



NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT

issues in the spotlight...

Paving the way for national drought policies

Since 1900, more than eleven million people have died as a consequence of drought, and more than two billion have been adversely affected. The Horn of Africa has experienced droughts almost every year for the past 12 years. Australia suffered multi-year droughts between 2002 and 2010, and the damage caused by recent droughts in Russia and the United States helped trigger rising food prices. The list of drought affected regions and countries over the past 10 to 20 years is too long and so are the impacts.

Drought affects more people than any other type of natural disaster, and it is also the costliest. Droughts are certainly not new, but their increasing frequency and severity throughout the world over the past decades has heightened impacts and lifted their dimension from local to global. The resulting massive famines and migration, conflicts and unrest, and food price hikes spell well beyond drought affected areas to become global concerns. These shifts mean that we have to approach drought in a new way.

One of the most worrisome aspects of managing drought is that, once the crisis has passed and precipitation resumes, attention wanes. This approach to manage drought as a crisis has shown its limits. It is costly and ineffective, and it creates greater societal vulnerability to subsequent droughts.

This data sharing and collaboration are crucial to countries along the Nile basin trying to increase the efficiency and productivity of water use and to adequately account for water and to weigh the costs and benefits of water policies.

Experts in drought management have long called for more coherent drought policies, urging governments to stop looking at drought as a crisis and start coordinating efforts long before the next drought hits. Scientific developments and new knowledge in management and technologies make it possible today to break the passive crisis management cycle and move towards more pro-active drought risk management strategies that make societies more drought resilient.

Boosting society's capacity to cope with drought before the next drought episode hits is somewhat similar to preparing for war during peace time.

For this reason, in March 2013, the first-ever High-Level Meeting on National Drought Policy was held in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss what is needed in this new environment and how scientists, experts, and policy makers can work together to strengthen the political will and build technical and managerial capacities for establishing national drought policies. Currently, only Australia maintains a national drought policy.

The Geneva Meeting was attended by over 430 participants from 92 countries, including ministers, dignitaries, heads of a large number of organizations and agencies, scientists and country delegates. It received wide interest and media coverage, and its participants unanimously adopted a Declaration on National Drought Policies. Alongside the Declaration, a Scientific Document and a Policy Document were also adopted. Those documents are aimed at providing guidance on how countries can achieve the goal of developing and adopting such policies.

The Declaration requests that FAO, the World Meteorological Organization, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, alongside other partners, support countries in achieving this goal and calls on developed countries to assist developing countries, especially the least developed countries, with the means of implementation towards the comprehensive development and implementation of National Drought Management Policies.



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"Adoption of the Declaration on National Drought Policies was an important milestone," according to Mr. Mohamed Bazza, the FAO Senior Land and Water Officer who led the FAO delegation to the Geneva Conference. "But the hard work is still ahead of us. This summer, FAO, WMO, UNCCD and UN-Water team up with partners and member countries to begin a series of regional workshops to assist countries in learning how to draft their Drought policies and in sharing information and building support across the regions."

The first scheduled regional meeting is planned for 7-11 July 2013 in Bucharest, Romania for Eastern European and Balkan States. That will be followed by similar regional meetings for Asia in September, Africa in the autumn and Latin America in 2014.

"Work on drought is not new," says FAO's Bazza. "What is new is the increased emphasis on building solid partnerships. We're also partnering closely with organizations such as the Robert B. Daugherty Water for Food Institute and the National Drought Mitigation Center, both at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, USA, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to ensure we're basing our policies on strong science, and utilizing the most effective tools and methodologies, while tapping into existing networks."

As many speakers at the Geneva conference pointed out, we know that we can't stop droughts from occurring. But, by putting better policies in place, we can mitigate the effect they have on populations, natural resources, economies, and food security.

Adoption of the Declaration on National Drought Policies was an important first step. Over the coming months and years, it will be crucial for organizations such as FAO, WMO, and UNCCD to work in partnership, supporting national governments as they begin drafting their first national drought policies.

WEB SITES:

High-Level Meeting on National Drought Policy Meeting

www.hmndp.org/

World Meteorological Organization

www.wmo.int

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

www.unccd.int

National Drought Policy Training - Romania

www.ais.unwater.org/ais/course/view.php?id=37

DOCUMENTS:

National Drought Policy Final Declaration

www.hmndp.org/sites/default/files/docs/HMNDP_Final_Declaration.pdf

Drought fact sheet

www.fao.org/docrep/017/aq191e/aq191e.pdf



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