

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock at the ODI Humanitarian Policy Group/ Institute for Security Studies webinar, ‘The climate crisis and humanitarian need: taking action to support the world’s most vulnerable communities’

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(29 April 2021)

Thank you, Sorcha.

The UN Secretary-General has said this is our “make or break year” on climate change. There is no doubt we need to see unprecedented political commitment this year at the COP. What I’m talking about today, though, is not the very broad issues that will need to be progressed by the COP but the narrower ones of main concern to those involved in humanitarian policy.

Climate change is already one of the top drivers of humanitarian need and human suffering, alongside conflict and disease - both of which, by the way, are exacerbated by climate change.

Countries in humanitarian need often share a few other unhappy characteristics that exacerbate their fragility. As well as being especially hard hit by climate change, they’re also likely to be very poor, have weak institutions and governance, and weaker delivery systems for services to citizens. And despite this, international partners – including the international financial institutions - are less generous to them than to middle-income countries. All of which means it’s harder for them to build resilience, deal with disasters and recover.

Global inequality – and inequality within societies – is growing. This means countries at the very bottom of human development indices are going to fall even further behind. Climate change is making that worse. That will result in unpleasant consequences for everyone, everywhere, increasing instability, violence, and displacement.

So, what’s already happening?

Well, adverse weather events are becoming more extreme and more frequent. 2019 saw a six-fold increase in the number of climate and weather-related natural disasters, compared to the 1970s.

People who live in fragile places simply don't have the ability to cope with climate shocks. They are less likely to have assets and savings, access to social safety nets or insurance to help them recover.

My office coordinates humanitarian appeals called Humanitarian Response Plans. This year, 34 countries have a humanitarian response plan.

In 2020, 12 of the 20 countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change had an inter-agency humanitarian appeal. (In case you're curious, that's Haiti, Yemen, Burundi, Mali, Zimbabwe, Niger, Sudan, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Somalia, and Chad.)

Put together, they represented approximately one third of total funding requirements for global humanitarian appeals in 2020 – about \$13 billion dollars. Eleven of those 12 countries have had an appeal for the past five consecutive years; that tells you something about how easy it is to escape from this category.

In total, they experienced 27 climate and weather-related disasters in 2020, ranging from acute droughts to tropical cyclones to flash floods. And that doesn't cover the chronic climate-related issues, like water scarcity in Yemen or a locust invasion in Somalia.

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People in many places I have been in recent years say they see their climate changing – Malawi, Lake Chad, Somalia and elsewhere.

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I visited Fiji last year to understand the threat climate change poses to the Pacific. People there see climate change for what it is: an existential threat –to themselves, their culture and their country. A group of twelve-year-old girls there told me that the world must “stop burning fossil fuels and protect the natural environment because our future is at stake.”

Why is their message important? Well, because we now have a body of evidence on the impacts of climate change in vulnerable contexts.

Climate change exacerbates inequality and societal fragility. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, often lacking access to resources and assets to cope with disasters. In situations of scarcity or conflict, women and girls often pay the steepest price – at heightened risk of sexual violence and sometimes resorting to negative coping strategies, like leaving school to work or being forced into early marriage.

We also know a lot more now than we did even a few years ago about the link between conflict and climate change. Sixty percent of the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate

change are affected by armed conflict, and all twelve of the countries I mentioned earlier are in situations of fragility or armed conflict. A changing climate increases the likelihood of conflict, and conflict decreases resilience to cope with climate change's impacts – a depressingly common feedback loop.

Often-cited examples are the drought that resulted in the hunger, mass migration, and social discontent that preceded Syria's uprising and long civil war, or the reductions in arable land in the Sahel that mean farmer and herder communities are pushed into more resource competition, sometimes leading to more conflict.

The World Bank estimates that climate change could push more than 130 million more people into poverty by 2030.

Climate change will make water scarcer. Over 50 per cent of the world's population is expected to be living in water-stressed regions by 2050. We already see water scarcity exacerbating tension and conflict in some places, like Darfur.

It will make more food harder to access. More frequent and intense extreme weather events are increasing food insecurity and malnutrition by destroying land, livestock, crops, and food supplies. Of those 12 countries most vulnerable to climate change with an HRP, 8 have at least 15 per cent of their population in situations of acute food insecurity (IPC/CH Phase 3 or above), and 5 countries have over 35 per cent of people living in food insecurity.

Changing climates means that the spread of infectious diseases is likely to increase. Warming climates will increase the range for insects like mosquitos – and the malaria, yellow fever, and zika they can carry, to name just a few. The World Bank estimates that by 2030, 100 million more people will be at risk of malaria as a direct consequence of climate change.

Out of the top 12 countries vulnerable to climate change with an HRP, 11 are experiencing the double burden of COVID-19 along with at least one other disease outbreak. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, is experiencing the impacts of seven concurrent disease outbreaks – on top of its just-ended Ebola outbreak.

And what do people do when it becomes increasingly difficult for them to protect their homes from the elements or to earn a living, feed their families, and stay healthy in the places they live? They often think about going elsewhere or they are forced to flee.

In 2019, climate disasters triggered nearly three quarters of new internal displacements recorded worldwide. More than 95 per cent of these displacements were the result of climate- and weather-related hazards, such as storms and floods. Just this week, the ICRC said that 10 million people globally have been forced to relocate due to adverse weather in the last 6 months alone – four times higher than the number fleeing conflict.

Disaster displacement has quadrupled since the 1970s. The majority of refugees and internally displaced people come from and still live in climate hotspots. Without action,

there may be more than 143 million internally displaced persons due to disasters by 2050 in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America alone.

From everything I've just described, it should be clear there is an imperative to prevent these trends accelerating.

If they do, the humanitarian system will simply not be able to keep pace. Political leaders are mistaken if they think humanitarian organizations can continue to manage the consequences of crises already more prevalent, protracted, expensive, and, in relation to the needs, less well-funded than they were twenty-five years ago.

The humanitarian community had moved from responding to 12 crises in 1995 to more than 34 crises today.

The average duration of a humanitarian crisis over that period – in other words, the number of years where a country had a Humanitarian Response Plan in place - increased from under two years to nearly seven consecutive years.

The cost of interagency appeal plans has increased from just over \$2 billion in 1995 to \$40 billion in 2020. Even though funding now approaches \$20 billion a year, the average funding gap between what's needed and what's raised – 39 per cent – is in recent years the highest it's ever been.

Humanitarian aid can only be a temporary band-aid – and a woefully small one at that. We need leaders around the world to take smarter decisions and make smarter investments today.

So, what can be done?

Obviously, first of all we need political and business leaders to start taking climate action seriously. Just last week, the SG warned that the world is veering into an “abyss” and outlined a number of measures that must be agreed before the COP this fall. The new stance set out by the Biden administration provides grounds for some hope.

But even with concerted action, climate change is already here, so from a humanitarian perspective we need to start investing more in adapting to and mitigating its consequences.

It's not all doom and gloom. There are some promising trends to build on. Here are a few ideas offered in all humility.

First, adaptation finance needs to be scaled up now in order to prevent, prepare for, and respond to growing humanitarian crises, and to make communities more resilient to the realities of climate change.

The scale of ambition on adaptation financing for the most vulnerable places is far too low: only 5 per cent of all climate funding goes to adaptation. Of that, the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change received less than 15 per cent of climate adaptation finance

in 2017. In that same year, 17 out of the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change witnessed moderate to severe levels of debt distress, and over half of those countries received over 20 per cent or more of their adaptation finance in forms of concessional loans and other debt instruments. That is neither sustainable nor adequate.

A couple of things need to happen. Adaptation financing needs to be concentrated at a far higher rate in the most vulnerable countries – most of whom are already beset by some form of conflict and humanitarian need. And that adaptation funding needs to be conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive to avoid exacerbating drivers of fragility and inequality within societies.

The World Bank estimates it would take between \$30-100 billion annually to meet the adaptation requirements set out by 50 developing countries for the coming decade. The global response to the economic impact of COVID-19 has already surpassed \$10 trillion. So less than \$100 billion should be easily within our reach. But it obviously requires different decisions from some that we are seeing now.

Investing more in adaptation measures like disaster risk reduction and resilience is a good return on investment. Every \$1 invested in risk reduction and prevention can save up to \$15 in post-disaster recovery.

Second, we are getting better at responding to climate-related disasters. Despite the increasing frequency and intensity of weather events, the number of people killed by disasters globally has decreased year-on-year. This can be explained partly thanks to the success of preparedness, early warning and resilience-building strategies. The world needs to build further on this: so, more investment, both physical and social, in preparedness.

Third, we are getting much better at predicting climate-related crises, thanks to improvements in science and technology. That means we can take anticipatory action and use forecast-based financing to stage earlier, more cost-effective responses that help more people. That is not about prevention or preparedness: it is about the different issue of acting faster when we know disaster is about to strike.

Evidence gathered in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mongolia, Mozambique, Nepal, Philippines, Somalia, and elsewhere shows that compared to a reactive response, an anticipatory approach to disasters can yield a 7:1 return on investment over one year.

If more donors channeled more funding to anticipatory approaches, the impact would be significant. The UN CERF has now demonstrated a real comparative advantage here, but the scale is still much too small to optimize the benefits.

Fourth, the world can help the most vulnerable countries scale up their access to contingency finance and insurance, from sovereign all the way to household levels, in order to finance response and recovery faster and at a larger scale than typically happens now. Pre-agreed contingency finance from the multilateral system which gives countries access to grants or loans at concessional rates to finance emergency response and reconstruction

can help. Catastrophe Draw Down Options (Cat DDO) provided \$1.2 billion at the start of the COVID-19 crisis and those funds were amongst the fastest disbursed funds. Such pre-agreed, instantly released contingency finance needs to be dramatically scaled up and deployed to deliver pre-worked response plans.

There is also a role for insurance, though I am less sure than three or four years ago how big it now is in this space. Scaling up disaster-risk insurance schemes that can quickly generate a flow of capital to help countries and communities recover after a disaster offer possibilities that have yet to be fully exploited. The African Risk Capacity initiative is one that I think retains significant promise.

Fifth, I think the pandemic has opened people's eyes to the sorts of overlapping vulnerabilities I've just described. That needs to translate into operations if the IFIs in particular. Masood Ahmed and I wrote on that in the FT recently. The IMF and World Bank put out a report just a few weeks ago pointing to the toxic combination of debt burdens, climate change and environmental degradation as a "systemic risk to the global economy." Hopefully, this sort of analysis will mean leaders and financial institutions start to better support the most vulnerable countries – in their own interest as well as out of solidarity.

The final piece of good news I'll offer is that there are far more solutions out there. Researchers and organizers in the most vulnerable countries will have far more innovative and wise ideas than I for how to mitigate and adapt to the risks of climate change, and the world should listen to them.

Thank you, Sorcha and Fonteh. I look forward to our discussion.