

## Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Gender and Climate Change Resilience

1203. Climate change, environment and population health – UAPS

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### Abstract

Climate change is about justice, as those most vulnerable to the changing climate have contributed the least to the problem. The impact of climate change is disproportionately concentrated in the global south. Within countries, those most vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters are the poorest communities, where especially women and girls and other marginalized groups are struggling to cope with and adapt even to current climate change impacts. Climate change is already increasing the number of people in emergencies, including those needing emergency reproductive health services and/or protection from gender based violence. Young people are stepping up the challenge of climate change and their involvement in combating climate change is crucial. Through ensuring access of adolescents and youth to sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, education and opportunity, they can be empowered to take action on climate change. This paper discuss five vital actions to address the challenges of climate change:

1. *Invest in sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality to strengthen climate resilience for those furthest behind*
2. *Strengthening climate-resilient health systems to deliver universal SRH*
3. *Ensuring protection of rights and all forms of violence in the context of climate-related migration and displacement*
4. *Improving vulnerability assessment through population and health data*
5. *Empower young people as climate change innovators, mobilizers and problems solvers*

### Background

In 1994, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) recognized that “ecological problems, such as global climate change, largely driven by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, are adding to the threats to the well-being of future generations.” Those threats have already started to arrive, driven by the one degree of global warming above pre-industrial levels already observed. Impacts will accelerate even with concerted action to reduce emissions, and they will be disproportionately concentrated in the global south, including on the African continent.

Extreme climate-related hazards are now regularly occurring in Africa: drought in the Sahel, severe water scarcity, more frequent and extreme El Nino events, historically severe storms such as cyclones Idai and Kenneth and more. Climate projections for Africa indicate that mean annual temperature increase will exceed the global average, and impacts will only get worse. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)’s Fifth Assessment Report, climate change will amplify existing stress on water availability and will interact with non-climate drivers and stressors to exacerbate vulnerability of agricultural systems,

particularly in semi-arid areas. Increasing temperatures and changes in precipitation are very likely to reduce cereal crop productivity, reducing food security and undermining livelihoods on a continent where the majority of people rely on agriculture for income. Climate change is a multiplier of existing health vulnerabilities, including insufficient access to safe water and improved sanitation, food insecurity, and limited access to health care and education, and climate-related displacement is challenging both protection and the realization of human rights. Climate change is also widely recognized as a threat multiplier, for instance in the Lake Chad region, where increasing conflict and instability have accompanied the loss of 95 percent of Lake Chad. Fundamentally, climate change is a major threat to the vision of human centered sustainable development outlined in the ICPD Programme of Action.

At the fifth Africa Regional Forum for Sustainable Development in Marrakech in April this year, member States recognised that climate change is stalling Africa's efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063, and stated the need for the continent urgently to formulate a common position on climate change.

### **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Gender and Climate Change Resilience**

The ICPD Programme of Action recognized the strong links between population, sustainable development and environment, and the centrality of sexual and reproductive health and rights to individual well-being and empowerment as well as collective sustainability. Improving sexual and reproductive health enhances individual and community resilience while reinforcing human rights.

The IPCC's 5<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report, "Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability", recognized the role of population dynamics and the importance of investing in sexual and reproductive health, including family planning as an adaptation strategy for reducing climate change vulnerability and increase resilience. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction also emphasizes the importance of increasing access to basic health-care services, including for maternal, newborn and child health and sexual and reproductive health. SRHR is an important part of strengthening individual and community resilience to climate change.

The Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC, at its 23rd meeting, adopted the Gender Action Plan (GAP), which underscores the essential role of women and girls in developing and implementing climate change solutions, and calls for States to present information on the differentiated impacts of climate change on women and men, with special attention paid to local communities and indigenous peoples. Investments in the full realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights are a vital part of gender equality, including the full participation of women and girls, and are central to realizing the aims of the GAP and gender-responsive climate adaptation and mitigation.

#### ***Strengthening climate-resilient health systems to deliver universal SRH***

Climate change has been linked to undernutrition, water scarcity, poor hygienic conditions, infectious disease outbreaks and increased vulnerability to floods, hurricanes, heat waves and other natural disasters. These conditions have direct consequences for women's health during pregnancy, labor and delivery and postpartum and in turn for population health overall.

In order to address the challenges that climate change poses to population health there is a need to strengthen the capacity of health systems to protect and improve population health in an unstable and changing climate. Health systems should be climate resilient and have the capacity to cope with and manage health risks in a way

that the essential functions, identity and structure of health systems are maintained. Health systems must be prepared for changing climate-related health risks; prevent, respond to, manage, and cope with uncertainty, adversity and stress; adapt operations to changing risk conditions; recover from crisis and learn from experience and improve system capacity for the future.

***Ensuring protection of rights and all forms of violence in the context of climate-related migration and displacement***

The 5 year review of the Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development in 2018 underscored that emerging challenges of regional mobility due to the impact of climate change coupled with political instability are affecting several countries in the region. Those forced to move due to emergencies or natural disasters have particular sexual and reproductive health needs and a large proportion of people affected are women of reproductive age, including adolescents. Climate change increases the number of people in emergency and therefore the number of people in need of emergency reproductive health services or protection from gender based violence.

***Improving vulnerability assessment through population and health data***

In order to ensure appropriate and adequate response to climate related stresses, vulnerability assessments informed by population data, and taking into account sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence risks and protective measures, are vital tools for programme design, implementation and monitoring.

***Empowering young people into climate action.*** The youth of today are stepping up the challenge of climate change and their involvement in combating climate change is crucial. Many are already taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to increase climate change resilience. At the UN Climate Change Conference in Marrakech (COP22), young people have been vocally pushing for more climate ambition and for a stronger role of youth in helping to shape climate policies and implementing the Paris Climate Change Agreement and the new Sustainable Development Goals.

Many countries recognize these links, and have referenced them in a wide range of policies and instruments meant to curtail the threat of climate change. Sexual and reproductive health and protection from gender-based violence are also understood as life-saving services as part of humanitarian response to climate-related emergencies. Yet few countries have included investments in realizing universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights as part of comprehensive climate adaptation efforts. This gap is driven by lack of awareness of the importance of SRHR and climate change and the existence of established policies and programmes that address these links, together with lack of sufficient opportunities in climate financing.