

Facing a Changing World: Women, Population and Climate

Empowering women key to combating climate change in Vietnam

HA NOI, 19 November 2009 – International climate change agreements and national policies are more likely to succeed in the long run if they take into account population dynamics, relations between the sexes, and women's well-being and access to services and opportunities, according to *The State of World Population 2009*, launched today by the United Nations in Viet Nam and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE).

"The whole world has been talking about carbon credits, carbon trading and emissions targets, but hardly anyone has been talking about the people whose activities contribute to those emissions or about those affected by climate change. It is important that the climate change debate is reframed, putting people at the centre. Climate policies that fail to take people, especially women, into account will neither make climate change manageable nor shield anyone from the potentially disastrous impacts," says Bruce Campbell, United Nations Population Fund Representative in Viet Nam.

Over the past 100 years, the temperature of the earth's surface has risen 0.74 degrees Celsius. This seemingly small increase has already been linked to more severe and frequent storms, extended droughts, melting glaciers and rising sea levels, all of which are taking a toll on lives and livelihoods, especially in developing countries. Southeast Asia is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change with its extensive, heavily populated coastlines, large agricultural sectors and large numbers of people living in poverty.

"According to climate change scenarios for Viet Nam, which were recently launched by MONRE, the average temperature in Viet Nam will rise 2.3 degrees Celsius above the average level of the 1980-1999 period, and the sea level will rise by at least 0.75 meters by the end of the 21st century. Also according to these scenarios, about 76,000 km² of the Mekong Delta, which makes up more than 20 percent of the total delta area, will be flooded. The consequences of climate change are very serious and will have negative impacts on the country's poverty reduction goals as well as the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development," states Mr Nguyen Van Duc, Vice Minister of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE).

The impacts of climate change, which include rising sea levels in low-lying coastal areas as well as severe droughts and floods, also suggest that an increasing number of people will migrate in the future for mainly environmental reasons. While no reliable figure exists, it is estimated that 25 million people worldwide are already displaced by environmental changes. By the middle of the century, population movements will present an even greater challenge, with estimates ranging from 50 million to one billion people, either within their countries or across the borders on a permanent or temporary basis.

Besides endangering lives and undermining livelihoods, climate change will also exacerbate the inequities between women and men. Women, especially in poor countries, already bear more of the brunt of environmental change. They manage households and care for family members, which often limits their mobility and increases their vulnerability to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. Women's unequal access to decision-making, formal financial systems, land ownership, sexual and reproductive health care, and education and information not only has a negative impact on human well-being but also hinders countries' resilience to climate change.

Even though women are sometimes seen only as victims, they are well positioned to be agents of change through mitigation, management and adaptive activities in their households, workplaces, communities and countries.

“Where women have access to education, livelihoods, voluntary family planning and other health services, they have healthier families and are empowered to better cope with the impacts of climate change”, concludes Campbell. However, the advantages of increasing women’s educational attainment go well beyond influencing the climate, since investing in women also contributes to development and the eradication of poverty.