

## ***Climate Change, Conflicts and Emotion Change in Nigeria: Drive towards Counselling and Social Intervention***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper highlights climate change and its effects on emotions. Of particular interest was the link between climate change and violent conflicts in Nigeria and the emotional change among victims. To achieve this, qualitative methods were used to collect, collate, organize and analyse information from available literature. Through this process, it was revealed that climate change affected lakes, grazing fields and farm land. This has led to competition for the use of available but inadequate resources and inevitably, violent conflicts in North East, North Central, North West and more recently, South West Nigeria. Due to conflicts, many loved ones have lost their lives, many others have become homeless and lost means of livelihood. The conflicts leave many people with debilitating emotional states and grave psychological effects because people who were in control of their lives with sustainable livelihoods are now displaced and aid dependents. So, to mitigate these effects, counselling and social works interventions were proffered. The interventions include early warning, cognitive behaviour therapy, among others.*

**Keywords:** climate, change, conflict, emotion, psychological,

### **Introduction**

For more than three decades now, concerns about and discussions on climate change have dominated discourses at various world bodies. So much so that some international protocols and treaties have been put in place to stem climate change and its consequences. At national, regional and global levels, several fora have been organized to discuss climate change because the impact is felt all over the globe. Interest in climate change cuts across world leaders, meteorologists, climatologists, agriculturalists, mental health practitioners, guidance counsellors, other social workers, among others. This concern stems from the fact that climate change has enormous consequences and affects the whole of human existence globally. Due to climate change, people lose means of livelihood, conflicts occur, criminality intensifies, homes are destroyed, hunger, famine and death result. The survivors' lives change for the worse with upsurge in internally displaced persons, refugees and migration. In the interest of social justice, no member of the society should be left behind in the pursuit of wholesome development.

However, definitions of climate change have been complex and controversial. Several definitions of climate change exist depending on the orientation of the author. For University of California, climate change

refers to significant change in global temperature, precipitation, wind patterns and other measures of climate that occur over several decades or longer. The seas are rising. The foods we eat and take for granted are threatened ... Ecosystems are changing, and for some, that could spell the end of certain regions the way we have known them. And while some species are adapting, for others it's not that easy... Evidence suggests many of these extreme climate changes connected to rising levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere – more often than not, the result of human activities.

In order to fully understand the phenomenon of climate change, it is very important to first understand what climate is. In this regard, Solomon et al. (2007) say that the climate of a region is generated by the climate system which is an interactive system consisting of the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the cryosphere, the land surface and the biosphere, forced or influenced by various external forcing mechanisms such as solar radiation. Bearing this in mind, one can incorporate the simple definition of climate change as given in Youmatter (2020) as

the global phenomenon of climate transformation characterized by the changes in the usual climate of the planet (regarding temperature, precipitation, and wind) that are especially caused by human activities. As a result of unbalancing of the weather of earth, the sustainability of the planet's ecosystem is under threat, as well as the future of humankind and the stability of the global economy.

One of the most accepted definitions of climate change is as contained in IPCC Fourth Assessment Report (2007) of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It states that climate change is a change in the state of the climate that can be identified by using statistical tests, by changes in the mean and variability of its properties, and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer. It is worthy of note that man is the architect of his woes in terms of climate change because, directly or indirectly, human activities such as burning, farming, mining and others are majorly responsible for climate change. In Nigeria, a direct link has been well established between climate change and conflicts. A case in point is the conflicts between herdsmen and farmers (Wikipedia, 1998).

Gleaning the body of literature on climate and climate change in Nigeria reveals that not much has been reported on the impact of climate change on the emotions of affected Nigerians with their psychological consequences, and what guidance counsellors and other social workers can do. It is this gap that this paper wants to contribute to filling. That is, psychological effects of climate change in Nigeria and counselling/social works interventions. The effects of climate change on the ecological system and sustainable livelihood would most likely evoke certain emotions. So, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of emotion. The word emotion is derived from the Latin word – *emovere*, meaning to move out. Emotion, then, refers to the outward expression of the inner feelings of the individual which are raised by one's own behaviour or the behaviour of other individuals

(Durojaiye, 1981). Inner feelings could be expressed outwardly as anger, happiness, anxiety, depression, aggression, phobias, despair, grief, among others. Nnachi (2007) adds that “emotional state refers to the internal state of one’s feeling which may or may not be expressed outwardly. The way one feels inwardly significantly influences the mental health of the individual”. It is safe to suppose that a farmer whose means of livelihood is threatened by effects of climate change will manifest debilitating emotions that affect his/her psyche and would require counselling intervention.

### **Theoretical framework**

There are several theories that underpin the conflicts between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria. However, in this article, the social conflict theory offers the best explanation of what is being experienced in Nigeria. Karl Max is the foremost proponent of this theory. The theory sees social life as a competition for scarce resources and power. It is believed that nature has not evenly endowed resources and power. So, the proponents of the theory believe that a society is a coming together of people of diverse needs and interests, hence the competition for the scarce resources and power. Explaining further, Egbuta (2018) says “conflict occurs when two or more actors oppose each other in social interaction, reciprocally exerting social powers in an effort to attain scarce or incompatible goals and prevent the opponents from attaining them. The quest for dominance and power becomes the currency rather than consensus”. It can be seen clearly that the resources and power provided by nature are scarce and climate change has even made matters worse. This has inadvertently resulted in conflicts in Nigeria with devastating emotional effects. The research method adopted is qualitative which involves using secondary sources to collect, collate, organise and analyse literature, some of which contains data. The information that was mainly gleaned from print and e-resources was organized, categorized and synthesized against a relevant theoretical underpinning.

### **Link between climate change and emotions**

Now that climate change is no longer a looming threat but a present and clear danger, one needs to begin to look beyond the storms and droughts. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) estimates an increase of 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 due to malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress. Impacts include heat-related morbidity and mortality, increase in vector-borne disease (like dengue fever, malaria), increased respiratory illness, and morbidity and mortality due to extreme weather events. The often-over-looked effect of climate change is the impact on emotional state of individuals. This is the focus of this article.

However, there is a growing literature on the impact of climate change on mental health. For instance, Berry et al. (2008) have presented evidence that climate change can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder (MDD), anxiety, depression, complicated grief, survivor guilt, vicarious trauma, recovery fatigue, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. Hayes et al. (2018) have properly documented other studies that have linked climate change with mental health issues including aggression and violence.

### **Climate change, conflicts and psychological effects in Nigeria**

In the relevant literature on the subject globally, psychological effects such as eco-anxiety, eco-grief, eco-anger, post-traumatic stress, in addition to the ones already mentioned have

been identified. It behoves on researchers in the Nigerian situation to find out if these effects are present in addition to others that may be identified. For instance, Raypole (2020) states that most people realize that climate change can affect physical health, while mental health professionals also point to one serious mental health consequence: “eco-anxiety”. He went further to define that “eco-anxiety” refers to persistent worries about the future of earth and the life it shelters. Related terms include “climate change distress”, “eco-trauma”, “eco-angst”, and “ecological grief”, to name a few.

The people Raypole (2020) identified as the most at risk fit very well in the Nigerian setting. The particularly vulnerable groups, according to him, include:

- Indigenous communities.
- People living in coastal or Island regions, dry areas, or other regions with high geological risk.
- Socio economically disadvantaged communities.
- Children and older adults
- People living with disabilities or chronic health concerns.

In the Nigerian setting, it is just possible that the emergence of several criminal, violent and terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, cattle rustlers, bandits, and kidnappers is a backlash of the psychological effects of climate change. Due to climate change, agricultural activities are adversely affected and as a consequence, many people are rendered jobless amid food insecurity; such people could easily get persuaded to see criminal activities as being more lucrative than agricultural activities.

In fact, the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) (2019) declares that:

The relationship between resource competition and civil conflict is well-established, and, in regions like the Lake Chad Basin, climate change has clearly exacerbated competition over increasingly scarce resources. In the language of security studies, climate change is potential “threat multiplier”

As the waters of Lake Chad recede, fish stocks are reduced, cultivable land disappears, and other economic opportunities are also diminished. The African Union has noted that the loss of traditional livelihoods has encouraged some individuals to turn to explore membership of armed groups as a potential alternative source of income.

Olukoya’s (2019) report is in tandem with that of the UNODC. He acknowledges that experts have strongly linked climate change with growing activities of Boko Haram. He adds that prior to the rise of Boko Haram, North East Nigeria had more than 50% of its population making a living from farming, fishing and livestock production. However, with increasing aridity caused by climate change, many people lost their means of livelihood and became vulnerable to Boko Haram recruitment. In a related report, Sayne (2011) summarized that:

Nigeria’s climate is likely to see growing shifts in temperature, rainfall, storms and sea levels throughout the twenty-first century. Poor adaptive responses to these shifts could help fuel violent conflict in some areas of the country.

A basic causal mechanism links climate change with violence in Nigeria. Under it, our responses to climate shifts create shortages of resources such as land and water. Shortages followed by negative secondary impacts, such as more sickness, hunger and joblessness. Poor responses to these in turn, open the door to conflict.

Another dimension of the effects of climate change in Nigeria is the farmers-herdsmen conflict. This is, perhaps, the most preponderant resource conflict in Nigeria in recent times (Ajuwon, 2004; Fasona & Omojola, 2005). The ever-growing demand for food coupled with desertification occasioned by climate change has resulted in stiff competition in land use between the two groups. This in turn has triggered extensive and intensive conflicts in many parts of Nigeria (Adisa, 2012). Adisa's (2012) study investigated the socio-psychological effects of conflict on the quality of family lives of both farmers and herdsmen. The result found that both farmers and herdsmen suffered several negative socio-psychological consequences relating to their family lives. Though these effects were found to be more pronounced on farmers than herders. The effects investigated include marital dissatisfaction, declining quality of children's education, physical exhaustion, sleepless nights, anger/anxiety/emotional exhaustion, reduction of food quality and quantity, farm abandonment, among others.

In a related study, Onyebueke et al. (2018) evaluated the psychological impact of conflicts among the inhabitants of two communities in South East Nigeria that have been in prolonged conflict arising from land use. The study revealed some psychological effects which include psychological distress, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety disorder. Due to the impact of climate change and resultant desert encroachment from the Sahara to the Sahel, herdsmen who are mostly Fulani, are moving southward in search of grazing land.

Over the years, this has resulted in persistent and expanding violent conflicts between herdsmen and farmers. The report in Wikipedia (2021) lends credence to this assertion. The conflicts between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria arise mainly from disputes over land resources between mostly Muslim Fulani herders and mostly Christian farmers across the country. Though, the conflicts are more intense in North Central part of Nigeria, some attacks have taken place between Fulani herdsmen and Hausa farmers in North West and between Fulani herdsmen and farmers in South West Nigeria. Though economic and environmental reasons fueled the conflicts initially, religious and ethnic undertones are being implied presently. Sedentary farming rural communities are often targets of the attacks and thousands of people have been killed with thousands more, internally displaced. As at 2018, about 19,000 people had lost their lives as a result of these conflicts across Nigeria (Wikipedia, 2021).

It has been well established that these conflicts have a wide range of physical effects. These include but not limited to reduction in output and income of crop farmers; displacement of farmers; land degradation; and loss of lives (Ofuoku & Isife, 2010). The farmer who suffers reduction in output and income or is completely displaced or has to contend with the trauma of losing loved ones, passes through a lot of psychological crises resulting in different kinds of emotions. Imagine being displaced from one's home and rendered homeless and in the process, depending on begging and handouts to survive. Such a person's self-esteem will

drop to the lowest ebb and anxiety level will rise to the highest height. Whole communities have been seen to be in grief because of the loss of lives of their loved ones. Displaced youths who have no means of livelihood tend to be more vulnerable to be attracted to a life of crime (armed robbery, kidnapping, banditry, among others) as a survival strategy. That is why the religious extremist group, Boko Haram/Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), has a steady supply of recruits, and crime rate generally is on the increase. Nigeria's crime rate and statistics 2016 – 2021 puts it at 34.52% per 100,000 population (World Bank, 2021). This places Nigeria as a country with the 3rd highest crime rate globally.

### **Counselling and social works interventions**

Climate change has been seen to have devastating effects that lead to disruption of economic and social activities. Some of the consequences include competition for land use, conflicts, loss of means of livelihood, loss of lives and properties, anxiety, despair, grief, anger, traumatic disorder, to name a few. These in turn fuel activities of extremist groups such as Boko Haram and outright criminal activities such as cattle rustling, banditry, armed robbery and kidnapping. It behoves on psychological counsellors and other social workers to provide a point of convergence to mitigate the psychological consequences of climate change. The purpose is to prevent and to restore negative emotions to a state of harmony. The interventions include:

1. Accurate Prediction of impending conflict and early warning: The signs are always there to see, such as migration of herdsmen in search of new settlements for grazing and in the process other people's farms are destroyed by the ravaging cattle. Policy makers and the general public should be given early warning.

2. Counselling first responders who are mainly humanitarian workers like Red Cross: Often times, the first responders get emotionally broken because of the horrors they see in conflict areas. They need preventive counselling, that will prepare them on what to expect, and coping strategies. They also need curative counselling when traumatized using strategies such as systematic desensitization to restore harmony.

3. Using cognitive therapy for victims of conflict who may suffer anxiety, depression, despair, grief and other negative emotions: There are many cognitive therapy options but one popular option is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). This therapy helps the client to change thinking pattern and behaviour.

4. Counselling for adaptation and self-help: The victim of conflicts that primarily emanated from effects of climate change needs to adapt to new realities. For instance, victims who lose bread-winners, or lose their means of livelihood, or are displaced from their habitation need to adapt to new environment and new roles to earn a living. They also need to be trained on self-help skills for survival.

5. Deradicalization of repentant members of Boko Haram/Islamic State of West Africa Province and bandits through family counselling: Some of the goals of family counselling are improving communication, understanding and handling special family situations and creating a better functioning home environment. This is because inappropriate parenting skills could lead to parent-child conflict that could in turn lead to rebellion and vulnerability to extremism. Psycho-spiritual counselling is also used in deradicalization to offer alternative view point to understanding God's commands and the world.

## **Conclusion**

Climate change comes with profound effects that permeate almost every facet of human life globally. The effects on communities have touched means of livelihood, led to conflicts, resulted in emotional change, and given rise to criminality. That is why the geographer, the agriculturist, the economist, the educationalist, the psychological counsellor, the social worker, the policy maker, and members of the public are concerned and are making frantic efforts to mitigate climate change and its effects. In the Nigerian scene, the rapid increase in conflicts between herdsmen and farmers, the rise in religious extremism, banditry and kidnapping, and the emotional crisis that comes with all that is happening have been seen.

## **Recommendations**

Therefore, psychological counsellors and other social workers cannot afford to stand aloof. Concerted efforts need to be made to salvage the situation and assist in harmony restoration. These efforts should include, but not limited to, alerting policy makers, counselling first responders to conflicts and victims as well as those who crossed the red line into criminality as a consequence of climate change. If this is done and timely too, there will be damage control and hope will return to victims of conflict. In the long run, there will be a better society for all to live in and actualize their potentials.

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