Reports show impact of climate change in Africa

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A recent news item on Britain's Independent Television News by Martin Geissler highlighted the impact of climate change on sub-Saharan Africa. He reported from Lesotho, a country of less than two million people, which forms an enclave within South Africa.

With a Human Development Index of 149 out of 177 and a nearly 30 percent prevalence of HIV/AIDS amongst its adult population, Lesotho already faces a multitude of problems.

It is now facing changes in climate, with drought conditions the worst in 30 years. Geissler interviewed a local farmer who had been farming his land for 60 years. He explained how the weather patterns began to change around 20 years ago and continue to worsen. In the past, his crop would be 80 bags of corn—now it is seven bags.

The wet season used to be predictable. Starting in August the rains would arrive and continue steadily until the turn of the New Year. This pattern began to alter in the 1980s. Now the land receives only one month's rain, often in torrents that erode the soil and leave the land unworkable.

The United Nations expects hundreds of thousands of people to face hunger, and is preparing a massive relief operation. Bhim Udas of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) estimated 30-35 percent of the population would be at risk of malnutrition.

It is a similar picture in Zambia. The British *Guardian* newspaper of July 6 carried an article by *Associated Press* writer Joseph Schatz writing from Pemba in Zambia.

He spoke with corn farmers who explained how the rainy season used to be predictable almost to the day. Now the rain that should come in October and stretch through to March may not appear until November or even December. When the rain comes, it comes late and is more erratic, often falling in torrents damaging the soil. Again, as in Lesotho, the change in the pattern of rain has taken place over the last 20 years.

A study carried out by the Centre for Environmental and Economic Policy of Africa based at South Africa's Pretoria University, showed how Zambian farmers were vulnerable to the changing climate.

Many are subsistence farmers and lack money and expertise to be able to access irrigation techniques. The study explains, "Some have switched to crops such as sweet potatoes which mature earlier and need less water. But governments have long supported corn growing and it's the basis of nshima, the Zambian daily staple. So farmers are reluctant to stop growing it."

As well as southern Africa, climate change is also affecting the Horn of Africa. A report issued in June this year by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) explains how environmental degradation has helped fuel conflicts and tensions in Sudan, including Darfur.

The report notes rainfall in northern Darfur has been reduced by 30 percent over the last 80 years. Other findings show that many parts of Sudan are experiencing a marked decline in rainfall and that it is becoming irregular. Declines in rainfall between 16 and 30 percent have led to millions of hectares of marginal grazing land converting to desert.

The desert in the north of the country has moved south by 100 kilometres (60 miles) over the last 40 years. Yields of the food staple sorghum could fall by 70 percent in some areas. Even though rainfall has decreased, flooding is also a problem, especially flash floods and floods resulting from the overflow of the Blue Nile caused by deforestation in its upper reaches (in Ethiopia).

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Achim Stiener, the UNEP executive director speaking at a press release, said, “This report encapsulates the scale and many of the driving forces behind the tragedy of the Sudan ... that has been unfolding for decades.... Sudan’s tragedy is not just the tragedy of one country in Africa. It is window to a wider world underlining how issues such as uncontrolled depletion of natural resources like soils and forests allied to impacts like climate change can destabilize communities, even entire countries.”

At the end of May this year the development charity Oxfam issued a briefing paper, “Adapting to climate change. What’s needed in poor countries, and who should pay?” It called on the upcoming G8 summit leaders to seriously address the impact of climate change.

It made the point that whilst climate change will affect the whole world, “poor countries will be worst affected, facing greater droughts, floods, hunger and disease.... In South Africa, less frequent and less reliable rains are forcing farmers to sell their cattle and plant faster maturing crops.”

The report noted the World Bank’s estimated cost for developing countries to adapt to climate change is between $10 billion and 40 billion per annum. Oxfam reckons the annual cost to be $50 billion. According to the report, the major capitalist powers have pledged only $182 million towards adaptation costs and it points out that the money pledged is being counted within development aid. Oxfam calls for money needed for adaptation to be given on top of aid donations.

Oxfam goes on to state that the results of climate change will cut across the United Nation’s efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals set in 2000 to reduce poverty.

In April of this year the UN published an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on the impact of climate change on agriculture and food production. The report noted that developing countries would be amongst the most affected by climate change. There would be more frequent drought, floods and resultant crop damage, water shortages and disease.

The Oxfam report notes the IPCC prediction for Africa would mean “75-250 million people across Africa could face more severe water shortages by 2020.... Agricultural production and access to food will be severely compromised in many African countries: agricultural land will be lost ... shorter growing seasons.... In some countries, yields from rain-fed crops could be halved by 2020.”

The same message was given at a recent conference of the prestigious Stockholm Environment Institute discussing climate change and sustainable development. The institute executive director Johan Rockstroem, speaking to the Agence France Presse (AFP), explained, “The risk is that we might halve ... food production in sub-Saharan Africa because of our lifestyles.”

The latest USAid Famine Early Warning System, FEWSNET, gives the food security status of countries in Africa. Chad, Ethiopia and Somalia are classed as in an emergency. In Chad the threat is of water-born disease amongst displaced peoples from the crisis in neighbouring Darfur. Ethiopia faces flooding worse than last year. Somalia experienced lower than normal seasonal rains which, together with people displaced from the capital Mogadishu, means food insecurity for many.

Djibouti, Kenya and Zimbabwe are given a warning status. The situation in Zimbabwe is being exacerbated by the policies of the Mugabe regime, which have led to hyperinflation and supermarkets with no food on the shelves.

The recent G8 summit held in Heiligendamm Germany produced no realistic meaningful response to the threat of climate change. Commenting on the lack of response at the G8 summit, George Gelber of the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) described climate change as “a slow motion tsunami for millions of poor people round the world ... developing countries which are the least responsible for global warming will experience its worst consequences.”

Whilst continuing scientific reports highlight the dangers of climate change and are able to provide increasing evidence for its effects, the major powers refuse to take the necessary actions that would be at the expense of big business whose interests they represent.

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