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El Nino:
Coping with the New Normal

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Synopsis

Millions of people are at risk of hunger, starvation and diseases as a result of the onset of the unusually strong El-Nino since 2015 till now. But efforts in disaster risk preparedness and climate change adaptation have been haphazard. There is urgency for action to avert more catastrophic consequences of new climate patterns.

Commentary

THE CURRENT El-Nino weather pattern since 2015 has brought record-high temperatures and the spread of erratic rainfall around the world. Experts have argued that the El-Nino is not “the only boy in town” affecting the atmosphere in the tropics. El-Nino, combined with global climate shifts, have not only triggered magnified droughts but also caused erratic rainfall across the globe.

As a result, the impact of the present El-Nino on the global ecosystem has been devastating, worse than what experts have expected. The intense heat patterns caused by El Nino is already seen in many parts of world, with Africa and Latin America undergoing tremendous strain in their food and health systems.

Counting the impact of El-Nino

The UN World Food programme (WFP) warned last week that 100 million people were facing food and water shortages. In Africa, about 36 million people are reported to be facing hunger since many parts of the continent like in Southern Africa, planting has not been possible due to longer droughts, resulting in widespread agriculture failure.

President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has already declared a state of emergency given that about 3-4 million people are at risk of famine. In Ethiopia, UNICEF estimated that 10 million people are in need of food aid. The same condition is found in Somalia, Sudan and many other parts of the continent.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, millions of people are facing dire hunger as a result of some three years of severe drought. The outbreak of the Zika virus that has rapidly spread in parts of the region has further compounded the situation with health security under threat, particularly among infants.

The Asia and Pacific region has not been spared the current El Nino heat patterns. Thailand is facing one of its worst droughts since 1996. Drought and water stress have adversely affected the country's crop production. Its sugar cane exports are expected to fall by 20% this year. Similarly, Vietnam has just announced its worst drought in 50 years, while in Indonesia El Nino has affected almost half of its 34 provinces. The intense heat is already aggravating the threat of peat land and forest fires affecting over 43 million people in the country.

The lack of adaptive capacity by farmers against this severe weather has left many farmers desperate for help. In the Southern Philippines, farmers held demonstrations demanding relief from governments; the protests led to clashes with the police, leaving at least two persons dead and dozens injured.

El Nino also brings about anomalies in local climate conditions. In contrast to the intense drought, Mongolia is experiencing a severe winter. Meanwhile, strong tropical cyclones have battered the Pacific, such as the recent Cyclone Winston in Fiji.

Early Warning Systems

Could one have anticipated the devastating impact of El Nino on the ecosystem? The answer is yes. There is enough scientific information that could have possibly mitigated the state of emergency we see today. Systematic early warning services on El Niño/La Niña events have been available in the last 15-20 years. Moreover, there are many multilateral platforms that provide comprehensive data on the impact of the global environmental patterns.

For example, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) regularly provides updates on El-Nino since the early 2000s, based on contributions of many National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs) around the world. The United States' NASA regularly produces comprehensive notes on El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO).

The translation of the global ENSO data and information and their potential impact on global agriculture is often done through multiple channels including the FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS). There is also the WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping that is carried out by over 150 analysts around the world that is informed by NMHSs and WMO.

Thus, the ENSO 2015-2016 provides the kinds of useful data that could have been utilised by governments around the world to prepare for new weather patterns and do something to mitigate the impact of anticipated risks.

'New Normal' or Emerging 'Perfect Storm'?

Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals is to *"end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture"*. With climate change, this goal could be the hardest to achieve by 2030. As we see more cases of agricultural failure due to El Nino, many more millions of children will suffer malnutrition.

Unfortunately, WFP and FAO and their partners have currently noted that the overall funding gap for El Niño responses stands at US$1.5 billion. In Africa and Latin America, existing funds are able to support no more than 25 per cent of the total finances needed to fund projects to address hunger and malnutrition. These are clearly inadequate given the immensity of the task at hand.

The former head of the World Bank, Robert Zoelleck, once warned that food security is the next silent global tsunami. What the international community should be mindful of is the potential for a 'perfect storm' of the food, energy and financial crises that can wreck havoc and instability.

There are indeed enough examples of drought, environmental stress and hunger worldwide that should compel early action and effective responses from multiple actors—governments, international institutions, donor agencies, and the private sector. There is clearly the urgency to work together and find ways to cooperate in finding global solutions to address the multidimensional impact of climate change on the environmental ecosystem. This therefore requires no less than stronger and bolder commitments from all stakeholders if catastrophic climate events are to be averted.

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