El Niño disasters: Governments know what's coming, but are unprepared. Here's what must change

April 1 2024, by Tafadzwanashe Mabhaudhi

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Drought disasters in southern Africa are mainly attributed to a lack of preparedness, inadequate response and mitigation and poor risk reduction measures. With little to no preparation for drought disasters, such as the failure of the staple maize crop, the only option after the disaster hits is delayed relief action.

Because of climate change, the El Niño-induced impacts on southern Africa—dry spells, low and erratic rainfall and elevated temperatures, and floods—are becoming more intense and prolonged. These are well-studied and can be mitigated by taking proactive measures.

The looming crises are real and require immediate intervention. But governments in southern Africa often act only when events unfold. They focus on reactive post-disaster recovery, often supported by the international community. This is why impoverished communities in the region are repeatedly exposed to natural disasters.

The current El Niño phase, which has caused drought in the region, was announced at the end of 2022. From the onset, it was predicted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to be a strong El Niño with likely impacts on food production, water scarcity and public health. Southern Africa depends heavily on agriculture for food and livelihood options, which makes it highly vulnerable to El Niño. Climate experts urged the region to be prepared.

As a professor of climate change, food systems and health, I believe that the impacts of remaining unprepared for disasters such as those caused by El Niño will be severe for children, women, the elderly and other vulnerable groups. Research has also shown that repeated exposure to disasters by the same vulnerable communities exposes them to mental health problems, such as depression.

The region is poorly prepared because governments do not invest enough in weather monitoring, and they lack comprehensive strategies to prepare for disasters. Government disaster policies are often incoherent and information is not communicated. There is a need to be clearer about who does what and coordinate preparations for disasters better.

Southern Africa's ability to cope with natural disasters

In southern African countries, there are low adaptive capacity and high vulnerability levels. Low adaptive capacity refers to people's or a system's ability to cope and adjust to changes such as those caused by climate change. Poverty and inequality—a feature of the region—leave people less able to cope with climate change impacts and more vulnerable to harm.

Across the region, the number of weather stations has been declining for more than 24 years. Where they exist, they tend to be old and outdated, reducing the region's ability to monitor weather changes. This means there is a lack of real-time and long-term data for developing early warning systems and early action capability, which in turn means that southern African governments react to disasters, such as flash floods, only after they occur.

There are other problems too. Limited proactive disaster risk reduction strategies and the failure of governments to invest in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies means that southern African countries have less resilience against natural disasters.

Policy incoherence is another problem. Policies meant to achieve similar goals are developed in isolation from each other, with divergent objectives and action plans that are not well implemented. For example,

about 54% of surface weather stations in Africa are outdated and unable to capture accurate weather data.

Finally, the countries lack appropriate ways to communicate well in advance to people that floods or droughts are coming. For example, information is often communicated via social media, which is inaccessible to most people in rural areas. A lack of effective response capabilities compounds this, where disaster management officials lack the equipment and trained persons to help affected communities cope with an emergency or a disaster.

How to prepare

The reality of climate change is that the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events are increasing. Given this reality, what can countries do to build preparedness, anticipation, early warning, and action so that they are not always "unprepared?"

El Niño affects water, food and energy supplies. It can cause health and environmental disasters. Therefore, greater coordination and collaboration across water, energy, food, environment and health sectors and across governments is needed. Southern Africa needs integrated proactive disaster response strategies and implementation plans that define the actions to be taken, by whom, and when.

The plans must make it clear who has responsibility for coordinating responses to disasters. Water, energy, food, environment and health sectors need to work together to come up with joint plans and decisions to manage the risk of disasters.

Early warning systems for all are needed. These include sending effective information about the climate changes to everyone involved; proactive disaster response; and disaster management plans from farmer

to country level. This also includes providing agricultural advisories to farmers so they can take early action.

To achieve this, governments and the private sector must prioritize climate action in development plans. Together, they will need to allocate enough funding to enable weather offices to monitor, predict disasters and issue early warnings. Additionally, equipment and capacity development is needed to upskill people involved in disaster management, including extension workers, to be able to receive warnings, translate them and help affected communities to manage disasters.

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: El Niño disasters: Governments know what's coming, but are unprepared. Here's what must change (2024, April 1) retrieved 21 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2024-04-el-nio-disasters-unprepared.html