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By Flavie Halais

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Why mental health is the missing link in responses to climate change

By [Flavie Halais](#) // 22 December 2022

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People walk along a flooded street in India. Climate-related disasters have devastating consequences on the mental health of those affected. Photo by: [Piyush Priyank / Unsplash](#)

Extreme weather events caused by climate change, and man-made environmental degradation such as deforestation can have devastating consequences on the mental health of the communities immediately affected and beyond. But the link is rarely discussed in the siloed worlds of public health and climate agencies.

Some organizations are trying to understand this by taking an interdisciplinary approach. [Land Body Ecologies](#) is an international group of researchers, human rights activists, artists, and mental health experts looking into how what they call “land trauma” affects land-dependent and indigenous communities when events such as climate change and deforestation impact their way of life.

Destroyed livelihoods

Daniel Kobei, executive director of the [Ogiek Peoples' Development Program](#), or OPDP, — a Kenyan organization dedicated to supporting Indigenous people's rights — and a member of Land Body Ecologies, told Devex he has witnessed rising rates of mental health issues among Ogiek People, including depression and alcoholism, which he attributes in part to their inability to maintain their traditions and way of life.

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— Renzo Guinto, chief planetary health scientist, Sunway Centre for Planetary Health

“When you are removed from your own land, where you call home, and left just to look for survival, you get depressed, and many [members of the community] died,” Kobei said.

The Ogiek community has inhabited the Mau Forest in Kenya for centuries, developing a symbiotic relationship with the honeybee population, which provides them with a source of income through honey production, and [maintains the ecosystem's health](#) through pollination.

When Kenya gained independence, the Ogiek people were not granted formal land tenure in the Mau Forest. In the following decades, the forest suffered considerable degradation due to illegal [deforestation](#), resource extraction, and land encroachment, as well as associated impacts on wildlife and natural resources, leading part of the community to disperse — in July 2022, the African Court on Human and People's Rights [awarded reparations](#) to the Ogiek people, following a 2017 judgment that found that the government of Kenya had violated their right to life, property, natural resources, development, religion, and culture.

Now, the community is also dealing with decreasing honey production due to the decline of the honeybee population, affecting a major source of income and medicine, and a central part of their identity, as many local traditions and ceremonies incorporate honey, Kobei explained.

The plight of the Ogiek community is one example of a phenomenon that is happening all over the world, and could happen with increasing regularity and impact as climate change brings a host of issues for people living off the land in the form of [droughts](#) and [extreme weather events](#).

Slow recognition

Humanitarians that work in disaster response and prevention have long been aware of the [psychological stress caused by natural disasters](#) on affected populations.

Events such as floods, droughts, and hurricanes have been [linked](#) to higher rates of anxiety, depression, violence, and post-traumatic stress disorder. They can also have indirect effects caused by loss of income, displacement, or malnutrition, leading to [chronic stress](#) that can last for years. In this context, more work needs to be done to prepare for more mental health issues arising along with the frequency of extreme weather events, practitioners say.

“There's a lot of work going on in climate adaptation, climate change activities, and climate change projects. But there's little research and focus on interventions that are looking at both mental health and climate-related [issues],” said Shona Whitton, technical adviser for mental health and psychosocial support at the [International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies](#) Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support.

The effect of the climate crisis on mental health has recently started to be acknowledged by health and climate agencies. A [2022 report](#) from the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) mentioned the rising mental health challenges caused by warming temperatures, extreme weather events, and related economic losses. And in June, the [World Health Organization](#) released its first-ever [policy brief](#) on mental health and climate change. It describes multiple ways climate change can affect people's well-being and provides recommendations for policies and programs.

Meanwhile, the scientific community has been documenting our psychological reactions to climate change and environmental degradation.

New concepts such as ecological grief, climate anxiety, and [solastalgia](#) — which refers to a type of emotional distress caused by changing landscapes — have emerged and been given labels in recent years. Researchers have also explored [the connection](#) between [heat waves](#) and [increased psychological distress](#).

Problems in practice

But this heightened awareness has yet to lead to a practical response. In its [2022 Countdown on health and climate change](#), which reviews countries' progress toward the Paris Agreement, The Lancet noted that few national adaptation plans and other types of disaster risk reduction programs currently integrate mental health and psychosocial support.

More research is needed to understand how climate change-related events can intersect with other determinants of mental health, but also how communities respond to and adjust to stressors, Whitton told Devex. "Context is really important in both post-disaster and mental health work, relating to language, culture, and geography," she said. "How those needs change within different contexts...related to climate change impacts specifically, that I think still needs to be explored."

There is a general lack of knowledge sharing between the two fields. "There is no funder that has dedicated funding for the climate and mental health nexus, and this is especially needed for emerging research groups in the Global South," said Renzo Guinto, chief planetary health scientist at the Sunway Centre for Planetary Health in Malaysia. Areas within global health — "whether that's HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis or infectious diseases" — still don't take into account the changing climate, he added.

"[Climate] is still a silo, rather than something that is integrated into all aspects of global health, research, delivery and financing policy. You listen to the annual World Health Assemblies, and sure, there's a resolution on climate and health, and then all the other [health] issues are discussed as if the climate is okay," Renzo said.

The top-down nature of the decision-making process doesn't help, Guinto continued, as it means research and policies can be far removed from the reality of communities living on the frontlines of climate change. "More resources should go directly to the communities, researchers and health practitioners working to understand and address the problem locally," he said.

"We need more local researchers who understand their contexts better to be investigating these phenomena and contributing to the body of knowledge," he said. "And eventually, maybe co-designing interventions with communities, rather than just copy-pasting what Western societies are doing."

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Mental health and psychosocial support interventions often have the best outcomes when they're led locally, as the ability of individuals and communities to bounce back from shocks depends on preexisting resources, IFRC's Whitton agreed. But with climate change intersecting with so many other determinants of health, the development sector has yet to build consensus around how to channel aid funds most effectively, she explained. "Donors, I think, are stretched around a lot of different paths to invest in terms of climate change impacts."

Communities at the center

Indigenous and rural communities, such as the Ogiek community in Kenya, play a [crucial role](#) in managing and protecting ecosystems thanks to ancestral knowledge passed on over generations.

This knowledge is embedded in cultural traditions, belief systems, and economies, making those communities particularly vulnerable to accelerated changes in ecosystems, explained Samrawit Gougsa, head of communications at [Minority Rights Group](#) and a member of Land Body Ecologies.

To really understand the relationship between ecosystem health and mental health, researchers should "look past Western-centric definitions of health and mental health, and incorporate the emotional and spiritual dimension of well-being as well," Gougsa said.

“We need to move away from a biomedical, body-centered approach to trauma, and start looking at how some experience land as an extension of the self, which is a concept centered on indigenous worldviews,” Gougsa said. “That means harm to land and the climate is also harm to one’s self, their identity and their mental health. It is traumatic.”

Communities affected by climate change already hold the keys to their own well-being through traditional knowledge — they just need to be allowed to be in the driver’s seat when it comes to making decisions that affect their well-being, she explained.

“If we can ensure that indigenous communities are stewarding and acting on the solutions they hold for the climate crisis, that is good both for the planet, and all of our health — it's not just the community itself,” Gougsa said.

Visit the [Planet Health series](#) for more in-depth reporting on the current impact of the climate crisis on human health around the world. Join the conversation by using the hashtag [#PlanetHealth](#).



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Flavie Halais is a freelance journalist based in Montreal, Canada, covering international issues and cities through a social lens. Her work has appeared in WIRED, the Guardian, Le Monde Afrique, Jeune Afrique, the Correspondent, and Devex.