

Safety begins with dialogue

A project based in the Sahel region of West Africa is bringing two groups of experts together to make sure vulnerable communities get the help they need when climate emergencies strike.

For the people of the Sahel region in West Africa, extreme weather can have a devastating effect. Farmers rely on the annual rainy season to water the crops they need to earn a living and ultimately to survive. Yet the season is becoming increasingly variable and it is difficult to predict when the rains will arrive or how long they will last for. This makes it almost impossible to plant with certainty and there is the constant threat that a drought or heavy rainfall could destroy livelihoods.

The World Bank is investing and supporting governments in the region in setting up social protection programmes with the aim of supporting vulnerable communities. To be as effective as possible, these programmes need to factor in weather and climate information, so that social protection agencies can predict any weather emergencies and make sure individuals and communities are prepared for a crisis before it happens.

Which is where the Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa (WISER) programme's Adaptive Social Protection – Information for Enhanced Resilience (ASPIRE) project, funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), came in. The project aimed to bring together experts from both sides of the table – social protection and climate expertise – to create a joined-up response to emergencies. The need has never been so pressing. "Climate change is adding uncertainty to the picture and may increase year to year variability in rainfall," explains Joe Daron, Met Office Science Lead on the ASPIRE project.

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A number of challenges to overcome

The ASPIRE team faced a number of challenges during the two-year project. At the African Climate Risks Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, held in October 2019, Dr Issa Lele outlined each one. Dr Lele of NORCAP is the ASPIRE representative on the ground in the Sahel who brought all the relevant social protection and weather and climate stakeholders together. The very task itself proved to be one of the key challenges, as the activities of the two sets of experts didn't particularly overlap. "It was difficult to find a key entering point for integrating the two," explains Dr Lele.

Limited capacity also made it difficult for both sides to invest time and resources in setting up a new, weather-based response. But perhaps the most fundamental challenge was the knowledge gap. The climate and weather providers had a limited understanding of adaptive social protection and what it meant. And the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Government agencies had a similar lack of experience in forecasting and how weather information might help inform their activities.

The project develops

The challenges meant that the aims of ASPIRE began to evolve as the project developed. "Around 18 months ago, we were trying to develop a prototype climate service," explains Joe Daron, "That's what we have done for many other projects and parts of the world. However, here the social protection programmes weren't at the stage where they were fully set up and ready to be scaled up."

Consequently, the focus turned to dialogue and bringing climate stakeholders and social protection experts together to discuss the needs and potential. "We brought them together into one room and let them talk," explains Dr Lele. "The social protection stakeholders were able to express their needs to climate forecasters and the forecasters, in turn, presented some of the products they had and explained how they could be tailored to meet particular needs."

ASPIRE also helped to improve the seasonal predictions across countries in the Sahel. Up until ASPIRE began, forecasts had largely been reliant on statistical tools, but the project introduced training and new ways of working to help improve the forecasting skills across the region. This included seasonal forecast training workshops in a number of countries, as well as a series of seasonal forecast training videos for ongoing use.

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Dialogues still in place

Now that ASPIRE has come to an end, the team members are optimistic that the momentum can continue. “The groundwork’s been done so there’s definitely hope and opportunity there,” explains Joe Daron. Ideally, the improved use of climate monitoring and observations as well as long-term, seasonal forecasts will enhance the provision of social protection, which could ultimately save lives and livelihoods.

“If we get this right, people don’t have to be trapped in cycles of limited choices where they have to make hugely difficult decisions that can ultimately make them more vulnerable,” Joe explains.

Dr Lele agrees and would like to see the project scaled up across the region. “We have been focusing on some key countries like Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mali,” he explains, “Yet if this could be in place for the entire West African region it would make a huge difference to people’s lives.”

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