

Climate change will hit poorest, hardest

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Cape Town – Climate change will hit poorer countries where people are more vulnerable to the effects of climate on food production, a research organisation has said.

“East Africa is currently experiencing the worst drought in the last 60 years which has caused famine and starvation in Somalia. The current crisis has affected 10 million people, led to 640 000 malnourished children, killed nearly 29 000 and placed half a million others at risk,” senior researcher Danielle Nierenberg at the World Watch Institute told News24.

Nierenberg has extensive experience in Africa, having spent time evaluating 300 food projects in 25 countries and urged policy makers to adopt practices that promote diversification of farming on the continent.

Negotiators from nearly 200 countries are meeting in Durban for the COP 17 climate conference where the debate will centre around reducing greenhouse gas emissions blamed for climate change is on the agenda.

Scientists estimate that if the global temperature rise cannot be held to under 2°C, it may result in runaway climate change characterised by extreme weather events like droughts, floods and storms that will have a devastating impact in vulnerable areas.

Hopes are low for a binding agreement as there are deep divisions between politicians from developed and developing countries.

Poverty

Activists and scientists agree that water shortages and food security will have the most immediate impact on poor people in susceptible areas as climate change takes hold.

According to the UN millennium development goal monitor, countries in West Africa particularly struggle with extreme poverty with up to 70% of the population in Nigeria living on less than \$1 per day.

The World Watch Institute blamed part of the problem on governments encouraging monoculture crops and legislation prohibiting urban farming.

According to the organisation, food production for people in vulnerable areas will decline and costs will increase because of the effects of climate change.

“By the year 2050, if nothing is done to correct the situation, rice production [south east Asia and sub Saharan Africa] will decrease by 14%, a decline in wheat production by 44% - 49%, and a decline in maize production by 9% -19%,” Nierenberg said.

The rising costs of food will have a particularly devastating impact on the poor because they spend a larger percentage of their budget on food, she said.

“On average, the poor spend about 70% of their incomes on food so even small price increases can have a huge impact on food security.”

Trees

Negotiators are hoping that the Durban conference will finalise details of a proposed green climate fund of around \$100bn for developing countries to adapt to the effects of climate change.

Nierenberg proposed that farmers could mitigate the effects of carbon pollution planting trees which could help to retain water, improve soil fertility and reducing erosion.

Indigenous trees could play a role in limiting carbon in the atmosphere.

“African farmers could sequester 50 billion tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere over the next 50 years, primarily by planting trees among crops, protecting forests, and keeping their soils planted with crops for more of the year,” Nierenberg said.

Senegal is co-ordinating co-operation with 11 countries to build a project dubbed the Great Green Wall which aims to plant a tree line 15km wide and 7 775km long to fight desertification in the south of the Sahara.

According to the World Watch Institute, funding for projects to help farmers should come from international organisations as well as African countries themselves.

“Funding needs to come from international donors, from the World Bank and IFC, from NGOs, but most importantly from African countries themselves. Only a handful of African nations invest 10% or more of their national budgets into agriculture, even though the majority of the GDP in these nations comes from small-scale agriculture,” said Nierenberg.