community spotlight

a conversation with Richard Choularton, Climate and Disaster Risk Reduction Unit at WFP

Richard Choularton

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Tell me a bit about what the WFP's Climate and Disaster Risk Reduction Programmes Unit does, and the ways in which it is involved with the wider climate services community.

WFP's Climate and Disaster Risk Reduction Unit's role is to ensure that WFP has the tools, knowledge, resources and partnerships to enable the most food insecure to reduce the impacts of disasters and climate change. Today, about half of WFP's programmes address the risks of natural disasters and their impacts on food security, reaching approximately 80 million people in 60 countries each year.

WFP has gained significant experience using, developing and providing climate services for food security and humanitarian operations. Climate services help vulnerable communities strengthen resilience to climate shocks by providing the information they need to make well-informed decisions. Timely and easy to understand and act-upon climate information can help communities take the necessary actions to better anticipate and prepare for these changing risks, adapt to a changing climate and strengthen their resilience and food security.

We engage at the global level with the climate services community through the Global Framework on Climate Services, serving as the vice-chair of the Partner Advisory Committee. We work with global climate centres and research institutions to develop new tools and apply new science. We also work at regional and national level in the application and development of new tools and services. Most importantly we are a user, taking climate information and integrating this information into our own decision-making and planning.

What do you see as the largest challenges for climate services in resilience and risk management?

Creating long term relationships, collaboration and understanding between climate service providers and users remains the biggest challenge. There is an amazing amount of new research and climate information being produced. But taking this information and working to apply it is difficult. Even more difficult is making sure the new tools are the ones that users need, whether they are farmers, emergency response organisations, or national governments. It takes time and persistence for users to begin to understand the climate scientists, and likewise for climate scientists to start to understand user's needs and their decision-making processes. Where this does happen though, we see amazing results.

Which new projects or developments are you involved in just now that excite you the most?

Two things excite me at the moment. First – forecast-based financing. Over the last 15 years our early warning systems for food crises have improved tremendously. A major part of this improvement is the integration of better seasonal forecasts into these systems and our ability to combine them with other data. We are now at the point where we are starting to use the seasonal forecasts to trigger action before a climate shock occurs, anticipating its impact. Our work on this through the Food Security Climate Resilience Facility is very exciting. As El Niño evolved, we were able to trigger action 3-5 months before the seasons failed in Zimbabwe and Guatemala helping people anticipate the drought.

Second – linking national early warning and crop monitoring with local level farmer climate and extension services. We have seen a growing blend of technology and community engagement to provide farmers and pastoralists with usable climate and agricultural extension services. Many of these services build on national early warning systems. Rather than seeing single climate services developed, I think we are starting to see the development of platforms that can serve multiple users in a more cost effective way.

How can climate services mitigate negative impacts and/or take advantage of opportunities?

In our work, I am always amazed by how sophisticated farmers and pastoralist are in managing the many risks they face. When we engage them in the co-design and production of climate services, and it is equally amazing to see how they use the information to mitigate risk and to take risk. With regular maps of vegetation conditions, Ethiopian pastoralists maximise their use of scouts and their management of trekking routes. In the first year of the Satellite Assisted Pastoral Resource Management (SAPARM) project with Project Concern International (PCI), herd mortality along trekking routes was reduced by 40% in one evaluation.

What are your goals for the future of WFP's Climate and Disaster Risk Reduction Programmes Unit?

My goal is simple, keep focusing on supporting innovation and development of partnerships, tools, and policies that help the most food insecure people to manage climate risks, become food secure, and ultimately, to thrive.