Women in the Sahel: a crucial lever for building climate resilience

And why policies need to focus on the gendered aspect of climate change

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As they contribute substantially to agriculture, women in the Sahel region in Africa are especially vulnerable to climate change in this area of the world where temperatures are rising faster than the global average. However, they are still not adequately considered in policies aiming to build climate resilience. The COP26 that will take place in November 2021 needs to make the gender implications of climate change a focus area of intervention.

While a whole new generation of African activists against climate change are raising their voice, it is time for the development community to consider their claim. Focusing on women in the response to the climate and security problems of the region is key to resolving the security and development issues in the Sahel.

- Sabrina D'Andrea
Paris, August 2021 - After the alarming predictions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), warning of increasingly extreme natural disasters and rising temperatures, the world is preparing for the COP26 summit in November. Last August, the UN Humanitarian Affairs Office (OCHA) celebrated the World Humanitarian Day by launching the #TheHumanRace, a global challenge for climate action bringing the needs of vulnerable people at the center of the COP26. One of the hotspots for climate change is the Sahel region, where temperatures are increasing 1.5 times faster than in the rest of the world. Inhabitants of the Sahel, a vast semi-arid region stretching over Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, suffer not only from political and economic insecurity due to violent conflicts in the region, but are also severely impacted by climate change. Within this region, where 65% of the population lives in rural areas, communities are already suffering from intensifying droughts, desertification and floods. Women are particularly affected by these crises.

WHY WOMEN IN THE SAHEL REGION ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

In general, women living in rural areas are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change: they make a substantial contribution to agricultural and domestic work, including supplying the household with water and firewood, managing the familial agricultural production, petty trading, etc. However, they have poor access to land ownership and face a higher risk of poverty. In the Sahel region, women make up for 80% of the agricultural labour force. As such, they are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, natural disasters, water shortages, as well as climate-induced migration and conflicts. Disasters such as floods have almost doubled in the region in the last 5 years, leaving 80% of the region's farmland degraded and drastically reducing food resources.

As men migrate to the cities to find work, women are left behind, experience food insecurity and are overburdened by work in the fields and at home. Women are thus at the front line experiencing the effect of climate change within pastoral communities: they face, often alone, the drying up of water points and the drop in agricultural yields. The economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have accentuated these vulnerabilities in rural areas, as more men have migrated to cities leaving women more vulnerable to poverty. Discriminatory practices and beliefs accentuate these inequalities.

Climate change in the Sahel is thus accentuating an already wide gender gap in the region: according to the African Development Bank's Gender Equality in Africa Index, the gender gap in the Sahel region is 48.4%, larger than the 31% continental average.
Why Climate policies need to focus on women

Women are more dependent on natural capital for their livelihoods. While men have the alternative to search for paid work in cities or in other areas, women need natural resources to feed their families. This is why any policy focusing on building climate resilience within rural communities should focus on women. However, women have very limited control of resources and typically do not have access to land ownership due to unequal inheritance laws and a lack of influence in men-led cooperatives and community groups. They hardly ever participate in the elaboration of programmes for the management of natural resources.

Policies have only recently begun to include the gender aspect in the fight against climate change. Indeed, while women and girls are a crucial lever for building climate resilience in affected regions, they are still rarely the target of intervention in the area. The director of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) admitted that while women often represent the vast majority of small farmers in most parts of the continent, policies have ignored them and funding targets have been disproportionately focused on men.

Women give a substantial contribution to agriculture in the Sahel region. Source: Ralf Steinberger on Flickr
Local organisations are currently discussing how to promote women’s economic inclusion in programmes supporting female businesses amidst growing regional insecurity and recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. NGOs and international organizations in the Sahel finance various projects combining the fight against climate change and women’s empowerment, such as the Sahel Women Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Project (SWEDD) launched in 2014. Notwithstanding these efforts, women in the Sahel region are likely to face the dramatic consequences of climate change in the coming years.

While a whole new generation of African activists against climate change are raising their voice, it is time for the development community to consider their claim. Focusing on women in the response to the climate and security problems of the region is key to resolving the security and development issues in the Sahel, as pointed out by Ms. Nana Aïcha Cissé, Regional Coordinator of the G5 Sahel Women’s Platform.

LOOKING FORWARD

The recent floods in Niger and the armed attacks perpetrated in Mali and in Niger in August 2021 are only a few examples of the problems the region is facing. The COP26 in Glasgow in November this year will need to focus on the already evident consequences of climate change in this vulnerable region so as to enable the countries of the Sahel region to adapt to the impact of the climate crisis. In order to implement climate resilience in the Sahel area, a gender focus is essential, as social vulnerability shapes resilience outcomes and the implementation of development intervention.

Wathi, a think tank based in Western Africa, recommends involving women especially in rural communities in the planification and the implementation of initiatives aimed at building climate resilience, for instance in the sustainable management of resources like water and forests. Improving women’s access to land ownership, loans and climate training are likewise essential. Another crucial lever in the fight against climate change is providing girls with quality education, as underlined recently by the Malala Fund.

At the UN Climate Conference in 2020 (COP 25), countries decided to implement a more gender-responsive approach to climate action and adopted the Lima Work Programme on Gender (LWPG) and Gender Action Plan (GAP), involving for example gender-responsive budgeting in climate finance. These action programmes need to be implemented and enhanced during the COP26 in Glasgow, with a particular focus on the world’s most vulnerable regions to climate change, such as the Sahel.
NOTES: (References)


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