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Investing in communities is key in mitigating Nigeria's extreme weather events

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The 2022 severe floods and landslides in Nigeria highlight how vulnerable the country is to multiple risks and impacts of such extreme events. Scientists have attributed the recent rising sea level and frequent flooding to climate change. Despite Nigeria's commitment to achieving net-zero by 2060, Olasunkanmi Okunola wonders whether such policy commitments and macro interventions are enough to mitigate subsequent flood occurrences in the country and if there is a political will to transform communities at risk into resilient and sustainable communities.

As of October 2022, no fewer than **600 people** lost their lives, about 1.3 million people were displaced, and more than 600,000 people have been affected in 27 of **Nigeria's 36 states** and the federal capital territory. If the recent rain forecast by **OCHA** is anything to go by, more extreme events are expected to continue.

The consequences are far-reaching and unprecedented as the floods have led to imminent threats of disease outbreaks, social unrest, destruction of farms, homes and public infrastructure. According to authorities in Nigeria and Niger, more than

817 schools have been closed since July 2022, and 75,000 children have been affected in Zinder, Tillaberi, Tahoua, Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. In addition, hundreds of thousands are said to be homeless and have lost their means of livelihood in these countries.

The 2021 floods and landslides that affected about 27 states should have been a reminder of how vulnerable the region is to heavy rains. Many of those states have a significant number of people residing below flood lines along riverbanks and on steep slopes. As a result, residents are faced with increasingly annual flooding due to sea level rise and sinking at a rate of between ~80 to 100 mm per year.

Is climate change to blame for severe flooding in Nigeria?

Many scientists and government authorities all over the world have attributed the recent rising sea level and frequent flooding to climate change. This is evident as all forms of severe and extreme weather are becoming more frequent and more extreme than in the recent past. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Sixth Assessment Report has also predicted an upward trend in extreme rainfall events in the West and Central African regions. Evidence has shown that decades of fossil fuel burning and deforestation increase the risk of flooding in Nigeria's rural and urban communities. A typical example of such is the continuous deforestation of wetlands and cutting down of mangroves in Lagos and other coastal cities to pave way for housing development. Relatedly, the Nigeria Hydrological Services Agency in April 2022 predicted more floods in the same year than in previous years due to "excessive" rainfalls and external water flows from Lagdo Dam in Cameroon. The excess water travels through River Benue and its tributaries to wreak havoc on coastal communities in Nigeria.

Beyond climate change, previous research has linked severe flooding to the non-implementation of environmental guidelines and inadequate infrastructure. The high level of urbanisation further compounds this without commensurate provision of urban infrastructure and amenities. Many residential areas lack access to good roads and drainage systems and rely on natural drainage channels. Another contributing factor is poor waste management. This could be attributed to citizens' poor attitudes toward waste disposal and waste management authorities' failure to provide waste disposal services which have contributed to severe flooding in the communities. In addition, the current floods in the country result from a lack of

planning, and even when there is planning, the laws are not usually enforced. Building over drains, altering approved construction plans, and using unauthorised land are typical examples.

Efforts to manage frequent flooding

The 2022 severe flooding in Nigeria has heightened interventions from the National Emergency Management and the Nigerian Meteorological Agency. This includes providing the usual relief materials, enlightenment of people in at-risk communities through print and electronic media, and temporary shelters for displaced people. The Federal government also claimed that they have embarked on the channelling of water bodies in the affected communities. Nigeria's Meteorological Agency alerted more than a dozen states about "serious consequences" in the coming weeks as two of the country's dams started to overflow. Relatedly, during COP26, Nigeria committed to achieving net-zero by 2060, and barely a week after the conference, President Muhammadu Buhari signed into law the [Climate Change Act, 2021](#). In all this, the questions begging for answers are whether these interventions are strong enough to prevent and mitigate subsequent flood occurrences in the country and if there is a political will to transform communities at risk into resilient and sustainable communities.

Pathways to a solution

The policy solution to frequent flooding in Nigeria and other West African countries requires sequences of short and long-term actions. While the recent [signing of the Climate Change](#) bill into law by the Nigerian President is commendable, the development of long-term plans that are climate-sensitive, address waste disposal, provision of critical infrastructure and are appropriately financed should be a priority. The long term actions must be widely shared and understood by local communities, the private sector, and national policymakers to enable coordinated action.

In the short term, the Nigeria Meteorological Agency must gear efforts towards enhancing timely distribution of accurate and readily understood information on seasonal rainfall predictions to the public and other sectors. Also, prohibiting building along riverbanks, fighting deforestation of wetlands, and cutting down of

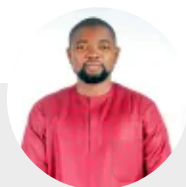
mangroves are crucial to protect the life and properties of people in the coastal communities.

Lastly, the State and Local government authorities must urgently develop contingency plans that include relocating and evacuating thousands of people that have been displaced in days to minimise the impact of climate displacement. Additionally, the government should help communities strengthen the quality and resilience of affordable housing by investing in the expansion of such housing before disaster strikes.

It's time to break the cycle by redesigning and reinvesting in communities to help them mitigate and manage better the frequent and violent floods and damage in the coming years.

Photo: Children stand in a flood water in Borno State, Nigeria. Credit: UNICEF/Vlad Sokhin

About the author



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Dr Olasunkanmi Habeeb Okunola is a visiting scientist at the United Nations University, Institute for Environment and Human Security, Germany. His research interest focuses on issues related to climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, community-based natural resource management, coastal and marine resource management. He has won various prestigious scholarships such as DAAD and Alexandra Von Humboldt Fellowships. He tweets at @sunkiehabib

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