

Climate Change - Catastrophe is upon us-the grim view from Southern Africa

Thursday 27 February 2020, by [DESAI Rehad](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2020).

The word catastrophe is being used more and more by institutions reporting on the effects of extreme weather in the two regions of Africa, Southern and South Eastern Africa, and of late Australia. The word means a number of things: tragic; fiasco; utter failure; sudden and violent change in a feature of the Earth. All are completely fitting for the situation we now face.

The intensity of the droughts and storms is leading to massive levels of displacement outside of the first world. Oxfam estimates that 20 million people were displaced in 2019 due to climate related disasters, and that inhabitants of the poorer parts of the world are five times more likely to be displaced by climate heating than those in the richer regions. A situation further exacerbated by rising levels of inequality.

Southern Africa has long been identified as a climate 'hot spot', significantly more vulnerable in relation to the climate crisis than most other parts of the globe. The latest climate modelling tells us our future is considerably more alarming than we had previously known. The question we find ourselves asking is how bad can it get? It's something we don't like to dwell on because we know what happens when mass hunger takes hold, sooner or later we turn on each other.

The frequency of drought has increased over the last decade in both African regions : from one drought every (six/seven) years to consecutive droughts and erratic rainfall patterns, where dry spells are followed by flash floods. The latest climate science expects this weather pattern to intensify over the coming years, making us particularly vulnerable to floods and lower consistent rainfall, sustained droughts will become part and parcel of our future.

Africa's population is in large part agri-based and highly dependent on rainfall for sustainable agriculture. Over the last 8 years, only two seasons have been considered successful. Consequently, malnutrition among children now stands at record levels, affecting just over 20% of all children in the wealthier parts of the region, and climbing to high 40s as we get close to the equator.

A snapshot survey of the drought that's wreaking havoc across this region shows 11 million people are hurtling towards a human emergency that, if not addressed in the coming weeks and months, will result in a human catastrophe. While the figures in South Eastern Africa stand at just over a million, this figure is set to rise as a climate crisis inducted swarm of billions of locusts devour thousands of square kilometres of arable land. It is the time for grieving in the face of immeasurable loss. In Southern Africa the haunting spectre of another famine on the scale of Biafra hangs over us like a living nightmare. Significant food aid is now required to avert a massive tragedy, a matter I will return to.

Only a year ago we saw two of the most powerful cyclones on record in that part of the Indian Ocean rip into Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi, destroying 270, 000 homes and leaving 1.7 million

people displaced, and equally alarming the devastation of Beira in Mozambique, the country's second biggest city. The reality is, a large percentage of those affected by the floods are now reliant on food aid and have no capacity to bounce back to producing enough food to subsist.

The regions that have been hit by the cyclones are now most adversely affected and the latest science tell us more are coming down the road. Consecutive droughts combined with floods have raised the alarm bells like never before. Fears now abound that the capacity to continue to farm may well be wiped out, creating deserts of what once was arable land. This is now happening decades before it has been predicted by the UN's International Panel on Climate Change.

The 11 million people now affected by drought can be broken down in the following manner: at least 560,000 people in Angola face crisis levels; 230,000 in Eswatini; 430,000 in Lesotho; 915,000 in Madagascar; 1,125,000 in Malawi; 1,650,000 in Mozambique; 2,330,000 in Zambia; and 3,580,000 in Zimbabwe. The estimated nine million-plus severely food insecure southern Africans is "expected to grow to 12 million at the peak of the lean season and the recent rains have been insufficient to put any real dent into these numbers. Reports in January state that nearly 8 million people in Zimbabwe alone are now food insecure.

A mere decade ago the conventional wisdom among climate justice activists was that temperatures would rise, but gradually, and that it would be the large swathes of land that straddled the Equator that would become wastelands. We now know better as drought becomes the norm as we reach record temperatures year after year, feeding epidemic prone diseases and drastically impacting on the health of children and the elderly.

Once temperatures rise to an average of 40°C for sustained periods of time, the land is no longer habitable for humans, our bodies simply cannot function at that level, neither can most crops or livestock. The climate crisis is hitting us hard now, not only because of famine in our rural areas, but also the water crisis that is hitting towns and cities across the region.

Scores of towns in South Africa are now without water for over 2 months. Harare has been without water for three months, as economic collapse combines with an extended drought. The water crisis is now a general problem that, like the heat, will become more intense as each year passes.

It is no coincidence that in those countries most adversely affected by drought conditions are now undergoing a more defined closure of democratic space as local regimes scurry to secure their hold on power. The impending disasters are compounded by the response of the advanced capitalist states to the climate crisis, which crudely put, is to absolve themselves from the problems by ensuring that notions of climate debt and climate justice are squeezed out of the COP processes. This began in Paris in 2015 and continued in Madrid 2019.

COP 25 in Madrid proved an utter failure as the club of polluters once again sought to squirm out of meeting its voluntary commitments by insisting on all sorts of dubious mechanisms related to carbon trading, refusing point blank to talk about more ambitious targets to stop blowing what is left of the global carbon budget, now estimated at the figure of 270 gigatonnes.

Marx was among the first to point to how the industrialised nations robbed the resources, land and the fertility of the soil of the colonized nations to support the industrialization of the coloniser nations. We now understand that the rise of fossil fuels and capitalism are inextricably intertwined. The metabolic rift between town and country, global north and south, has now escaped geographical boundaries given the inability of governments to decarbonize their economies. It is now clearer than ever that this will ensure our common ruin if we are unable to build the type of global movement capable of stopping the club of polluters.

But we also understand that over 90% of the carbon that has been spewed into the air has been done so by a handful of nations and therefore we cannot remain silent about the attempt to jettison the principle of a Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBRD) and respective capacities. Because without serious financial and technical support rapidly put in place to secure meaningful or deep adaptation for those countries that are under-resourced it will mean the loss of hundreds of millions of lives, possibly billions. Maybe deep adaptation and some success in mitigation will only delay such calamitous loss, but that delay is precious.

For most of the world outside of the club of big polluters our local challenge is not mitigation but rather adaptation as the vulnerable constitute a large majority in such societies. As it is they carry the harshest burdens of this unfathomable fiasco. We now only have a decade or so left of carbon emissions at the current annual levels. The notion of what remains of the carbon budget gets shared justly on the basis of a CBRD has now become a pipe dream.

No more evident than in the World Bank's latest aid policy, whose leadership is in the hands of developed economies. They now refuse to provide aid to those countries they define as middle income. Its support is only provided to 75 low income countries, over half of which are African states. Of the nine southern African nations requiring crisis intervention, only Malawi, Madagascar and Mozambique are officially defined as "low-income" countries, according to these sweeping groupings.

Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Eswatini, Lesotho and Angola, represent a mix of "upper-middle" (in Namibia's case only) and "lower middle" income countries, according to this list. (For the current 2020 fiscal year, a low-income country has a GNI, or gross national income per capita, of \$1,025 or less. A lower-middle-income country has a GNI per capita of up to \$3,995. An upper middle-income country has a GNI per capita of up to \$12,375; and a high-income country has a GNI per capita of \$12,376 or more. South Africa's GNI per capita stands at \$5,750.)

To get an understanding of what we can expect there is no better place to look than the World Bank's response to the climate crisis induced disaster in Mozambique. It is conservatively estimated that \$3 billion damage was created by the two cyclones in 2019. As of September 2019, 6 months after the devastation the bank has managed to raise \$500 million to help the country recover. And the kicker is that a sizeable part of that amount is made up of low interest loans.

Ninety per cent of Mozambique's second largest city was destroyed, the construction of 300,000 homes is now required and yet to begin, the price tag \$600 million, roads and public utilities \$700 million. The death toll of 1000 only took into account those killed by the immediate impact of the cyclones. Yet to be counted are those that perished following the spread of hunger and disease. The unpalatable likelihood is that Mozambique will never fully recover from the destruction created by cyclones Idai and Kenneth and that furthermore, and the country will be hit again in the near future.

Beira is not alone. Score of coastal cities and towns in Mozambique and indeed the continent, particularly those that sit on the Indian Ocean, are now highly vulnerable to violent hurricanes and storm surges. As a consequence, we are seeing significant loss of life and infrastructural damage. The urgent need to ameliorate the destruction by putting in resilient infrastructure is simply not being met.

The reality is that we are now facing a situation where we will see an exponential rise of lives lost in Africa due to the climate crisis over the short span of two decades. The international ruling class understands that a 4C temperature increase in Africa is a death sentence for 100's of millions of Africans, but they don't care because they are surplus to the needs of capitalism. Clearly evident in the approach of the World Bank's aid policy and indeed its various positions in the climate change

negotiations that effectively rule out any notions of climate debt and climate justice.

The inescapable irony is, it is only these very small scale(peasant) farmers, when collectivized, that are able to adopt the rational, ecologically sustainable aspect of capitalist agriculture and in doing so provide the alternative to the hugely destructive nature of large-scale capitalist farming. While the climate crisis makes us all victims, for the coming decade, Africans are set to bear the harshest brunt of ecological and societal collapse.

While Africa's destruction clearly lies at the doorstep of the advanced capitalist system in the global north, in large part so does the hope to halt it. It lies in the millions of school students that have been striking around the world, it lies with the likes of Extinction Rebellion who through innovative direct action have been forcing the issue onto the agenda of governments of Europe. But the common ruin that now faces our world means that we will need to build way and far beyond those who are leading the fight for life. Only the steely determination to build a massive international movement comprised of hundreds of millions of working people can ensure we halt our current descent into barbarism.

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P.S.

• Globaleco Socialist Network. January 28, 2020:
<http://www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net/2020/01/28/catastrophe-is-upon-us-the-grim-view-from-southern-africa/>