A unified approach to climate change and hunger

JOHANNESBURG, 24 April 2013 (IRIN) - Studies out of Ethiopia, India, Kenya and Niger show that children born during natural hazards, like droughts or floods, are more likely to be malnourished. Yet as the climate changes, it is poor countries - already struggling with hunger and food insecurity - that are increasingly likely to face these natural hazards.

A recent conference considered this issue from the perspective of “climate justice” - an approach to climate change focusing on the rights of vulnerable people who are the least responsible for causing climate change but among the most affected.

The Hunger-Nutrition-Climate Justice (HNCJ) conference, held in Dublin, Ireland, was organized by Irish Aid, the Mary Robinson Foundation, CGIAR and the World Food Programme (WFP). Among the topics explored were “joined-up approaches” - also known as the “nexus” approach.

The nexus approach seeks to find solutions based on the interconnections between various sectors or disciplines. For instance, addressing interrelated malnutrition and climate change problems would involve working across health, agriculture, environment, water and land management sectors.

“No one level, sector or stakeholder group alone can identify and implement sustainable solutions to complex societal challenges such as hunger and climate change,” said one of the papers at the conference.

IRIN spoke to experts about how joined-up approaches and “climate justice” can help improve nutrition for the most vulnerable and shape sustainable development efforts in the future.

**Joined-up approaches**

Experts say the nexus approach is a way to advance the social, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable development simultaneously.

Oscar Ekdahl, WFP policy officer, says using joined-up approaches to address hunger, nutrition and climate justice should come naturally.

“People’s needs, as well as opportunities, are by nature multi-sectoral,” he said. “More often than not, multiple sectors or service providers - for example ministries of agriculture, social planning, and environment - are required to effectively address issues such as hunger and undernutrition.”

Building resilience among vulnerable populations - entailing support from both humanitarian and development actors - can also help address nutrition and climate change problems simultaneously, says José Luis Vivero Pol, an anti-hunger activist with Université Catholique de Louvain. “Well-nourished people and children will better cope with climate change vagaries (either floods or droughts) than malnourished children,” he explained via email.

FAO’s Richard China said the future of the nexus approach will be determined by how countries choose to allocate resources to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - a set of goals the UN is formulating to guide development after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) end in 2015.

One of the criticisms levelled against the MDGs is that they have encouraged countries to ensure funds flow through sectors, or to adopt strategies with narrow sector-based approaches. Experts hope the SDGs will instead promote inter-related interventions by the various sectors.

“The money you own cannot exclusively determine the food you get, as food is a basic human need” China said the UN Secretary-General’s Zero Hunger Challenge, which aims to end hunger “in our lifetime”, underlines this inter-related approach. Achieving the goals - “100 percent access to adequate food; zero stunted children less than two [years old]; all food systems are sustainable; 100 percent increase in smallholder productivity and income; and zero loss and waste of food” - will require interventions across multiple sectors, including agriculture, health, nutrition and climatology.

**Overcoming status quo**

IRIN has explored the nexus between hunger, nutrition and health and the connections between water, energy and food, and has found that rigidly organized governments are often the biggest deterrents to accepting joined-up approaches.

Lawrence Haddad, director of the Institute for Development Studies, says people already live in a joined-up world, and that “it is governments, donors and researchers who have the luxury of fragmenting” the world into sectors.

To address this, he suggests introducing more problem-based training at the university level, which would encourage officials to think across sectors. He also recommends funding projects that link sectors, and ensuring government ministries are organized around problems rather than sectors.

“None of these are easy, as they all will require disruption of the status quo and all the vested interests aligned with them,” he said.

Even so, WFP’s Ekdahl says governments have begun “to budget time and finance required for this type of collaboration, but more is required.”

**Climate justice**

Climate change disproportionately threatens the food supplies of the most vulnerable, an issue campaigners for climate justice at the UN talks on climate change have been raising.

Many advocates see a rights-based approach as essential to both sustainable development and climate justice. The UN, for instance, has been pushing countries to enact laws recognizing the right to adequate food, which would compel governments to act in times of food insecurity.

In a joint paper for the HNCJ conference, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food Olivier De Schutter, former president of Ireland Mary Robinson, and Tara Shine, the head of research and development at the Mary Robinson Foundation, say ensuring the rights to food, life, health, water and housing must be the foundation of any approach to sustainable development.

But some are sceptical that this can be achieved.

Pol, the anti-hunger activist, says climate justice is a “fancy word” and will only mean something if it is “implemented through binding legal frameworks and mounting public budgets”, with more restraints on the privatization of natural resources and common goods.

He adds that appealing for climate justice seems meaningless when countries have failed to implement the Kyoto Protocol, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate climate change.
"The money you own cannot exclusively determine the food you get, as food is a basic human need," Pol continued. "If we keep on thinking along those lines, within 50 years we'll have to pay for breathing...another human need."

He advocates the polycentric approach developed by Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom. This approach encourages natural resource management at multiple levels, including within communities. Individuals, communities, local governments and local NGOs should decide to take steps to address climate change rather than waiting for a global agreement between governments, according to Ostrom.

**Getting it in writing**

Haddad points to another inequality inherent in the relationship between malnutrition and climate change: "There is another type of injustice that affects everyone in the world - the injustice being the legacy that this generation is leaving the next one - wherever they live. This has some parallels with nutrition, because nutrition is also about what we as adults can do to prevent stunting in the first 1,000 days after conception - a legacy that plays out throughout the child's life... So there is a kindred spirit between the two issues of climate change and undernutrition... I think we could find ways to exploit it - perhaps in the context of the rising interest in resilience."

WFP's Ekdahl says that there is recognition of the importance of nutrition and food security among officials negotiating a UN treaty to prevent further global warming and to protect people from the effects of climate change.

"However, there is less progress in terms of getting specific nutrition language into the actual text" of the treaty, he said.

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