Natural disasters,

“At the whim of nature”

Environmental disasters affect poor countries in particular, with disproportionate numbers of deaths, displacements and damage to infrastructure. Furthermore, adapting to the negative impacts of global climate change – that could include declining harvests, spread of disease and decreasing water supplies – will be more costly for low-income countries.

Deaths and displacement
More than 90 percent of all deaths caused by natural disasters were from droughts, floods and windstorms.

In 1999 the US reported two to three times as many disasters than Bangladesh; yet in Bangladesh disasters caused 14 times more deaths (2).

Aprochimical use affects 25 million agricultural workers each year and kills hundreds of thousands.

Unease settlements
One billion people live in unplanned shanty towns, 40 out of the world’s 50 fastest growing cities are in quake zones, ten million people live under constant threat of floods (3).

Changing climate
Global climate change is predicted to increase the risk of flooding in Bangladesh by 20 percent – meaning especially poor people that currently live in flood plains (4).

Developing countries in semi-arid zone are speculated to be particularly hit by reduced water availability resulting from global climate change (5).

Between drought and flood

Over the last 30 years increasing numbers of people have been affected by severe flooding, drought and variable climate in the Sahel. Millions of Africans have sought refuge from these disasters. These people have often had to settle on marginal areas, where some have faced social tensions with new neighbours coming from the cities. Poor people all over Africa are vulnerable to droughts and floods since many depend on rain-fed agriculture as their main means of subsistence and often live in depressed areas susceptible to rainfall variation (caused of trees and vegetation). Poor harvests due to rainfall variability have led to famine and have badly disrupted African economies (6). In 1992, all southern African countries experienced extreme food shortages. In 1993 alone, drought killed 100,000 people in the Sahel (2).

Floods: In 1998 many parts of East Africa experienced record rainfall (up to ten times the usual amount) and disastrous flooding. In Uganda alone more than 10,000 people were affected, directly or as a result of ensuing cholera epidemic, 40 percent of the main crops were destroyed and the country heavily dependent on food imports and aid (5).

Cyclones and Storms: In May 2002 Cyclone Kesyiny hit Madagascar affecting more than half a million people, making them homeless or in need of emergency food, shelter and drinking water. Up to 75 percent of the crops were destroyed, 20 people died and 1,200 were injured (4).

Volcanic Activity: In January 2002 Nyiragongo erupted affecting most inhabitants of Goma (300,000), and killing 147 and displacing 30,000 (5).

Earthquakes: In December 1999 an earthquake hit northwest Algeria, measuring 5.2 to 5.5 on the Richter scale, killing 22 people and hospitalizing 20. Three thousand houses were destroyed and 5,000 families (25,000 people) were affected (6).

Economic damage:
During the 1984 drought in Burkina Faso, the income of the poorest third rural households dropped by 50 percent in some areas (7).

The average cost of natural disasters as a percentage of the GDP is 20 percent higher in low-income countries than in rich industrialized countries. During the 1991-1992 drought in Africa, agricultural growth and total output slowed in Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe alone GDP declined by 9.5 percent in 1992 (6).

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The poor suffer most from environmental disasters and are more vulnerable to fluctuating climate because:
- they live in areas that are at high risk to natural disasters and extreme weather;
- they live in poorly built, shelter that is easily damaged in the event of a disaster;
- they live in areas with few or no early warning programmes;
- they have few assets and a weak social safety net to help them cope with disasters and variable weather.

From 1990 to 1998, 37 percent of all deaths related to natural disasters were in developing countries (1). Hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides etc. caused unexpectedly high death tolls and damage to infrastructure, and poor people have also been especially vulnerable to less sudden, long-term environmental changes: millions have suffered from undernourishment or died of hunger during droughts and flooding.

There is growing evidence that degradation of the environment will cause further long-term climate change and extreme weather. Rich industrialized nations emit most of the carbon responsible for climate change, but low-income countries will suffer most from the impacts of climate change. Climate change could result in a decline of agricultural production in many tropical and subtropical areas that are already face food deficits, and could displace millions of people, decrease water availability and allow for the greater spread of diseases such as malaria. In India alone, climate change by 2025 may decrease wheat, maize and rice yields by five to ten percent (2).

To mitigate the impacts of natural disasters and decrease the likelihood of climate change, we need to improve urban planning, encourage afforestation and water conservation, enforce stricter building standards, strengthen social support programmes and develop long-term initiatives to combat climate change.

Ma. Sn.

Facts and figures

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In their own words

The poor live at the whim and mercy of nature.
Anonymous, Kenya (1)

As if land shortage is not bad enough we live a life of tension worrying about the rain: will it rain or not? There is nothing about which we say, “this is for tomorrow.” We live hour to hour.
A woman, Ethiopia (2)

The atmosphere is not rewarding us; lately the climate has been adverse.
A poor male farmer, Bolivia (2)

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