

FAO calls for greater resilience against drought in Africa

In a new report, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has called for a more proactive approach to addressing the risk and management of drought in the Near East and North Africa region. Although drought is a familiar phenomenon in the region, it has become more widespread, prolonged and frequent over the last four decades, likely due to climate change.



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The region is not only highly prone to drought, but also one of the world's most water-scarce areas, with desert making up three-quarters of its territory. The Near East and North Africa's technical, administrative, and financial capacities to deal with drought are inadequate, rendering farmers and herders - the first and worst hit when drought strikes - even more vulnerable.

Farmers and herders face mounting challenges as water becomes scarcer, land more degraded and eroded, and soils more fragile. Yet, there is still too much focus on recovering from drought rather than being less susceptible to it, with insufficient funding, preparedness, and coordination remaining significant constraints, warns the report.

"We need to perceive and manage droughts differently, and shift from emergency response to more pro-active policy and long-term planning to reduce risks and build greater resilience," said Rene Castro, FAO's assistant director-general, Climate, Biodiversity, Land and Water Department.

"The report assesses gaps in current drought management and provides a solid base to help governments rethink policies and reformulate preparedness and response plans by offering solutions that take into account each country's specific context," added Castro.

Launched ahead of World Day to combat desertification and drought, the report was developed by FAO and the Water for People Daugherty Global Institute at the University of Nebraska. It covers 20 countries in the region - Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE, and Yemen.

Supporting drought-stricken populations

Although preventing or mitigating drought impacts can be cheaper than providing drought relief, this does not necessarily translate into action through planning, budget allocations and changes in the institutions' behaviour. Providing emergency

food assistance, access to water, fodder, and creating jobs are the most common approaches adopted by the region's governments when supporting drought-stricken populations.

While these are essential to saving lives and alleviating hunger, they also have several limitations as they do not help vulnerable populations become more resilient to future shocks. Many countries do not have a structure dedicated to drought and drought action plans.

Coordination at the highest levels of governments when planning for droughts also need reinforcing. Current agricultural policies are rendering land more degraded and impoverished and need to be re-examined to mitigate the impacts of drought.

Drought management solutions

The report argues that developing and implementing national drought management policies consistent with the country's development objectives as well as establishing early warning systems are essential. It recommends disseminating technologies to combat drought, and support policies and incentives to use land and water resources rationally.

Growing drought-tolerant, fast maturing and watershed crops, and encouraging advanced methods of irrigation (including drip and spray irrigation) are some of the measures that should be adopted at a larger scale to combat climate change. Setting parcels of land apart to grow trees or small trees in agricultural fields and pastures to ensure their growth is a practice that can generate multiple-use trees to mitigate impacts of droughts.

Traditional livestock herding practices - keeping stocking rates low and moving herds when forage is low, can reduce the risk of overgrazing and land degradation.

Drought impact in the Near East and North Africa region

- Agriculture is the first and worst hit sector when drought strikes. Due to the impacts of drought, domestic food production has declined in the past four decades and rural populations' income dropped.
- Although oil supports a number of economies, agriculture is still an important part of the region's GDP and essential for populations' food security.
- Droughts are costly and can severely compromise the agricultural sectors.
- The latest drought in Northern Africa, in 2015-2016, affected all countries and caused a significant drop in cereal production in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.
- As recently as the 1980s, 70% of Mauritians were nomads and subsistence farmers. In the past three decades, recurrent droughts have forced many to move to cities where they suffer due to high unemployment and a severe lack of social services.

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