The Inconsistency of the Flood Narrative in Nigeria

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It is almost every year that Nigeria and other West African countries experience instances of flooding. The flooding of 2012, however, has been the most vicious so far, devastating communities and having a severe impact on life and property. It is estimated that the floods affected about 7.7 million people with as many as two million people being rendered homeless (Shuaib, 2012). Apart from the disruption on human activity, there was tremendous destruction of infrastructure, agricultural land, open recreational space and biodiversity (Onuah and Cocks, 2012). The social, economic, and environmental consequences of this flood, described as the "worst flood in 50 years", were simply enormous. According to an elderly local resident, Paul Izukanne:

"We've never seen this kind of flood in the history of this town […] I was already grown up in the Nigeria flood of '68-'69 so I was a witness" (BattaBox, 2012).

This incidence has raised a number of questions pertaining to climate change, flood governance, disaster preparedness and pre-disaster warning. The narratives are structured in such a way that climate change is recognised as the primary cause of the floods, whose intensity is increasing annually. According to Nigeria's Director General of the National Emergency Management Agency,

"The climatic conditions and drastic changes to the weather pattern contributed to massive flooding witnessed in most states in Nigeria where lives were lost and sources of livelihood worth billions of Naira were destroyed"

Quoting from the United Nations and World Bank estimates, he added that:

"Nine out of every ten disasters are now climate related. Scientific evidence has shown that as a result of climate change, extreme weather events like floods, windstorms, droughts and epidemics have become more frequent and severe. They occur in areas where they were previously either unknown or extremely rare. For us in the developing world, climate change portends greater dangers […] losses from disasters can be up to 20 times greater as a percentage of gross domestic products in developing countries than in industrialized nations, while over 95 per cent of all disaster related deaths occur in developing countries. This is grim and unacceptable."

Curiously, narratives on measures already in place or measures that ought to be put in place as solutions in stemming the tide of the recent floods, do not mention climate change which is arguably the primary cause of the problem. Rather, they place emphasis on disaster warning and monitoring systems. Naturally, one would expect that since the definitions of the problem are associated with particular narratives of climate change then climate change would be included in what is presented as the solution. The Director of NEMA was also quoted saying at a recent meeting:

"…improve our early warning capabilities, preparedness and mitigation, as well as response mechanisms in the country […] We have called for this gathering of stakeholders to provide a common platform to critically reflect […] and come up with a simplified warning message to be used as a common working document." (Vanguard, 2012)

Meanwhile, the Director General of the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NIMET), Dr. Anthony Anufurom, had blamed the massive flooding on the neglect of the early warnings issued by the agency.

"On the 3rd of August 2012, the agency wrote to the governors of some states informing them that based on our observations and predictions, their areas were most vulnerable to flooding. They turned deaf ears to this warning and the result is what we are currently witnessing in the country" (Adedoja and Ezigbo, 2012).

This is not too surprising as a similar sort of narrative is adopted vis-à-vis predictions from international organisations. An example for instance is the World Meteorological Organisation, which suggested that the total rainfall in 2012 was 150 per cent above the normal levels in Mali, Senegal, northern Burkina Faso and the Lake Chad basin countries of Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon (World Meteorological Association, 2012). Simply put, the floods in the region in 2012 were a result of climate change. Interestingly, the United Nations recommends that countries devise robust programmes to forecast and respond to floods, in order to minimise their impact by organising prevention, improving planning and shortening reaction times. Such programmes would also help relief agencies coordinate aid distribution more effectively.

Thus, they seem not to "hit the nail on the head" but to be "treating the symptom", while abandoning the root cause of the problem. While the recommendations of these narratives are correct, Nigeria and many West African countries have yet to establish such prevention systems. The main purpose of flood warnings is to save lives by allowing people, support and emergency services time to prepare for the flooding. Their secondary purpose is to reduce the effects and damage of flooding (Bariweni et al., 2012). Thus, flood warnings are merely a response and cannot be treated as preventive measures. The best way to prevent flooding in the region is to address climate change. These recommendations, however, demonstrate either a lack of understanding of the issue and the situation on the ground or a deliberate attempt to undermine the importance of climate change. The latter seems to be the most probable here.

This faulty narrative has been responsible for the reactionary approach of national governments and the international community to flood incidents across the region. The approach is designed for developed countries to send aid to flood affected areas quickly. Rather than running to the aid of countries with relief materials, whose cost often runs into the billions of dollars, this money can be channelled into climate change mitigation. Besides, one cannot overlook the fact that some of this aid ends up in the pockets of a few privileged officials, rather than the victims themselves. The best way to aid the victims is to address the root causes of climate change and not merely wait for disaster to strike before rolling out PR stunts as global world powers.

Furthermore, the continuous downplaying/denial of climate change narratives as the solution to flooding in the region threatens the well-being of developed countries in some measure. For instance, the Niger Delta of Nigeria, which was one of the worst-hit during this flooding and is in constant danger of inundation, supplies 40% of all the crude oil the United States imports. It is therefore time for these nations to take a more proactive and holistic approach to climate change globally.

The starting point for flood management in Nigeria and the wider region is a need to change the prevailing narrative to one that recognises that climate change is the root cause of flooding and that, hence, the solution is to be found in research towards this direction. Other investment, such as aid, should only be complementary.

Recommendations

Some people in the decision-making mix are fully aware of this half truth and misinformation, yet, one sees little in terms of efforts to stem and reverse the tide. The state is more interested in benefits from aid rather than doing its part to address the problem. This is unfortunate as only the Nigerian state can make a difference by correcting the half-truths and misinformation it is guilty of perpetuating as a solution to recurring flooding.

Let me suggest three examples of what can be done to change the narrative in a way that addresses this root cause. Firstly, is for the government to ensure that people making statements regarding climate change impacts are qualified professionals with adequate and in-depth knowledge of global climate governance. Secondly, proper funding of relevant agencies may reduce their dependence on aid from countries and organisations that distort climate change narratives. Thirdly, is a way to mitigate climate change in Nigeria, a country that lost 55.7% of its

primary forest between 2000 and 2005 (Butler, 2005). The citizenry should be actively encouraged to plant a tree annually. The federal, state, and local government can encourage legislation that sets apart an hour annually for all residents to plant a tree.

Conclusion

The impact of climate change is presently observed in the flooding incidents in Nigeria and the West African region. While most narratives increasingly recognise climate change as a root cause of flooding, solutions emphasise flood-warning systems, neglecting climate change. While flood risk planning is important, I argue that attacking the root cause of flooding -climate change- is important in monitoring success. The process by which flood planning is to be judged will need to involve new and challenging institutional processes that recognise the importance of tackling climate change.

Given all of the above, it is clear that current efforts to address the ravaging effects of climate change in Nigeria are not in line with contemporary global realities. Managing and responding to the effects of climate change, such as the flooding of 2012, will need to see the government setting ambitious, legally-binding targets and strengthening the institutional framework for environmental social governance at a national scale. While the efforts to assist victims and the adoption of disaster and emergency management is commendable, a more holistic approach that takes climate change into consideration must be adopted. This is especially important if Nigeria aims to address the recurring flood incidents in depth.

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