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Experts link climate information with flood risk management in Africa

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Failure to include women in decision-making, lack of information on early warning signs on climate change and weak national meteorological centres have hampered communities' capacity for coping and adapting to climate change impacts.

Speakers on the ninth day of the UN climate change conference COP21 at the African Pavilion in Paris, France, called for linking communities with climate data and information services for climate risk management.

Denis Opiyo, a lecturer at Maseno University in Kenya, noted that inadequate information and weak institutional mechanisms for climate change disaster risk assessment and management exist at county and national government levels in Kenya.

"This gap can be addressed through capacity building and partnerships between county and national governments, universities, research institutions and local community organizations and old people who have knowledge in traditional weather patterns," Opiyo said.

As a result, the African Development Bank (AfDB) has given Maseno University a grant of €1 million to implement a flood management project to build the capacity of Busia County government institutions and community organizations.

Under Kenya's devolved governance structure, county governments are responsible for local level development, including managing risks associated with climate change impacts.

Busia County is one of the regions prone to floods and negative impacts of climate change but lacks a climate change policy.

Through the project, the county aims to draw from partnerships to develop novel approaches for managing risks associated with climate change to benefit residents.

The project outputs include a flood risk analysis and mapping system, training of county government institutions and community organization officials, documentation of indigenous traditional knowledge on coping and adaptation and strengthened community-based flood disaster management system.

"To succeed, this project should provide flood risk information targeting women and the youth for enhanced livelihood resilience. This is important because women who produce 80% of our agricultural products don't get the necessary information," Winnie Lichuma of the Kenya Gender Commission said.

"Women need to be involved in all projects aimed at addressing climate change. We need to make sure that information on farming is not aired when they are in the kitchen cooking or out looking for firewood or water," Lichuma said.

Arame Tall of the Global Framework for Climate Services called for increased access to climate information for community groups, particularly women and youth, through participatory community engagements for improved livelihood activities.

"Science should be used for practical solutions. There is much talk, but no actions. Communities are waiting for solutions. They are dying. Climate information is a tool to help communities predict weather patterns and take positive actions," Tall said.

"We don't need pilot projects," she added. "Let us stop duplicating projects, but work together to address climate change. Let us invest in strengthening national meteorological centres to address the issue."

Justus Kabyemera, Coordinator, Clim-Dev Africa Special Fund under the AfDB, said his programme has established five regional centres in Africa to modernize meteorological centres through provision of technology and capacity-building, while the recently launched Hydromet project focuses on developing national meteorological centres.

Koko Warner of the Institute for Environment and Human Security, United Nations University, in Bonn, said information is vital to combat climate change.

"Communities want better lives, to pay fees for education and health coverage and are concerned with unpredictability of weather. When floods come, they need early warnings to prepare," she said.

Saleemul Huq, Director for the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), said research shows that poor people are willing to plan and implement projects aimed at disaster management when well informed and funded.

"Let governments give 50% of their adaptation money to communities. Today, only 14% goes to the communities. Nepal is a good example that gives 80% of its money to the rural communities and is doing well in addressing weather problems," Huq said.

Augustine Njamnshi of the Pan African Climate Justice Action (PACJA) called for the voices of the vulnerable. "Let us not sit in international fora and whine. Let us focus on those who suffer most, like women. Let us give women's groups money for agricultural projects even if their proposals don't meet the threshold," he said.

According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), over 80% of the world's 48 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) have only a basic early warning system, while just a handful of the 40 Small Island Developing Countries (SIDS) have an effective early warning system in place.

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