



# Human Security and El Niño/La Niña: Towards a New Response Framework for Recurring and Extreme Weather Events

*“El Niño has had such a widespread and varied impact around the world, and is in some ways so technical, that it can be easy to forget its debilitating effect on the lives of ordinary people – many of them already facing multiple economic, environmental and social challenges”*

– **Ms. Mary Robinson**, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on El Niño and Climate



The current El Niño weather event, one of the most intense and widespread in the past century, has had devastating impacts on more than 60 million people worldwide. While El Niño/La Niña is a naturally occurring phenomenon, befalling us every two to seven years on average, the intensity of its impacts is increasing as it converges with human-induced climate change. That means even more destructive droughts, floods,

and extreme temperatures, which lead to a loss of livelihoods, spikes in hunger, malnutrition, food and water insecurity, and deepening poverty and inequality, hitting the most vulnerable the hardest. And, while El Niño lasts for a short period, the impacts on people, agricultural production, and the sustainable development of affected countries can persist for years.

The scale and scope of the devastation for communities in countries most affected by the current El Niño/La Niña highlights gaps in responses and signals the need for a new approach to address slow-onset, predictable weather events in the context of climate change. This new approach must reflect the deeply integrated challenges of promoting long-term development, building resilient communities and reducing vulnerability to natural disasters. Human security provides an effective framework for responding to complex climate-related challenges by guiding the development of protection and empowerment strategies that are people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented. These strategies help ensure communities and countries have the mitigation, adaptation, coping and response mechanisms in place to reduce the intensity of impacts, and safeguard livelihoods and development gains in future cycles.

# KEY IMPACTS OF EL NIÑO

Natural disasters, environmental degradation and extreme weather patterns disrupt harvests, deplete fisheries, erode livelihoods and spur infectious diseases. Some effects come on suddenly, but in the case of El Niño, many of the effects unfold over time leading to a ripple of impacts as communities lose their livestock and crops, sell their assets, and hold off using education and health services. When the loss of land and livelihoods occurs against a backdrop of persistent poverty and other insecurities it can trigger competition for scarce natural resources and fuel social tensions.

The current 2015-2016 El Niño cycle has been one of the strongest on record, impacting agricultural production and food security across the globe. The most affected regions include the Horn of Africa, southern Africa, the Dry Corridor of Central America, Caribbean Islands, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Many countries in these regions have declared a national state of emergency as a result of the impacts. At present, in Central America, the Dry Corridor is experiencing its worst drought in decades, affecting the food security of over 3.5 million people. In southern Africa, the production of maize, which is grown by 80 percent of the subsistence farmers, fell nearly 30 percent in 2015. Serious damages have also been registered in Asia and the Pacific.

## **Human security: towards a new response framework**

While we must effectively address the emergency needs of communities and countries impacted by extreme weather events, we must also recognize that we are at the doorstep of a new era. This new world with frequent and destructive climate-related risks demands a new approach: one that better integrates needs and vulnerabilities and requires us to engage earlier and prepare better; one that is targeted towards the most vulnerable people and communities and focuses on building resilience and context-specific solutions; and one that promotes stronger integration across a wide range of actors, particularly between the humanitarian and development sectors.

## **A comprehensive and integrated approach to address the interrelated social, economic and environmental impacts:**

Although each sector has important contributions to make in response to climate-related challenges – for example, introducing climate resilient agriculture or disaster-proof food and water systems – effective responses must consider the interlinkages across sectors and identify entry points for collaborative action to mitigate the impacts of climate-related challenges on people and communities. Through its comprehensive analysis, human security provides a framework to simultaneously reduce food, health and economic insecurities that are the result of climate-related threats. This approach can also help international, national and local actors better prioritize and coordinate responses, and determine where collaboration will produce the most powerful results for affected populations.

## **Community-driven and context-specific solutions:**

The current El Niño cycle has devastated the lives of those least responsible for human-induced climate change, including smallholder farmers in southern Africa and fishermen in Pacific Island States. By placing people at the centre of analysis, the human security approach encourages broad participation that provides detailed insights into the varying challenges faced by different groups within communities and regions. Such an approach helps identify how different climate-related threats intersect and how different groups of people may be impacted in varied ways by the same events. This allows for more targeted and community-based solutions that address immediate needs while also building resilience and protecting livelihoods in the long term. These community-based adaptation and mitigation plans can also make crucial contributions to national and international strategies, and can support early warning mechanisms that inform proactive and preventive measures.

## **Bridging the divide between emergency assistance and sustainable development by investing in prevention and accounting for vulnerabilities:**

Our shared future is one in which recurring and extreme weather events will bring more severe human, economic and environmental impacts. While we know that early action is far less costly and far more effective, it can be difficult to make the investments and commitments in early prevention. At its core, human security is focused on protecting the life opportunities of both future and present generations. Applying a human security lens integrates risk and vulnerability analysis into development planning and helps link emergency assistance with longer-term development goals and strategies. By bridging the divide between humanitarian and development, human security can support us in becoming better at anticipating crises, identifying emerging threats, and mitigating their impacts before they inflict unnecessary suffering and undermine hard-earned development gains.

# Applying the Human Security Framework to the Work of the United Nations

In 2015 and 2016, the multilateral system adopted an unprecedented number of landmark agreements and commitments including the Sendai Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the A2R initiative (Anticipate, Absorb and Reshape) of the United Nations Secretary-General, and the World Humanitarian Summit's core commitments.

Meanwhile, recognizing the urgency and gravity of the current El Niño event, the Secretary-General also appointed Mary Robinson of Ireland and Macharia Kamau of Kenya as his Special Envoys on El Niño and Climate to provide the leadership required to tackle this complex challenge.

As a core component of their work, the Special Envoys are developing a blueprint for action, drawing on an integrated human security approach, to help the international community better adapt to the 'new normal', prevent predictable weather events from becoming emergencies, and develop quicker and more effective responses to climate-linked emergencies.

Within this framework, key humanitarian and development partners across and beyond the United Nations system are developing Inter-Agency El Niño/La Niña Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure integrated, people-centred and preventive action for slow onset and predictable climate events. The SOPs will establish thresholds at which collective 'early' action should be taken to mitigate or try to prevent the effects of the El Niño/La Niña phenomena on the most vulnerable communities. The architecture for this cooperation must materialize not only between United Nations agencies and their partners, but also within countries where a comprehensive and multi-sectorial framework can limit the



tendency for implementing isolated measures with narrow impact on long-term resilience.

## Conclusion

El Niño, La Niña and other extreme weather-related events have direct impact on the lives and livelihoods of people and countries around the globe. Accordingly, the United Nations system has recognized the need for new approaches to better prevent, prepare for and respond to complex climate-related challenges. Human security provides a useful strategic and operational framework for guiding the development of the blueprint, as well as the integrated activities of the United Nations system in a manner that can reduce vulnerability, build resilience, and safeguard livelihoods and development gains in the face of extreme weather events and climate change.

# The policy framework is set, now is the time to translate this into action.

*"It is clear that this is a complex emergency that demands integrated responses built on forward-looking partnerships. It is equally clear that a failure to deliver on this mission will have ripples felt for generations."*

— **Ambassador Macharia Kamau**, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on El Niño and Climate

# Application of the Human Security Approach: Building Resilience to Climate Change

## Building resilience of communities in the Dry Corridor of Guatemala

The effects of El Niño in the Dry Corridor of Guatemala have exacerbated drought and water scarcity in an already fragile environment, highlighting a set of multidimensional threats and challenges to the sustainable development of the local population. A human security analysis has revealed the impact of El Niño on the economic, food, health and environmental security of vulnerable communities; insecurities that arise simultaneously and often exacerbate one another. The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) has supported a people-centred and prevention-oriented programme to reduce vulnerability and build resilience of communities through a multi-sectoral, integrated and comprehensive response framework. Implemented by United Nations Development Programme, FAO and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and in close collaboration with Government and municipal authorities, this framework has allowed the United Nations system and local partners to address multiple challenges simultaneously, benefiting from synergies, safeguarding development gains, and overcoming climate-related challenges through comprehensive and durable solutions.

## Strengthening human security in the border communities of Turkana, Kenya

In 2011, the Government of Kenya announced the growing drought crisis in the north-eastern part of the country as a national disaster. In response, the UNTFHS, through a collaborative and integrated framework of human security, launched an innovative programme in Turkana, Kenya and its border communities. The programme demonstrated a change in thinking and approach by placing resilience building of communities as the cornerstone of an expanded disaster response framework. With its emphasis on protection and empowerment strategies that are people-centered and prevention-oriented, the programme offered an important platform to combine the resources and capacities of communities and institutions to stabilize fragile livelihoods and prevent disasters from leading to competition over limited resources. By building community resilience to frequent climatic and environmental risks, the programme addressed the pervasive gaps in the protection and empowerment framework and supported greater access to alternative livelihoods and agricultural practices; advanced sustainable interventions in food, education, health and community needs and security of those most vulnerable; and developed early warning mechanisms to limit the spread and mitigate the impact of current and future shocks to climate change and weather-related disasters.

## Enhancing human security through disaster risk reduction in Haiti

Haiti is one of the most vulnerable countries to disasters in the world. Climate change, El Niño/La Niña and its impact on the environment are compounding the situation, with disasters occurring with growing frequency and intensity and exacerbating underlying social, economic, political and environmental insecurities. With support from the UNTFHS, the human security programme employs a holistic and people-centred approach that accounts for the real-life interlinkages between insecurities. With a particular focus on local communities, the programme provides the tools and resources for people to engage in the development and implementation of strategies that are tailored to the specific context of those most vulnerable. Such analysis enhances the quality of information on the trends and distribution of risks and vulnerabilities at the local level, reinforcing the development of early warning mechanisms that strengthen the capacities of institutions and communities and improve the resilience of those most vulnerable to respond to climatic shocks.

## Strengthening rural livelihoods severely affected by climate induced drought in Lesotho

In Lesotho, where an estimated 80 percent of the population depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, the adverse effects of climate-induced droughts have been hindering the country's development progress in a number of key areas, including agriculture and food security, poverty reduction, health and malnutrition. At the same time, developing long-term and sustainable responses requires a comprehensive approach that accounts for the interlinkages between the environment, food, health, nutrition and economic security. By simultaneously addressing the impact of climate change on people's vulnerabilities and by promoting sustainable drought-resistant agricultural technologies in line with local capacities and available resources, a UNTFHS programme, working through six United Nations entities, facilitated comprehensive and multidimensional strategies that capitalize on the comparative advantages of a diverse network of stakeholders. As a result, new strategies to adapt agricultural practices to climatic fluctuations not only reinforced the resilience of communities to the threat of climate change but also resulted in tangible improvements in the food, health and nutrition status of the participating communities in Lesotho.