

Poor Farmers Bear The Brunt of Natural Disasters In Developing Countries

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Nearly a quarter of damages wrought by natural disasters on the developing world are borne by the agricultural sector, finds a new Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) study released in Sendai, Japan on March 17, 2015 at the UN World Conference for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Media reports and a FAO news release said:

Twenty-two percent of all damages inflicted by natural hazards such as drought, floods storms or tsunamis are registered within the agriculture sector, shows the analysis of 78 post-disaster needs assessments in 48 developing countries spanning the 2003-2013 period.

These damages and losses are often incurred by poor rural and semi-rural communities without insurance and lacking the financial resources needed to regain lost livelihoods. Yet only 4.5 percent of post-disaster humanitarian aid in the 2003-2013 period targeted agriculture.

FAO's 22 percent figure represents only damages reported via post-disaster risk assessments. So while indicative of scale, the actual impact is likely even higher.

To arrive at a closer estimate of the true financial cost of disasters to developing world agriculture FAO compared decreases in yields during and after disasters with yield trends in 67 countries affected by (at least one) medium- to larger-scale events between 2003 and 2013.

The final tally: \$70 billion in damages to crops and livestock over that 10 year period.

Asia was the most affected region, with estimated losses adding up to \$28 billion, followed by Africa at \$26 billion.

The initial findings of the new report shows the cost to farmers was considerably higher than previously estimated.

Between 2003-2013, natural hazards and disasters in developing countries affected more than 1.9 billion people, and caused more than \$494bn in damages. Economic losses from natural disasters have tripled over the past decade, and continue to rise.

Out of a total \$140bn in damages, \$30bn affected agriculture.

"This (22%) is quite a large number and we think it is underestimated because ... we have

been facing a huge data gap ... Yet this 22% is much bigger than results for previous studies,” said Dominique Burgeon, FAO’s resilience coordinator, who is attending the UN conference in Sendai.

The FAO found that 82% of production losses were caused by droughts and floods, with 77% of all agricultural production losses worldwide due to drought occurring in 27 sub-Saharan countries and costing those economies \$23.5bn.

After natural disasters, trade flows were also jolted, the study said, noting an increase of \$18.9bn in agricultural imports, and a decrease of \$14.9bn in exports after natural disasters in the countries it surveyed.

Around 50% of global food production is produced by 2.5 billion smallholders. We have a huge challenge ahead

Around 2.5 billion small-scale farmers, herders, fishermen and forest communities depend on agriculture to survive, and their labors account for more than half of global agricultural production.

These people are particularly at risk from disasters – storms, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions – that destroy or damage harvests, equipment, supplies, livestock, seeds, crops and stored food.

“We know we need to increase global food security by 60% ... Bearing in mind that around 50% of global food production is produced by these 2.5 billion smallholders, we have a huge challenge ahead of us, and an increasing number of disasters affecting these people,” Burgeon said.

The FAO announced it was launching a special facility to help countries reduce risk and limit impacts of natural disasters in food production sectors. Under this new scheme, technical support will be provided to those who need it most.

“Agriculture and all that it encompasses is not only critical for our food supply, it also remains a main source of livelihoods across the planet. While it is a sector at risk, agriculture also can be the foundation upon which we build societies that are more resilient and better equipped to deal with disasters,” said FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva.

To help countries better prepare for and respond to disasters affecting agriculture, FAO on March 17, 2015 has launched a new facility aimed at channeling technical support to where it is most needed. The facility will work to mainstream disaster risk reduction in agriculture at all levels through diverse activities.

Graziano da Silva said: Studies have shown that for every one dollar spent on disaster risk reduction, as much as four dollars are returned in terms of avoided or diminished impacts.

Key facts

From FAO’s analysis of damages reported via needs assessments

Based only on damages reported in 78 post-disaster risk assessments in 48 countries covering the 2003-2013 period, losses of \$140 billion were registered by all economic sectors – \$30 billion of these were to agriculture (crops, livestock, forestry, fisheries).

When droughts occur, agriculture absorbs up to 84 percent of all economic impacts.

Within the agricultural sector, 42 percent of assessed losses were to crops (\$13 billion) – with floods the main culprit responsible for 60 percent of crop damages followed by storms (23 percent of crop damages).

Livestock is the second most affected subsector after crops, accounting for 36 percent of all damage and losses, for a total of \$11 billion during the 2003-2013 period.

Out of the 78 disasters assessed, 45 involved impacts to the fisheries subsector (\$1.7 billion, or 6 percent all damages born by the agricultural sector). The lion's share – 70 percent – was caused by tsunamis, typically infrequent events. Storms such as hurricanes and typhoons account for roughly 16 percent of the economic impact on fisheries, followed by floods (10 percent).

The forestry sector incurred \$737 million in damages and losses, representing 2.4 percent of the total for the agricultural sector.

From FAO's expanded analysis

FAO also compared decreases in yields during and after disasters with typical yield trends in 67 different countries affected by at least one medium- to larger-scale event between 2003 and 2013, in an expanded analysis, in order to arrive at a closer estimate of financial costs.

Based on this expanded analysis, losses and damages to crops and livestock over that period are estimated to total \$70 billion. Data gaps mean the total is likely higher still.

82% of production losses were caused by drought (44 percent) and floods (39 percent).

Asia was the most affected region, with estimated losses adding up to \$28 billion, followed by Africa at \$26 billion.

In Africa, between 2003 and 2013 there were 61 drought years in Sub-Saharan Africa affecting 27 countries and 150 million people. FAO estimates that 77 percent of all agricultural production losses suffered worldwide due to drought occurred in those 27 Sub-Saharan countries, with losses adding up to \$23.5 billion.

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