

Headline: We must prepare now for another major El Niño

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Published Date: 02:03 AM November 28, 2015

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4959

Content:

The latest cyclical warming of Pacific Ocean waters, first observed centuries ago and formally tracked since 1950, began earlier this year and already has been felt across Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Weather experts predict that this El Niño will continue into the spring of 2016 and could wreak havoc, because climate change is likely to exacerbate the intensity of storms and flooding in some places and of severe drought and water shortages in others.

El Niño's impacts are global, with heavy rain and severe flooding expected in South America and scorching weather and drought conditions likely in the Horn of Africa region.

The risk is especially great for East Asia-Pacific countries that are highly vulnerable to altered weather patterns because of climate change. This year will likely be the hottest ever recorded, increasing the El Niño effect caused by weakened trade winds that fail to push warmer Pacific Ocean waters to the west.

We know what the potential effects might be. In 1997 and 1998, the strongest El Niño on record led to the deaths of 23,000 people from natural disasters and increased poverty rates by 15 percent in some countries. It also cost governments up to \$45 billion due to severe storms, droughts and other effects.

Such a global challenge calls for a global response—with coordinated efforts by governments, international institutions such as the World Bank, relief agencies and communities—to minimize the death and destruction from natural catastrophes while building more resilient societies.

The good news is that we have learned from past experience how to better predict, prepare and respond. We now know that disaster risk management and early warning systems can provide forecasts and data that reduce death tolls and economic losses from severe weather.

These achievements show that building resilient and adaptable societies is the most effective strategy for challenges such as El Niño. Instead of limiting our approach to the specific challenge of El Niño, we should continue to support investments in sustainable growth and building resilience to the changing climate.

In our recent East Asia-Pacific Economic Update, the World Bank Group warned that failing to anticipate El Niño's impacts can have serious economic development repercussions for the region. Food shortages, wildfires and depleted water resources are likely in some areas, and torrential rains in other areas can cause flooding and human migration.

An El Niño typically leads to higher demand for polluting energy sources like coal and crude oil, because hydropower generation declines due to high heat and drought. Drought and flood can also spark outbreaks of diseases from contaminated water and reduced hygiene, as well as mosquito-borne viruses like dengue.

In the Philippines, the government predicts that 80 percent of the country will likely experience drought by February 2016, while farmers in parts of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia already are leaving fields and rice paddies unplanted due to excessively dry and hot conditions.

Meanwhile, the lowest rainfall levels since 1951 left more than 230,000 people in China's Liaoning province short of drinking water in July. This summer, Myanmar (Burma) experienced severe flooding and landslides that displaced more than 1.6 million people.

Pacific islanders also face water shortages, because lack of rainfall threatens freshwater sources in societies mostly dependent on agriculture. Water shortage can have serious health implications, with increased risk of disease outbreak.

At the World Bank Group, we stand ready to help countries with a proactive strategy that includes technical assistance and monitoring and mitigation tools, such as early-warning systems and postdisaster needs assessments and mobilizing financing, which governments can tap into shortly after disasters hit.

For example, in the last three years, we helped Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu assess the impact of destructive cyclones to assist reconstruction efforts. And in 2014, the Philippines used a new financing mechanism developed by the World Bank—Catastrophe-Deferred Drawdown Option—to quickly respond to severe Tropical Storm “Sendong,” also known as “Washi.”

In the 1997-1998 El Niño, the World Bank Group provided emergency loans to help many countries restore infrastructure and productivity in sectors such as transport, flood control, health, agriculture and energy. We also helped countries strengthen early-warning systems and risk management capacities.

Now, as we get ready to confront an El Niño that could be one of the strongest on record, it's time for us to mobilize a unified response to protect the development gains of recent decades for people in East Asia-Pacific.

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