

IUCN-IISD-SEI-B Task Force

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Vietnam Mekong Delta Floods (November 2000):
Viet Tanh/International Red Cross

Cover: Mozambique Floods (March 2001):
Christopher Black/International Red Cross

Climate Change, Vulnerable Communities and Adaptation



With the growing threat of climate change and climate-related disasters, it's imperative that communities be empowered to reduce their vulnerability. Ecosystems can be a buffer against natural hazards, and can sustain people daily and in times of crisis. Still, their protective value is often ignored. IUCN – The World Conservation Union, the International Institute for Sustainable Development and the Stockholm Environment Institute – Boston Centre are working together to strengthen the role of ecosystem management and restoration in reducing community vulnerability, and to spur adaptation to the growing threat of climate-related disasters. By bringing together climate change action, disaster reduction and environmental management, this initiative is identifying and promoting environmental strategies that reduce community vulnerability to our changing climate.

The Rising Toll of Disasters

While governments work on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, communities are already feeling the impacts of a changing climate through increased incidence and severity of climate-related disasters.

The global costs of these disasters are increasing dramatically, and the world's poorest populations—particularly those living on fragile or degraded lands—are most likely to bear the brunt. Their impacts on regional economies and local livelihoods are substantial, undermining sustainable development efforts. As the cost of humanitarian relief skyrockets, it is clear that reactive measures alone are unlikely to meet the task of reducing human vulnerability to disasters.

The impacts of climate-related disasters foreshadow the likely adverse effects of climate change. What is required is a move away from crisis management toward a more proactive, anticipatory approach that strengthens human resilience and livelihood security.

Environmental Strategies for Climate Change Adaptation

There is a compelling need to explore the links between environmental degradation and climate-related vulnerability. Deforestation, drainage of wetlands and loss of stabilizing plant cover can create or exacerbate disasters. Moreover, these natural systems, when intact, support livelihoods and offer shelter and resources in times of trouble.

Environmental management activities that protect and restore natural systems can therefore play a vital role in reducing vulnerability to climate-related disasters and adapting to climate change. In fact, such activities offer a range of benefits:

- increased productivity and diversity of livelihoods;
- conservation of biodiversity; and, in some cases,
- enhanced carbon sequestration capacity.

In Vietnam, the Red Cross has worked with local communities to establish 2,000 hectares of mangrove plantations as a buffer against typhoons and to enhance the production of aquaculture exports, such as crabs. In 1996 the project area was struck by "the worst typhoon in a decade," yet was unharmed.

Vietnam Mekong Delta Floods (November 2000): Viet Tanh/International Red Cross

China Floods (August 1999) Jane Martin/International Red Cross



Climate Change, Vulnerable Communities and Adaptation: The IUCN-IISD-SEI-B Initiative

In 2001, IUCN, IISD and SEI-B joined forces in an effort to promote the use of environmental management activities as a strategy for reducing climate-related vulnerability of communities.

Drawing from the fields of disaster reduction, environmental management and policy, sustainable livelihoods, and climate change action, the initiative seeks to:

1. identify environmental actions that reduce the vulnerability of social and economic systems;
2. facilitate the broader application of these activities by offering guidelines for their implementation;
3. build the capacity of national and regional institutions to assess and respond to the environmental source of vulnerability; and
4. promote the integration of environmental options into existing policy frameworks and international strategies on disaster reduction, climate change action, biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation.

To guide the initiative, IUCN, IISD and SEI-B have established the *Task Force on Climate Change, Vulnerable Communities and Adaptation*. Outputs will include:

- common conceptual framework;
- case studies;
- regional consultations;
- guidelines for using environmental tools that reduce climate-related vulnerability; and
- a network of policy institutions at the regional and national level with the capacity for assessing and addressing environmental sources of vulnerability.

