and climate-related infectious diseases will take their heaviest toll on the most vulnerable; small children, women and the elderly.

Even though information is essential to form a perspective, an examination of public health efforts and strategies across Africa leaves a lot to be desired. But instead of simply regretting this situation, we have to look forward. Public health experts have had decades of experience in dealing with the problems that will worsen by climate change. We can use this as a platform for action. Efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals, from cutting childhood mortality to empowering women, must be increased as a central component of the international response to climate change. Many African governments still shy away from the issue of climate change, and an attitudinal change is much needed.

UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon stated that *Climate change is sometimes debated as if it affected only the planet and not the people living on it*. Climate change is real, it is accelerating and it threatens all of us. Fingers crossed while we still wait for stronger perspectives from Africa, a continent at such high risk from the effects of climate change.

Climate change vulnerability

Climate change makes Africa increasingly vulnerable. The impacts are region specific, the most important vulnerabilities are depicted here.



About the author

Chijioko Kaduru is a final year medical student from Accra, Ghana.

Further reading

- Climate change and health. WHO, media centre. www.who.int/mediacentre
- Message on climate change: dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director General. WHO media centre