



Presentation to The World Meteorological Organization February 2011

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share some thoughts regarding partnership between climate prediction work and humanitarian organisations, particularly, between WMO and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The value of such partnerships is now widely recognised. Preparedness, rather than just response, has become a Red Cross responsibility. Like our colleagues in the wider humanitarian world, we anticipate that climate change, population growth and urbanisation will shape our work in the years to come, and that as a consequence we will see an increasing number of large, medium and small scale natural disasters, affecting increasing numbers of people, and more frequent, cyclical disasters, again affecting increasing numbers of people; and with continuing advances in the detail and accuracy of climate prediction, there is no excuse to be waiting for a disaster to strike before launching a response.

Early Warning/Early Action is now a globally adopted approach across the Red Cross/Red Crescent world, and has already resulted in the exploration and cultivation of partnerships with climate predicting bodies and the use of climate knowledge in humanitarian decision making.

But these relationships are still in their early stages, and the use of climate knowledge has not reached its full potential. I'd like to use this presentation to raise four outstanding challenges that need to be addressed on the way to maximising the potential of collaboration between climate science and humanitarian action. I hope that these are challenges that we can work on together.

The first challenge is around communications and the delivery of information to the people who need to act on it.

At the moment, within the IFRC, we do receive climate updates, with seasonal forecasts that present percentage confidence rates of high or low rainfall. This information is sent from our Secretariat in Geneva to its Representative bodies around the world, such as the office I represent in Nairobi.

From our office in Nairobi we look out at our clients across East Africa, representing a giant network of Red Cross/Red Crescent branches and volunteers, consisting of dozens of languages, ethnic groups, people who are literate and illiterate, people who live in cities and remote areas, some in arid lands and some in wet lands, farmers, pastoralists, women, children, old people, displaced people, disabled people etc: a vast arrange of different cultures, capacities and vulnerabilities.

We cannot simply forward the English language seasonal forecasts we receive out to all these groups. And we don't, and often, this valuable information gets stuck in English and French speaking capitals, with the exception of a few, pilot, early warning projects dotted around the region.

So my first recommendation is that we do really need a communications strategy – one that is ambitious in scale, but one that considers and builds on local languages and local traditions, as well as the possibilities provided by advances in telecommunications. It would need to begin by surveying what sources people currently use and trust, and what sort of information would be useful to get from those trusted sources. This represents a major piece of work in itself – not only in the collection of the qualitative data but also in the alliances it would need to form – with elders, churches, schools and other respected bodies, across an array of cultures and capacities. The design of such a communications strategy is not part of a project but a project in itself. It represents the bridge between prediction and action – and is something we all stand to gain by collaborating on.

The second point I would like to raise is about this often tenuous, but always vital, relationship between prediction and action.

There are clear differences here between prediction of sudden onset and slow onset disasters. For sudden onset, the preventive action is fairly clear – move to a safer area and save lives. For slow onset, where the time pressures are less immediate, the triggers less clear, and affects likely to be visible only slowly on food security and malnutrition - the call to action can be a harder sell.

Yet in both cases, the value of the prediction is dependent on a corresponding ability to act on it.

Can people alter crops, change timing of tillage, change allocation of herds, physically move to a different location? The more options, knowledge and flexibility people have - the less vulnerable they will be to changing weather patterns. And this task of supporting communities to be more resilient is fast becoming a core business of humanitarian organisations, alongside the more traditional role of emergency response.

But there are lessons here from other types of humanitarian and development work that show just how difficult the relationship between prediction and action can be. If we take campaigns on HIV prevention, or even on smoking or wearing seatbelts, then we see just how reluctant humans are to change behaviour in the face of uncertain risk. Given a choice, many people are happy to take risks and hope for the best, and often it is only the force of law that eventually imposes a change of behaviour. In HIV campaigns we saw that simply passing on information about the relationship between the threat of HIV and condom usage did not necessarily lead to an increase in condom usage. Especially among groups that were already facing a multitude of day to day risks and pressures. The messages only sunk in when the communities took over the message, articulated and owned it themselves, and therefore really trusted the source. So the first lesson is – do not assume that prediction will result in action – a lot will depend on who is the source.

A second lesson we have had to acknowledge, this time on community action in response to climate knowledge, is that – not surprisingly, adapting to climate changes is not new. The pastoralist communities in East Africa have mastered the art of living in arid lands, and for centuries have practised a variety of effective approaches to protect lives and livestock throughout cycles of drought. If these adaptive skills are no longer functioning then we need to look beyond low rainfall to understand why. Other factors, such as population growth, environmental destruction caused by over grazing, limitations on population and livestock movement due to security or land ownership restrictions – all may be causes as to why traditional coping mechanisms are failing.

In other words, you may improve the quality of the weather forecasting, but when you encounter a reduced capacity to act on the information, a crisis will hit anyway.

The roots of this crisis may not be climate – but politics, power, aid policies, population size, culture etc. And the relationship between prediction and action then opens a can of worms that requires long term engagement, often, with mixed results.

But admitting that the relationship between prediction and action can be complex and sensitive doesn't detract from the point that a relationship must exist. My second suggestion for collaboration therefore is to link the messages on climate prediction with the advice and the capacity building to act on it, with the aim of supporting more climate resilient communities.

And finally on this point, it is worth noting, that the more detailed the prediction then the more immediate and obvious the action. If for example, after a flood, we could know where pools of standing water are likely to appear and for how long, then it may be possible to take action against mosquitoes' breeding sites and thereby reduce malaria incidence. There are other examples. But the point I think is clear. Beyond the challenges of disseminating climate prediction, more in depth understanding of, for example, the relationship between climate threats and health threats and how that will affect a certain area, may lead to a more effective relationship between prediction and action.

My third issue is more internal and refers to the planning processes that currently exist within IFRC. As things stand now, planning is shaped partners' plans, funding opportunities, donor strategies, organisational priorities etc. But not yet by climate prediction.

But in fact, as climate science gets stronger, there is no reason why annual planning processes should not be guided by long term and seasonal climate forecasts. In fact, it would almost certainly lead to improvements.

This can happen. It's just that the culture of it does not yet exist, or at least, is only just emerging. So my third suggestion is that we do link up at key stages during the year, when the planning is taking place, so that investments in making communities more resilient are based on analysis as to where the risks are highest for that coming year.

My final point is related to the donor community that supports humanitarian action. Arguments around the need to use climate prediction to improve disaster response are not contentious. Everyone seems to agree that it is a good idea. Just like everyone seems to agree that disaster risk reduction is as crucial long term as an ability to scale up an emergency response in a crisis. But the funding remains locked in more traditional ways of thinking – separating emergency work and development. Our situation in East Africa is typical. Between 2008 – 2010, we raised approximately twenty three million dollars for emergency response and around one and half million dollars for risk reduction. Possibly more lives and livelihoods could have been saved had the funding been the other way around. But currently, that is not the way humanitarian money moves. Some donors to their credit are adjusting and investing in early warning and early action, but for the most part, it's still big money once a disaster happens and little project money for "normal" phases. If we really want to support resilience to climate changes, then these funding systems need to change.

And so my final recommendation is that we collaborate on that message to our donors, many of whom are the same donors, so that we can scale up and adapt the delivery of climate prediction messages, and bring resilience work to scale.

Thank you