

CHALLENGES FACING THE WATER AND CLIMATE
CHANGE SECTORS IN THE GAMBIA—THE MANDATE OF
THE HEALTH SECTOR

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Today, climate change is considered one of the most serious threats to sustainable development. The impacts of climate change can adversely affect human and animal health, food security, economic activity, water and other natural resources, as well as physical infrastructure

There is an increasing body of evidence that global climate is changing rapidly and will have profound effects on the health and well being of citizens in countries throughout the world. However, the greatest health impacts will be felt in developing countries because of high levels of poverty, poor health and the limited resources (human & finance) of the public health systems to respond to new threats.

Extreme weather conditions like flooding could adversely affect human health in so many ways. Apart from the direct effects of drowning, injury and loss of life, floods are capable of causing major infrastructural damages including disruption of water supply systems, sewage disposal systems, and roads etc. and contamination of water sources for human consumption and livestock use. Children, women and the elderly are the most vulnerable sub-groups to the health effects of floods.

Portable water supply becomes critical during periods of both drought and flooding. Lack of sufficient quantity of household water supply, endangers poor personal and food hygiene, leading to outbreaks of communicable diseases, such as cholera, eye and skin infection. Similarly, meningitis and measles epidemics occur mainly in the dry season, and contacts between humans and mosquitoes which cause malaria, becomes more frequent in the rainy season.

For example the flooding of Ebo Town in the Kanifing Municipality in 2005/2006 resulted in an outbreak of diarrhoeal diseases (e.g. cholera). Diarrhoeal disease programmes under DOSH focused on the promotion of Oral Re-hydration Therapy (ORT) and Sugar Salt Solutions (SSS) for the treatment of diarrhea, and the training/retraining of health staff and community health workers in proper diagnosis and case management. Health workers, particularly Public & Environmental Health Officers at the district level play a key role in the implementation of water and sanitation projects to provide safe drinking water and sanitation facilities to the rural communities

The mandate of DOSH in the 2005/2006 outbreak was to coordinate the response to the public health emergency and mobilize government and donor support to control the outbreak. The cholera task force which was established by DOSH met frequently to share epidemiological information amongst stakeholders and these meetings were chaired by the Director of Health Services.

The public health interventions implemented to bring that outbreak under control included the following:

- a multi-sectoral teams were created to raise the awareness of the general public particularly those living in affected areas about the signs and symptoms of the disease, its prevention and control;
- chlorination of over 1,500 wells in Ebo Town and other riverine settlements in the Municipality;
- tankering of potable water to affected areas;
- installation of 19 water points by NAWEC; and
- Training of masons on latrine slab construction.
- distribution of ORS to affected families and the supply of essential drugs.

It is noteworthy to mention the agencies/institutions that contributed towards the control efforts of DOSH. These, included the Department of State for Fisheries and Water Resources, The Kanifing Municipal Council, UNICEF, WHO, GRTS and the media.

Changing weather patterns could also create new breeding sites for disease vectors such as mosquitoes and increase the range and level of malaria infection. Malaria gives rise to one of the greatest causes of concern and therefore deserves particular attention. Of the 1 million lives claimed annually by malaria, 90% of them are in Africa. Some 800,000 children under the age of five in sub-Saharan Africa die from malaria each year, making malaria the third largest killer of children globally.

Malaria is endemic in The Gambia, with a marked seasonal variation, most cases occurring in the rainy season (July-September). It is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality. Around 1000 children die from the direct effects of malaria every year and accounts for 20% of reasons of consultations at out-patient departments of government health facilities. In addition to the

direct effects, it disrupts socio-economic activities and fuels poverty. It is the leading cause of school absenteeism and impacts heavily on the workforce thereby affecting production. The general trend of malaria for all ages in the past few years, have shown a downward trend.

The National Malaria Control Programme under DOSH has developed policies and guidelines for the implementation of the malaria control strategic plan. The plan comprises six components, viz:

- case management;
- intermittent presumptive treatment;
- integrated vector management;
- information, education & communication;
- partnership & management; and
- surveillance & research.

Climatic changes affect food production in four principal ways; (1) spatial shifts in the agro-climatic zones suited for the growth of specific crops, 2) changes in crop yields, livestock output and fisheries productivity, 3) reduction in the quantity of water available for irrigation and 4) loss of land through sea level rise.

Since agriculture in The Gambia is heavily dependent on rainfall, drought is the most important climatic factor affecting agricultural production and productivity. Over the past few years, rainfall in The Gambia has been low and irregular resulting in low agricultural production. Food production has also drastically declined during the corresponding period, and this has profoundly affected household food security, an important factor for malnutrition. Household food insecurity is endemic in The Gambia affecting some sections of the society, especially the rural and urban poor, and becomes more serious during the rainy season.

FAO (2003) estimates that 30% of the population of The Gambia are consuming poor quality diets with insufficient or unbalanced levels of nutrients to ensure a healthy and productive life. Malnutrition is a public health problem in The Gambia as it affects a large segment of the population and the most vulnerable groups are children under five, pregnant and lactating mothers, the adolescent especially girls, elderly and people living with HIV/AIDS.

The challenges facing the water and climate change sector within the context of public health are:

- * promoting greater awareness of the link between safe drinking water and human health;
- *changing cultural practices regarding human excreta disposal and personal hygienic practices;
- *personal hygiene habits to ensure safe drinking water from source to point of consumption;
- *increasing access to improved water supply systems and basic sanitation, particularly in rural areas to address the rural/urban disparity; and
- *improving the management capacity of local communities with the active involvement of women to ensure sustainability of water supply and sanitation infrastructures.

The Government, under the dynamic leadership of His Excellency, the President of the Republic, Dr. Alhagie Yahya A. J.J. Jammeh, continues to give high priority to climate change issues and is currently developing policies to mitigate the possible adverse impact of climate change on the national, economic and social systems in the country.

According to The Gambia Millennium Development Goals Report, The Gambia has already reached the MDG target for water ahead of schedule. However, our performance in the sanitation sub-sector is not impressive. The country is not on track as far as achieving the MDG target for sanitation is concerned and this is an area where sufficient resources and commitment should be dedicated to.

The Government is not complacent with its current performance in the water and sanitation sub-sectors. We should therefore seize the opportunities presented by the International Decade for Action, *Water for life*, 2005 to 2015 and the MDG agenda to strengthen our resolve and commitment to save the lives of those who die simply because they do not have access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

I thank you all for your attention

Reference

The Gambia Millennium Development Goals Report, 2003.

Human Development Report, 2007/2008.

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