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CLIMATE

UN expert warns climate change happening now

WARSAW CLIMATE TALKS

Climate change is erasing jobs, choking water supplies and permanently shifting the way people live, a new report from the UN University has revealed. Climate expert Dr Koko Warner warns that action is needed now.



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The United Nations University has released the second volume of Pushed to the Limit, a study that examines evidence of loss and damage caused by climate change from the perspective of affected people in nine vulnerable countries. In the run up to the climate conference in Warsaw,

Dr Koko Warner, lead author and scientific director of the study, explains why policymakers must take action now.

DW: Your study for the UN University examines loss and damage caused by climate change. What does that mean?

Dr. Koko Warner: For our study, loss and damage refers to the negative impacts of climate variability and climate change that people haven't been able to cope with or adjust to.

For example, worldwide, people struggle with rain. Farmers especially. If rain comes too early, or too late, the seeds that they have planted don't grow, or they get washed away. Sometimes, if the rain comes too late, the seedlings just die, and farmers don't have a way to adjust to that kind of stressor.

What people try to do if they can't grow enough food is try to eat less. But, of course, there is only so much less that people can eat before they start feeling hungry or the impacts of malnutrition. We cite choices about food all throughout our study - that's one example of not being able to do enough to adjust to these climate stressors.



In northern Burkina Faso, extreme drought has destroyed crops and forced farmers to give up their livestock

You have released the second volume of the study having surveyed a total of nine countries.. How did you choose the countries to include in your survey?

Our job was to go and find out what loss and damage is, what kinds of problems people are experiencing now, what they do if they have too little or too much rain, or if they have floods, or hurricanes, cyclones, sea level rise. What they are doing, and what do they need in order to be able to adjust or adapt better. The countries that we came up with were Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Kenya, Micronesia, Mozambique, and Nepal. So as you can see African countries, island countries, mountain countries.

What have you seen in these countries?

I was in Bangladesh recently, doing fieldwork, and had a chance to sit down with women and children. Some of the women noted that they are having trouble with the weather, some of these particular women had lost their farms because of river bank erosion.



Dr. Koko Warner wants policymakers to take action now

Some of the families had other relatives in the area so they went and lived with relatives. One of the women said, it's really hard because I lost my farm and the impact of that is we don't have enough food to eat and we don't have enough income, but what's really hard is that I don't have work to do during the day. People's work and their livelihoods are really a part of their identity.

People are experiencing troubles today that they can't adjust to. Just to get to the end of the day they have to make decisions like taking their kids out of school, eating less, selling their productive assets, not investing in their family businesses - decisions that really undermine their resilience.

What kind of impacts are we talking about on their health and safety?

In the Satkhira district in Bangladesh, they had trouble with salt in the water and in the soil. Pregnant women were consuming the water - what else can you do, you have to drink water. They were having trouble with waterborne diseases because of flooding and cyclone activity, but they were also having trouble with their reproductive health, in part because of the high saline in the water that they were drinking. Children were having trouble with malnutrition, there were problems with eyesight and skin lesions, a whole number of health problems that they attributed to higher salt content in the water and in the soil, that had both to do with the cyclone that came through, and maybe as well incremental sea level rise - those things working together.



Women in Nepal discuss strategies for coping as the weather becomes increasingly unpredictable

You've timed the release of this report just ahead of the meeting of climate negotiators that starts Monday in Warsaw. What is the message that you would like them to take from this report?

We used to think that we would be able to reduce greenhouse gas emissions enough to avoid dangerous climate change. We thought we could adapt to the changes that come, but now we see that in spite of those good efforts, it's not enough.

When you look at all of this evidence, you see that the things that we care about the most, our identities, our cultures, poverty reduction, food security, livelihood security, safety and integrity of rural and urban areas where we live, are compromised by loss and damage that's related to climate change, and that's happening now.

Next week in Warsaw, countries will come together and discuss that big challenge for humanity. How do we avoid dangerous climate change, and what do we do about it? Because we see that loss and damage is already happening, it creates greater urgency. If we don't avoid dangerous climate change, the things that we care about most could be compromised.

Your work seems to add another layer to the battle of mitigation versus adaptation and say that mitigation is extremely important, but adaptation is not a future concept, it's something we need to talk about right now.

That's correct. In addition, what will we do if all that we do isn't enough? That's an important

question to ask. It's not that we have answers, but we really have to ask how we will collectively find solutions to things that are challenging us now.

What message would you give the negotiators at the next round of climate talks?

I think that the time for decisions is now. My message would be - humbly - can we get some action, can we do things in a way that really produces tangible results, on the ground, for the people we've been working with in this research.

Dr. Koko Warner is with the United Nations University, and leads research on climate change and resilience. She is the lead author on the report Pushed to the Limit, a two-volume case study of loss and damage in nine countries.

DW.DE

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Listen to the interview with Dr. Koko Warner

Date 07.11.2013

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