

POINT OF VIEW / Amie Gaye

## Africa needs help to deal with climate change

Special to The Asahi Shimbun

"We are drifting into a world of adaptation apartheid." These are the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town, South Africa, in his special contribution to the 2007/2008 Human Development Report on "Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World."

For sub-Saharan Africa, climate change is no longer a future scenario. The impact of droughts and floods is already being felt by poor people who risk further impoverishment if the world fails to act now.

The 2007/2008 Human Development Report on "Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World" notes that while the entire world would be exposed to climate change effects, Africa, a continent that has contributed insignificantly to the carbon dioxide emissions that are pushing up global temperatures, will be the hardest hit. But the region has the least capacity to cope.

This is not a blame game, but can the rich countries that bear historical responsibility for carbon emissions stand behind their fortified flood defense walls while the poor people of Africa sink in flood waters? This will be tantamount to a violation of human rights. Besides, the world cannot achieve stability while half of sub-Saharan Africa's people continue to live in absolute poverty.

Over a five-year period between 2000 and 2004, 10 million people in sub-Saharan Africa were affected by droughts and 2 million by floods. In most cases, both events happened nearly simultaneously.

It is projected that an increase in

global temperatures above 2 degrees will raise the frequency and severity of such weather events. It is very likely that temperatures in sub-Saharan Africa will be warmer than the global average.

Livelihood systems of poor Africans are vulnerable to climate change because of overdependence on natural resources. Nearly 80 percent of the continent's agriculture is rainfed.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, yields from rainfed agriculture could decrease by up to 50 percent.

For poor people, climate related shocks are not "here today, gone tomorrow" events. Instead, it is a matter of the most vulnerable facing a series of incremental risks that could lead to lifelong destitution. Africa's poor have always found a way to cope with climate-related shocks but some of the coping strategies actually trapped them into long-term poverty.

When calls for disaster relief are not heeded on time, poor people resort to selling the very assets on which their livelihoods depend.

Loss of agricultural revenue may mean transferring children from classrooms to the labor market, thwarting efforts to achieve universal primary education.

Household-food insecurity resulting from low agricultural productivity and declining incomes mean food rationing. This in turn threatens the nutritional status of children and their future human development prospects.

With reservoir levels already low in many parts of the region, projected changes in climate are set to put further pressure on water availability.

With a 1-degree increase in temperature, between 75 million and 250 million people in the region will be at risk of water stress.

This may lead to local and/or regional conflicts and affect economic development. In fact, UNEP's investigation into links between climate and conflict in Sudan predicts that the impact of climate change on stability is likely to go far beyond Sudan's borders.

Sub-Saharan African countries are already experiencing increases in malaria outbreaks, a disease that kills more than 800,000 children under the age of 5 annually. Exposure risks to malaria are projected to increase by 16 to 28 percent by 2060. This could result in an additional 200,000 child deaths annually.

Climate shocks also threaten poor people's most valuable assets—their health and their labor. Deteriorating nutrition and falling income increase vulnerability to illnesses while at the same limiting resources for medical services.

Climate change will also reinforce gender inequalities. With frequent droughts and expanding desertification, labor intensity of women and their daughters, who traditionally bear the responsibility for collecting water and firewood, will increase.

One study in Tanzania indicates that the amount of time females use to collect water and wood for fuel is up by between 250 and 700 hours per person per year respectively. They



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sometimes travel for up to 5 kilometers on foot. The time women spend in these drudgery activities leaves them little time for income-generating activities.

In 2000, world leaders committed to take actions necessary to achieve certain fundamental goals for sustainable human development for all of the world's peoples.

But achieving goals, such as poverty reduction, universal primary education, gender equality and empowerment, among others, cannot be done without making climate change adaptation and access to modern energy services central to the international development agenda.

To achieve the millennium development goals by 2015 and sustain progress beyond that period, it is imperative for the world to place climate change concerns at the center of development.

The need for a binding international agreement to cut greenhouse gas emissions cannot be overemphasized. At the same time, we must reflect on the circumstances, the capabilities and the need for sustainable poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa.

The international community needs to provide support to strengthen the capacity of sub-Saharan Africa to assess climate change risks and integrate adaptation into poverty reduction strategies. This is a social debt owed to the poor and vulnerable people of Africa. History will judge us by the action we take today!

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