

CLIMATE CHANGE: A GLOBAL THREAT AND ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Learner's Objectives:

On the completion of this topic, you should be able to –

- Explain the meaning of climate change,
- Know the impact of climate change on different issues, and
- Understand the role of social worker.

Introduction

- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (hereinafter UNFCCC) describes environmental change as “a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods.”
- Climate change refers to any huge and significant change in measures of climate (mainly temperature, precipitation, and wind) going on for a very long period.
- Global climate change causing unpredictable and irreversible alterations in the earth's ecosystem is alarming social and economic policy makers at all levels.
- Climate change is understood to be a public health issue because it affects the quality of our water, air, food supplies, and living spaces in a multitude of key ways, according to Terri Klemm.

India & Climate Change

- India is both a major greenhouse gas emitter and one of the most susceptible nations in the world to projected climate change.
- The country is already experiencing impacts of climate change that includes water stress, heat waves and drought, severe storms and flooding, and accompanying negative consequences on health and livelihoods.
- The impact is so much that the following saying goes totally true- “*Indian agriculture gambles with monsoon.*”

- Recently, climate variability in the form of floods and cyclones within different parts of India has resulted in destruction of crops, property and infrastructure, as well as in negative impacts on human health and well-being.
- A warming of 0.5°C is likely to prevail over all India by the year 2030
- Most global models suggest that the Indian summer monsoons will intensify witnessing higher degrees of hotness; the timing may also swing.
- India is participating in the Clean Development Mechanism of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and keenly participating in the development of a proposed UNFCCC mechanism called Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD).
- According to reports from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Pew Center, India, through normal policy developments, is “making significant progress in limiting greenhouse emissions” through energy efficiency improvements and environmentally friendly energy development.
- India hosted the eighth Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2002.
- India has promised to create an additional carbon sink – system capable of absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere – of 2.5 to 3 billion ton of CO₂ – comparable through forest and tree cover by 2030.

Impact of Climate Change

The issue of climate change is causing remarkable, unequalled, erratic and irreversible changes to the world's biological system at a disturbing rate.

A. Agriculture along with Food Security -

Environmental change is real and its impacts particularly on food security of the poor are being felt internationally; the rural population are the hardest hit due to their sole dependence on agriculture; As indicated by FAO (2016) climate change is mostly influencing four dimensions of sustenance security in numerous nations. These are food accessibility, food availability, food utilization and food system.

Around 33% of Indians are exceptionally poor, and 60 percent rely on agriculture for their livelihood, therefore, the phenomenon of climate change is a serious threat to the population.

B. Climate Change and Health -

Climate change has serious effects on human health. It is recognized as the biggest public health threat of this century (Costello, 2009); Although some effects according to WHO (2012) may be beneficial, mainly with regards to temperate countries where temperature increase may lead to milder winters, thereby reducing the deaths caused by too much cold, much evidence however suggests that in overall climate change will negatively affect the health of humans; This will be having severe negative effects on the respiratory system and lungs and to mention, individuals with preexisting cardio and respiratory conditions are more at risk.

According to Achstatter (2014) climate change is likely to worsen the deadly diseases that are currently wreaking havoc in developing countries.

C. Women and Girls -

Women and girls are more defenseless to climate change. A number of factors such as the oppression of women in most traditions and cultures and their low levels of education as compared to men cause this; it is estimated that climate change will pose serious threats on women's livelihoods by reducing their financial opportunities and female headed households will be the hardest hit (Brown et al, 2012); The Herald (12 March 2011) reports that 65% of rural water points are out of order thereby increasing the distance that women have to walk daily to obtain water. With the increased distance, women and girls encounter an additional challenge of being raped or assaulted in the bushy parts or remote places of the rural areas.

There has been a lack of gender mainstreaming in the responses to climate change by the international community as women and girls are also left out from crucial decision making.

D. Impacts on ecosystems, communities, and individuals –

In terms of ecosystems, many species have moved their activities, geographic reaches, pattern of migration, and species interactions, and this have prompted altogether considerably higher rates of species extinctions (IPCC, 2014a).

Talking of communities, as discussed earlier, climate change brought extreme weather events have adversely affected food and water security and have led to highly costly disasters.

Moving to individuals, climate induced weather changes have resulted in increased morbidity and mortality.

As per the CDC (2015), climate change has already headed to an increasing amount of heat-related illnesses, injuries, psychological well-being issues, and deaths due to extreme weather, as well as increasing asthma and cardiovascular disease due to air pollution.

E. Water; Extreme Heat –

Glacier melt seems to yield more runoff in the short term but less in the medium and long terms. More severe storms (especially cyclones and violent winds) will cause more damage and harm to infrastructure and livelihoods and exacerbate salt water intrusion in storm surges. Changes in the timing and measure of monsoon rains will make the production of food and other agricultural products increasingly unsure.

F. Migration –

India receives immigrants from a number of countries from all over the globe. Under conditions resulting from climate change, it may be flooded with many more, particularly from Bangladesh. Such migration may worsen tension between the two countries as well as putting a strain on Indian central and state governments.

Social Workers' Role

Social Workers have the skills, knowledge base and methods to deal with a diverse as well as complex set of problems be it with an individual, a community based or whether it is issues resulting from climate change. "Social workers have an ethical commitment to pursue social action and change," according to Mason. Community organizing is core to social work profession, and it can be adopted more actively to pursue climate change mitigation through local, state, and national policy changes that significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions.

- Being Prepared
- Raising Consciousness
- Developing Ability and Skills

- Researching

Thus, Social Workers can-

- By providing correct understanding of various environmental aspects, developing positive attitude in people and motivating them to be environmental friendly, by propagating respect and care towards the resources, by mobilizing people to the conservation of environment and by generating sensitivity towards the threat of climate change, can mitigate the rate and consequences of climate change.
- In collaboration with other disciplines, may explore various unexplored aspect of environment especially to highlight a friendly relationship between man and environment.

Conclusion

Climate change compromises health and wellbeing, undermines adapting, and deepens the existing social and environmental imbalances. The issue of climate change falls under the social work mandate, as it disproportionately impacts the marginalized and vulnerable sections of society and has significant negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities and an interdisciplinary Approach is essential.

Moreover, social workers need to play a leading role in addressing the human impact of environmental change in major areas that include disaster preparedness and response.

Thus, a changing worldwide condition requires transformative social responses and measures: new partnerships, involvement of local communities, profound commitment with nearby networks, and advancements to reinforce individual and collective resources.