Climate action (SDG13)

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts [97]

Challenges to climate action – the global picture

- Climate extremes have not taken a break during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, evidence shows that the world is in a graver situation than ever before as a result of human-made climate change. Climate change is "widespread, rapid and intensifying"[98] said the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its July 2021 report Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis.[99] The report extinguished any doubt as to whether human activities were driving the changes, stating: "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land."

- The World Meteorological Organisation's State of the Global Climate report found that concentrations of three major greenhouse gases in the atmosphere – carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide – were the highest ever recorded in 2019, and that despite COVID-19-related lockdowns and economic disruption, global greenhouse gas emissions[100] went up in 2020.

- The 191 Parties that have signed the Paris Agreement on climate change[101] are responsible for submitting national climate plans to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), setting out how they will reduce or avoid greenhouse gas emissions and so put the world on track to limit global warming to 1.5ºC above pre industrial levels (which is the overarching temperature goal of the Agreement). So far, countries' current policies would deliver a 2.9ºC world, while their pledges would add up to 2.4ºC of global warming. [102]

- The 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) of the UNFCCC was delayed from late 2020 to November 2021 because of the global pandemic, leaving exceptionally little time for countries to hammer out improvements in their collective ambition. This includes rich countries making good on the promised $100 billion in climate finance[103] they were due to disburse annually to poorer countries by 2020, but which is still well below these levels. The President of COP26, the United Kingdom's Alok Sharma, has warned that time is running out to avert a global climate catastrophe. [104]

A man with his family following Super-Cyclone Amphan in Satkhira in southwest Bangladesh. © YouthNet for Climate Justice

Challenges to climate action – local community perspectives

The confluence of the Covid-19 pandemic with weather and climate extremes is providing acute challenges for communities in all countries, and particularly in low-income countries and communities with fewer financial and material resources available to respond. The Voices from the Frontline give several personalised accounts of dealing with the compounded risks of Covid-19 and extreme weather or climate events, such as tropical storms, floods and droughts (to name but a few).

It is not always possible to say categorically that the extreme events we describe are a result of human-driven climate change, so we have been careful with our language. It can be difficult to separate background climate variability from the effects of human-made climate change[105] when trying to ascertain, for example, whether or not heavy rainfall happened in a city simply because it was an El Nino year?

However, the trends are clear. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finds that extreme weather events have become more intense and frequent in the *past few decades* as a result of climate change. And, depending on regions and locations, many types of extreme weather and climate events may be expected to become more severe and frequent in the *coming decades,* as a result of global warming. Readers should consult scientists' projections carefully and refer to the IPCC's regional atlas of the physical science of climate change[106] for the most accurate understanding of what to expect in their country or region.

A poignant Voices from the Frontline story comes from Jannatul Mawa[107] in the coastal Satkhira district of southeast Bangladesh. Here, COVID-19 was spreading rapidly in the community, just as Super-Cyclone Amphan struck. Amphan was the deadliest storm ever recorded in the Bay of Bengal,[108] bringing heavy rains and high tidal surges that destroyed dams and submerged low-lying lands and ponds. Saline water intruded further into the precious croplands of the district.

"Food shortages and rising commodity prices propelled community members to live on preserved dry foods (puffed rice, flattened rice and coconut) for many days. Availability of pure drinking water was also a major challenge," Jannatul described.[109] It is clear how the risks to personal safety, health, nutrition and wellbeing can be compounded by the intersection of

extreme weather events and COVID-19. For example, the destruction of people's housing, water and food supplies by a cyclone can force them to move around and congregate in new ways to seek vital shelter, sanitation, water and food. These unplanned movements and gatherings of people can increase their exposure to the virus.

Meanwhile, in informal settlements in India, including the state of Assam, ruinously heavy monsoon rains arrived in mid-2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was also taking hold and residents were under lockdown orders. The heavy rainfall, with consequent flooding and landslides,[110] wreaked havoc in most of Indian states, including Assam. A story from Bindu Singh,[111] a resident of Babu basti settlement in Guwahati, Assam, tells how, due to the devastating effects of the floods, she and other residents were forced to hastily retreat from their homes by a railway line and construct makeshift shelters and a toilet on raised land. Over the years, people have learned to build raised bamboo houses to save their belongings from floods, but this time, the raised shacks were also inundated.

"This time the floods approached without any warning, and the flood level exceeded twice the level it had crossed earlier," Bindu explained. "Also, the pandemic and subsequent lockdown left people with no money to buy bamboo and raise the platforms of their houses, forcing them to survive sleepless nights under those shelters." They were furthermore terrified by the risk of landslides. The increasingly crowded conditions in the shelters and reduction in sanitary facilities increased the residents' potential exposure to Covid-19.

A man swimming through flood waters from Super-Cyclone Amphan in Satkhira in southwest Bangladesh. © YouthNet for Climate Justice

Grassroots solutions on climate action

Covid-safe responses to climate emergencies. Seeing the compounded risks to people in Satkhira district, Bangladesh, Jannatul Mawa and her team provided food relief packages[112] to the most affected communities free of charge. They also developed a local sharing and caring model called "The Wall of Humanity" – a designated space where community members left their surpluses for those in need.

To ensure the safety of the cyclone-affected communities, Jannatul offered essential materials such as masks, hand sanitisers and disinfectants for free. "People are struggling to manage food for themselves; how will they buy masks and soaps? This is the time when we should support each other," she explained.

Importantly, Jannatul works as part of a women-led local organisation, Bindu. The group's previous experience in responding to extreme weather events contributed to its responsiveness and agility when Cyclone Amphan and Covid-19 collided in 2020.

In 2009, Cyclone Aila[113] had wreaked havoc in the district, causing numerous casualties and saline intrusion that destroyed croplands. Since then, Satkhira district has been frequently affected by medium to high intensity cyclones at close intervals. The organisation Bindu was formed and began working on community outreach programmes in this context, advocating for gender equity, women's empowerment and right to education, and climate

Community Action Group (CAG) leader Mumtaz distributes masks as part of her and other community leaders' efforts to help migrants in quarantine centres in Sawda Ghevra in Delhi, India. © Mahila Housing Trust

justice. The contacts and trust that Bindu had developed in the communities – in response to earlier climate extremes – enabled the organisation to mobilise resources quickly in the wake of Cyclone Amphan and the pandemic.

In Guwahati, Assam, India, local people similarly organised to help themselves when the flooding and coronavirus disasters happened simultaneously. News of their locally-led initiatives grew by word of mouth, and attracted further collaboration (see also 'SDG17 Partnerships', below).[114] For example, Arvind and Deepak [no last names given], together with members of their youth club, went door to door to raise awareness of essential hygiene measures to reduce Covid-19 transmission. They showed people how to wash their hands, wear masks and maintain physical distance.

To arrange money for food, they made a list of all contacts in their networks, and approached them for funds and food. Some of them also contributed their own wages. "We woke up early to work in the fish market to earn money to support the relief work," Arvind said. This effort yielded enough donations to provide dry rations to the entire informal settlement. Eventually, they started getting calls from organisations such as Shishu Sarathi, YUVA, and others on how to collaborate and scale up efforts.

Community Action Group (CAG) leader Sarita Varnaval worked with other community leaders to distribute food parcels to the most vulnerable residents in the informal settlement of Shantiniketan in Surat, India, based on their own mapping of who was most in need. © Mahila Housing Trust

Enabling actions to support and work with community solutions

➔ Provide concessional finance (i.e. grants, very low interest or no interest loans) and/or in-kind materials, skills sharing and technological advice to help the poorest and most climate-exposed people to rebuild new housing and sanitation facilities after disasters that will better withstand the next extreme event. Although the stop-gap and longer-term organising efforts of communities to build social and political capital are hugely impressive, these stories highlight people's continued lack of financial means to build back from weather and climate-related disaster more resiliently.

➔ Couple this finance, capacity-building and technology for resilient reconstruction with greater investment in climate-smart land use zoning and building codes and their enforcement along with good local governance to reduce people's exposure to climate hazards in the future.

➔ Operationalise the Santiago Network of Loss and Damage (SNLD)[115] under the UNFCCC, with clear administrative structures to support countries to access advice and support, and receive finance to assess loss and damage to rebuild more resiliently. A formal decision at the UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP26 in Glasgow, UK) would be the best way to do this.

Barengeke Ngini in Goma, Congo, started a business selling vegetables and fruit to support her family, with USD$100 from local research organisation the Bureau of Information, Training, Exchanges and Research for Development (BIFERD). © BIFERD

Implement the REAP targets

The compounded risks of Covid-19 and weather and climate extremes documented by the Voices from the Frontline activists and leaders underscore the urgent need for international and national policies, financial disbursements, and large-scale humanitarian relief systems to 'catch up' with the real needs on the ground.

These stories demonstrate the absolute urgency of realising the ambitions of the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP) to make 1 billion people safer from disasters and achieve REAP's specific targets:

• 50 countries have reviewed and integrated their crisis/disaster risk management and climate adaptation laws, policies and plans to ensure that they reduce climate change impacts and exposure on people and the environment.

• 1 billion more people are covered by financing and delivery mechanisms connected to effective early action plans, ensuring they can get ahead of predicted disasters and crises.

• $500 million invested in early warning system infrastructure and institutions to target early action in 'last/first mile' communities, building on existing initiatives.

• 1 billion more people are covered by new or improved early warning systems, including heatwave early warning, connected to longer-term risk management systems and supported by public awareness campaigns.

250 volunteers worked with BIFERD in Goma, Congo, to create awareness about the virus, initiate income-generating activities for women, and provide small loans to support the most impacted communities. © BIFERD