Caritas Germany
International Department

Climate Change and Humanitarian Action

Extreme weather phenomena and long-term climate change require a reorientation of disaster relief and preparedness, based on partnership. An analysis by Caritas Germany in ten steps.

The frequency and length of severe droughts in parts of Africa have increased in recent years. Several million people became temporarily dependent on humanitarian aid.

Over a six-week period, Mozambique was hit by two devastating cyclones in March and April 2019, with 1.8 million people being dependent on humanitarian assistance. The year before, the most severe monsoon of the last decades triggered severe flash floods in Kerala, India, which destroyed vast areas of the harvests and left nearly one million people temporarily homeless. In September 2016, about 40 million people in the Caribbean were worried about their livelihoods when the most powerful hurricane ever struck a number of islands and grazed the coasts of Cuba and Haiti.
In Afghanistan, more than ten million people were dependent on humanitarian assistance in the autumn of 2018 due to a lack of rainfall. At spring and summer 2017, several million people in the Horn of Africa were threatened by hunger and malnutrition as a result of a prolonged drought, exacerbated by political crises.

1. Climate change leads to disasters and creeping changes

This list could be expanded. For the number of natural catastrophes has doubled worldwide in the last twenty years, particularly as a result of the increase in climate-related disasters. This trend will continue as global temperatures keep rising due to rising emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Increases in extreme heat waves, prolonged droughts, severe floods and coastal disasters can be expected.[1] With the sea level rising and the climatic changes increasing, storm surges will also increase. In addition to more frequent extreme weather events and disasters, climate change also leads to creeping changes: Soils become salinized and seas acidified. Entire coastal regions will be lost, and protective coral reefs will die over large areas. The fishing industry is facing heavy losses. Droughts and scarcity of resources lead to the loss of formerly safe drinking water sources and pastureland and threaten the often already precarious food security of many people.
All this is felt first and foremost by people who are living in areas which are among the poorest in the world anyway. Although climate change is also increasingly apparent in the industrialized countries of North America and Europe, it is predominantly the inhabitants of the tropical and subtropical regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America who are being confronted with the consequences of climate change. Since the end of the 1980s, there have been increasing reports of climate change and warnings of menacing consequences. But it is only today that there is a growing understanding that climate change is becoming the world's greatest threat and has many immediate consequences: More and more frequently, its effects cause and exacerbate humanitarian crises and conflicts.

Torrential rain leads to severe flooding even in low rainfall regions such as the Sahel.

The dangers for many people are increasing – crop failures and hunger, the destruction of their homes or the escalating struggle for water and fertile soil. It appears cynical that, in global comparison, the people who suffer most from the concrete consequences contribute least to global warming. Causes and consequences, perpetrators and victims are often geographically and socially far apart. Caritas Germany therefore focuses on the simultaneous consideration of ecological and social challenges in order to recognise mutual interactions and to be able to meet them in a coherent manner.

"There are not two coexisting crises, one of the environment and one of society, but there is a single and complex socio-ecological crisis. The path to a solution requires a holistic approach to fighting poverty, restoring dignity to those excluded, and caring for nature at the same time."

Pope Francis, Encyclical Laudato si', 139.

But how could such a holistic approach, as formulated by Pope Francis, look like concretely? How can humanitarian aid in times of climate change take both ecological and social aspects into account? And what consequences does climate change have for humanitarian assistance in general and for organizations such as Caritas Germany in particular, which provide aid together with local partners and in close cooperation with the people affected?
Based on the understanding that sustainable disaster relief can only be successful in close cooperation with partners, local experts and affected people themselves, Caritas Germany has always acted according to the partner principle and the principle of help for self-help. Although these forms of aid have stood the test of time, the rapidly advancing climate change and its consequences now require a reorientation of worldwide disaster relief. The aid organization of the German Caritas Association continues to build on close cooperation with the affected people and the local partners. However, in view of the altered threats, it will also have to develop new ways of providing aid with these allies.

2. Climate change calls for more and more comprehensive emergency and disaster relief

The doubling of the annual number of registered natural catastrophes worldwide from about 200 twenty years ago to more than 400 today is due to the increase in climate-related catastrophes, three quarters of which are due to extreme weather events. This inevitably entails an increase in tasks for humanitarian action: In drought areas it will probably be less and less sufficient to build water reservoirs, retention basins and cisterns, because the droughts become longer and longer. In order to supply the affected people in Northern Kenya or Ethiopia with water during the droughts alone, large pipeline systems will have to be installed in the future or tank trucks will have to travel to the drought regions. The latter was already practiced during the last excessively long drought in 2017. Nevertheless, the people of Somaliland, an autonomous region in Somalia, lost a large number of livestock – up to 80 percent of the animals died. They are often the only livelihood and source of income for the nomadic population. In the future, even longer periods of drought will fundamentally imperil the survival of the people in this region and create a dependency on humanitarian aid.
In South Asia, a strong change in the monsoon has been registered over the past ten years: rainfall was more intense, monsoon seasons were shorter and generally less predictable. A further "increase in the total amount of monsoon precipitation" is expected in monsoon regions in the future. [2] The "flood of the century" in 2018 in the Indian state of Kerala was preceded in previous years by further severe floods in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other countries in the region. In 2010, another "flood of the century" in Pakistan made millions of people lose their homes.
Caritas Germany provides emergency aid time and again n these countries, supplies the affected people with water and food as well as with medical and psychosocial care, and it supports reconstruction in locations that are as flood-proof as possible.
But the risk of flooding in Asian countries is not only caused by unpredictable monsoon rains. Only recently, 200 scientists from the International Centre for Integrated Development for Mountain Regions (ICIMOD) published extensive data and analyses on the impacts of climate change in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan[3]: According to their research, at least one third of the glaciers in the Hindu Kush Himalayas will melt by the end of the century if the heating of our planet continues. After Antarctica and the Arctic, the third largest ice reserves on earth are stored here. These ice masses feed the most important rivers in Asia and secure the water supply for around 1.9 billion people. When the glaciers melt, the water supply of the population living here will be enormously endangered. Particularly affected are the poorest people in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region, who even today do not have enough to eat. And: with the melt, enormous masses of water flow down the valley and, in combination with heavy rainfall, create further flood hazards. Caritas Germany and its partners have also had to step up humanitarian action in the northern parts of Pakistan and India in recent years.

The examples of East Africa, the Hindu Kush and South Asia illustrate: The periods in which supposed "droughts of the century" or "floods of the century" occur and in which glaciers lose size are becoming shorter. And the resulting intensification of disaster events leads to an increased need for humanitarian action. Caritas Germany and its local partners are expecting that this need will increase in the future.

3. The adaptation to the consequences of climate change requires disaster preparedness.

In addition to emergency and disaster relief, humanitarian action will focus primarily on an expansion of disaster preparedness. In recent years, Caritas Germany and its partners have built up a great deal of expertise in this field and implemented long-term measures.
The strategy of the Catholic relief organization also envisions a further expansion of disaster preparedness. The Federal Foreign Office is also intensifying its activities in this field, it even perceives a "paradigm shift" in its humanitarian aid strategy in the context of climate change: "In addition to responding to disasters, humanitarian aid instruments are increasingly being used with foresight. (...) The goal is a coherent agenda for humanitarian adaptation to climate change that harnesses existing knowledge about climate change and its risks for forward-looking humanitarian assistance.“[4]

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We should look forward. Aid begins before a disaster occurs in order to mitigate its consequences. This is evident in the case of droughts, which can be announced earlier and more precisely with the help of scientific precipitation forecasts. Warnings of an impending dry spell ("triggers") can be used to release financial resources at an early stage ("forecast-based financing") and to trigger aid ("early action").
The opportunities for technical and infrastructural precautions in the course of "adaptation to climate change" are manifold and depend on the nature of the respective danger situation. The construction of dams and protective structures in areas threatened by flooding is just as much a part of this as the construction of cisterns, water retention basins and water control systems in drought regions. The origin and method of manufacture of the building materials to be used must also be taken into account. Industrially produced and imported materials such as reinforced concrete or cement can be replaced by regionally available materials such as wood, clay or natural stone. Even in emergency situations, there is no excuse to fly in or extract materials that are harmful to the climate. In the medium and long term, changed cultivation methods, drought-resistant seeds or protective plantings against erosion by wind, water and sun can also contribute to prevention.

Traditional construction methods with improved protective functions. Stilt houses have already protected many people against inundations in South and Southeast Asia.

4. Considering the social dimension of climate change

As has already been mentioned, the consequences of climate change are closely linked to those of social inequality: Extreme weather events only become disasters because there are people who are, unprotected, exposed to these phenomena. In the countries affected, these are especially groups such as children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with disabilities. In the case of floods or storms, it is even more difficult and risky for them to seek protection than it is for physically stronger people. In long-term ecological crises such as droughts, infectious diseases spread more rapidly among children and elderly people.

Humanitarian action must not be confined to alleviating suffering and alleviating symptoms. But it will only be truly effective and sustainable if it enables people to take their own precautions and protect themselves from both natural disasters and other threats. Disaster preparedness – or even adaptation to climate change – therefore requires far more than technical and infrastructural approaches. It must take into account the social and cultural conditions, integrate people at risk of disasters into its concepts, take on board local and regional experience and thus make disaster relief and preparedness an integral part of endangered societies.

Prevention and risk reduction are explicitly part of the mandate of humanitarian aid. [5] For catastrophes already begin even before the horror pictures shown to the public by the media. When, for example, in August 2017 a landslide on the outskirts of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, took several houses with it, the mudslide killed over 300 people. It was a predictable disaster, because due to the rapid urbanization, dwellings are often located in areas that do not have a basic infrastructure such as drainage or sewers and therefore get flooded regularly. Or they lie on mountain slopes, which are sporadically cultivated and hardly secured. People in poorer circumstances are often forced to live in these dangerous places. There have always been landslides in Sierra Leone. However, the annual rainy season has been shortened, temporally postponed and occurs with increasing intensity. In this respect, there were clear signs in this specific case and in many other cases before the disaster occurred.

"Time is something of a luxury we don't have."

from the joint declaration of the six Presidents of the Continental Bishops' Conferences of 29th of October, 2018

It is therefore part of the mandate of Caritas Germany to ensure, first of all, the survival of population groups that have lost their sources of income and their homes as a result of natural disasters, and prospectively to help them to secure future living conditions. The compatibility of humanitarian action and more long-term measures is one of the utmost tasks in times of climate change.

5. Prevention requires vision and sensitivity for the social context

Whether and how disaster risk management is successful depends not least on the social embedding of the measures. Aid must start with the local people affected and strengthen their protection mechanisms. The project experience of Caritas Germany shows that losses and damage can be mitigated through networked disaster prevention and intelligent adaptation to climatic changes. Much more important: We can save lives if disaster relief is not only aimed at an acute disaster, but if poorer population groups, communities and entire societies in particular are better prepared to face the effects of climate change. This can only be achieved with a deep understanding of social contexts. More than ever, the central characteristics of aid organizations will have to include socio-spatial integration and social belonging. International aid organizations must localize themselves, i.e. involve local people in decision-making processes and allow more decisions to be taken.

6. A strong community enhances security and minimizes risk

Why it is necessary to strengthen the social component in disaster preparedness as a whole, and especially in adaptation to the consequences of climate change, is sometimes only apparent at second glance. This is when, for example, engineers have built a protective dam, but it is not clear who will maintain it. And then, for example, when lifeboats are available during a flooding, but nobody knows where the elderly, or people with disabilities who need specific help, actually live. When the state organizes an information gathering on disaster protection, but it remains unclear how the knowledge gained is passed on and saved.
All in all, professional social work at the socio-spatial and community-based level is needed in order to permanently implement disaster preparedness in communities, schools, workplaces or neighbourhoods. Due to the worldwide network of Caritas associations – often described as the largest non-governmental organization in the world – Caritas is well placed and responsible to provide such social services beyond disaster relief.

7. Collective knowledge as the basis for disaster control

In addition to individual support that improves people's resilience to the consequences of climate change, structural support is also needed to build effective civil protection and implement long-term climate change adaptation measures. Caritas Germany therefore pursues a path that follows the proven social-spatial approach, closely involving the people affected as well as local administrative structures and which is implemented with local partners on the ground.
In the mountainous southwest of Haiti, for example, hurricane Matthew in 2016 deforested large parts of the region and devastated fields and houses. The people who survived the disaster and did not move to the city now have to live with the consequences of the hurricane and climate change. The hurricane was followed by two extremely dry years in which the maize harvest was largely lost.

The loss of vegetation aggravated the already difficult situation for the people: The gorges along the slopes, called ravines, swell to raging waterfalls within a few minutes during the rainy season. Then the water plunges, in the gravel-rich gullies, into the valleys along the largely deforested mountain slopes in such a short time that the people here hardly have time to rescue themselves and their cattle. Water, sludge and rubble carry away granaries and houses. >>

"It is not acceptable for climate policy to be made for people affected without their active participation in shaping it. We have to share the experiences of the local communities and indigenous peoples, especially their traditional knowledge in dealing with extreme weather conditions, in order to jointly develop locally adapted solutions for the effects of climate change and for climate protection".

Benson Kibiti, Caritas Kenya

By building stone walls, the municipality of Rivière Salée, a village in the department of Nippes, now protects itself from the consequences of heavy rain. Under the guidance of Caritas, the neighbours come together in a cash-for-work programme and build simple but effective walls to break the power of the running water. But the construction activity itself – as a social event – is also part of disaster preparedness. The villagers exchange their experiences during work. They talk about ways to save livestock, store seeds or reconstruct buildings in an emergency. It is all about safer construction methods for residential buildings and crop protection, private precautions and protection against erosion. In order to stabilize the mountain slopes, the neighbours are currently initiating a reforestation programme. The local state civil defence has already been urged to set up a tree nursery.
The collective knowledge about risks and strategies gained in this process is a crucial basis for adaptation to climate change. It is about strengthening resilience.

8. Strengthening resilience – enabling interactive learning spaces

Caritas Germany is pursuing comparable approaches in India. In Assam and Odisha, village communities are learning how to deal with the increasingly frequent floods and cyclones and how to minimize damage. In the run-up to the event, Caritas staff and a committee had reflected on past severe floods and jointly developed emergency plans for the future. Before and during the day of action, the participants - local politicians as well as residents – visited an exhibition on the subject and received an introduction to "flood prevention".

The learning effect ranges from very practical preparations in the case of imminent flooding to exercises for emergencies. For example, documents are packed waterproof, seeds are stored on raised stands and livestock are driven to higher altitudes. The exercises for drinking water purification or the transport of people on the water are some examples of emergency training.
In committees, the village communities develop emergency plans for rapid evacuation from endangered areas. Children also play an important role: At school they regularly study prevention and correct behaviour in disaster situations. The cooperation of community representatives, local politicians and the Indian state also resulted in some important construction measures for protection: While the villagers committed themselves to cultivating plants that strengthen the

Water committees like here in Pakistan coordinate the construction of houses, wells or water reservoirs and take care of their maintenance.

soil,the federal authorities had artificial rapids built to divert the current along particularly endangered steep banks.Against the background of an increased disaster risk due to climate change and, at the same time, the recognition that protection against it cannot be achieved without social components, Caritas Germany has developed a coherent approach combining Caritas-specific social work and disaster relief and preparedness in order to promote sustainable structural development processes and create synergies between the two fields of work. All measures are linked to the objectives of strengthening people's personal responsibility and independence, reducing disadvantages and enabling them to participate in social and public life in order to achieve equal opportunities.

9. Being prepared for emergencies – nationally and locallyl

In large parts of Central America these are precisely the challenges that are at stake, since its countries are particularly vulnerable to (climate-related) disasters and many people suffer from the extremely unequal distribution of existing wealth. Concepts of disaster relief and preparedness must therefore take particular account of the social structure. The evaluation of the project in Guatemala on "Prevention and Risk Management to Strengthen the Population against Disasters"[6] makes this very apparent. Within the framework of the United Nations' (UN) "Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 - 2030", in Guatemala it is also a question to set up national coordination bodies at government level for its implementation. Disaster preparedness, disaster protection and the required structures need to be implemented not only at national, but also at regional and local level. In the project, basic information is first conveyed at the community level and worked out with the people involved: What are the biggest risks? Which measures are already in place? Where is there potential for improvement? In a country that increasingly suffers from droughts but is equally threatened by tropical storms and heavy rainfall, a locally adapted approach is particularly essential. The close involvement of the Maya communities made it possible to develop concepts for disaster preparedness and for the adaptation to climate change down to the micro level. The formation of the committees, the networking of the various levels and the long-term implementation require a high degree of social work, professional competence and – last but not least – time.

More than ever before, sustainable disaster relief in the context of climate change not only means a rapid response to a disaster, but also includes preventive measures and leads to long-term close cooperation with local partners. Both the temporal and conceptual components are therefore important. Emergency aid and reconstruction do not stand side by side but are attuned to one another and trigger sustainable development processes. They provide the urgently needed interactive learning spaces for all stakeholders. Caritas disaster relief goes beyond short-term intervention and seeks to translate external solidarity into aid that is linked to the self-help of the people affected, but also tackles the causes of emergencies and gives voice to the poor and marginalized.

10. Humanitarian action in times of climate change needs solidarity, advocacy – and funds

With all the focus on local events and the specific regional possibilities for adaptation to climate change, it must not be forgotten that climate change is a global phenomenon – and therefore requires a globally coordinated approach. Caritas Germany regards itself, in the sense of the partner principle, as part of a worldwide network of Caritas organizations. And Caritas, according to the aid organization's visions and guidelines, "takes sides for the poor and marginalized. (...) Taking sides for the people affected also involves the exertion of influence on political decision-makers at local, national and global level. It should not replace the initiative of the affected people." Caritas Germany participates in UN climate change conferences as part of the global Caritas network to influence decision-makers. The focus is on both climate change mitigation and adaptation. For effective climate protection, which keeps global warming within limits, is probably the most effective form of disaster prevention. In this sense, the commitment to better climate protection in the industrialized countries can also be understood as part of humanitarian action.

At the same time, however, more comprehensive measures for prevention and adaptation to climate change must be taken without delay. Caritas also understands itself here as an advocate for those who suffer most from the consequences of climate change and have little means to counter them effectively. After all, prevention and disaster protection cost a lot of money. When it comes to the question of who has to bear the necessary costs, we inevitably come up against the questions of (climate) justice. Questions to which the international community has not found satisfactory answers since the Paris climate agreement of 2015: How can losses and damage caused by climate change be compensated? Who bears the costs of prevention and adaptation? >>

" When it comes to climate protection and renewable energies, many millions of euros are being talked about. But local communities in Oceania have long since been forced to leave their homes. They need support to be enabled to start a new livelihood where they arrive".

Julianne Hickey, director of Caritas Aotearoa in New Zealand

Still no satisfactory answers have been found. And the necessary financial resources are still lacking, as criticized, among others, by the Association for Development Policy and Humanitarian assistance (VENRO), of which Caritas Germany is a member: "At the UN climate summit in Copenhagen at the end of 2009, the industrialized countries pledged to increase international climate financing to USD 100 billion per year by 2020. (...) However, the costs of adapting to climate change in developing countries alone could rise to between 170 and 230 billion US dollars per year by 2030." [7]
Also on the political stage, at the UN climate conferences or in national debates on climate protection it is evident that purely technical solutions cannot lead to success. As proper as alternative mobility concepts, regenerative energy systems or research into artificial CO_2 may be, they cannot do without solidarity, empathy and charity. In this respect, the reorientation of humanitarian aid in times of climate change requires not only the strengthening of professional skills and the improvement of their financial resources, but also the fundamental inclusion of social issues.

NOTES:

1) IPCC according to special report 1.5 °C global warming - SR1.5
2) IPCC 2014: Climate Change 2013: Scientific Principles. Frequently Asked Questions - Part of Working Group I's contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [T.F. Stocker, D. Qin, G.-K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K.]. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex and P.M. Midgley (ed.)]. German translation by the German IPCC Coordination Office and Climate Office for Polar Regions and Sea Level Rise, Bonn, 2017.
3) http://www.icimod.org/ und: Philippus Wester, Arabinda Mishra, Aditi Mukherji, Arun Bhakta Shrestha: The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment Mountains, Climate Change, Sustainability and People. Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019.
4) Federal Foreign Office: Federal Foreign Office strategy on humanitarian aid in the context of climate change. Download 05.09.2019 from: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/themen/humanitaere-hilfe/-/205130
5) See also Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 - 2030 of the United Nations (UN)
6) Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, Caritas Germany, International Department: Lessons learned and best practices. Project: Building resilience to disaster risk through emergency preparedness and disaster risk management in rural Maya communities in the Departments of Baja Verapaz, Quetzaltenango and Quiché/Guatemala. Freiburg 2017.
7) Verband Entwicklungspolitik und humanitäre Hilfe (VENRO): Für ein nachhaltiges, faires und solidarisches Europa. Positionspapier zur Europawahl 2019. Berlin 2019.

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Postfach 420; 79004 Freiburg, Tel.: ++49 (0)761 200-288; Fax: ++49 (0)761 200-730
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