

Hard times ahead

Climate change and development in Africa are interlinked, says Marisa Goulden.



World leaders at the G8 summit in Gleneagles in July discussed African development and climate change as separate challenges, but for many Africans they are tightly linked. In Uganda I'm investigating whether people who live in poverty, and who are already vulnerable to extreme weather, can adapt to changing climate.

Villagers on the shores of East African lakes frequently suffer a variable climate and extreme weather such as floods and droughts. By interviewing those whose livelihoods depend on the lake, and studying satellite images, records of fish catches, rainfall and lake levels, I aim to better understand what people are adapting to, and what actions might work.

Fishermen and farmers told me how they coped with losing their crops, property or businesses. The most resilient families adapted by earning money from several different activities, or changing jobs. One man, George, told how he had to stop working as a fishmonger. The village fishermen had abandoned fishing or moved to other lakes because Lake Wamala had shrunk. George started brewing and selling banana beer and planting banana trees in the newly-dried-up lake. His young trees were destroyed a few years later after heavy rains replenished the lake, but he restarted his fish business.

Extended families, friends and social networks also help provide food, money or shelter. When floods destroyed most of Nangobi's crops, a sympathetic villager offered her work. She cultivated his fields in exchange for food supplies for her family. And a village leader helped Aduko, a widow with two children, negotiate with a local landowner for permission to build a new hut after her home was flooded.

People can adapt to problems caused by the climate, but there are limits to what households can cope with. One man, a

farmer and shop-owner with several wives and many children, explained, 'The floods affected me badly because we had just survived the drought. We started cultivating on the shores of the lake and then it came and destroyed the crops.' He fed his large family from the stocks in his shop, but eventually his business collapsed. He will have no such buffer if another famine strikes.

Rural Ugandans, like many other Africans, face many problems in their daily lives. Men and women told me how they struggled to cope with illnesses like malaria and HIV/AIDS, a growing family to feed, or being caught up in armed conflict that forced them to flee their homes. A changing climate is just one more thing for them to deal with. Climatic shocks like floods and droughts hinder development goals to 'make poverty history'. But without the improvements in income, health and education that development can bring, poor people will struggle to adapt to climate change.

So how should the extra development aid promised by the G8 nations be spent? I suggest development projects or policies should encourage flexibility and diversity in ways people earn a living. Providing credit facilities might help people take up new opportunities that climate change brings. It is also important to strengthen community organisations and avoid weakening the social networks that are so crucial for the poorest to survive in hard times. Africa and climate change are issues that, together, deserve our attention.

Marisa Goulden's research is funded jointly by NERC and the Economic and Social Research Council and is based at the University of East Anglia (School of Environmental Sciences and School of Development Studies) and the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. Marisa collaborated with students of Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda during field studies. Tel: 01603 593911, email: m.goulden@uea.ac.uk