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UN warns of climate change's potentially dire impact on food security



31 March 2011 – The effects of slow-onset climate change are expected to have “potentially catastrophic” impact on food production in developing countries in future, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) warned today, calling for action to mitigate the adverse consequences.

“Currently the world is focused on dealing with shorter-term climate impacts caused mainly by extreme weather events,” [said](#) Alexander Müller, the FAO Assistant-Director General for Natural Resources, in a submission to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change ([UNFCCC](#)).

“This is absolutely necessary, but ‘slow-onset’ impacts are expected to bring deeper changes that challenge the ecosystem services needed for agriculture, with potentially disastrous impacts on food security during the period from 2050 to 2100. Coping with long-term changes after the fact doesn’t make much sense. We must already today support agriculture in the developing world to become more resilient,” said Mr. Müller.

In its submission, FAO outlines steps that governments could consider in climate change negotiations to ensure that food security is not threatened. The agency recommends that food security be used as an indicator of vulnerability to climate change, saying that agriculture systems and the ecosystems it depends on are highly sensitive to climate variability and climate change.

Changes in temperature, precipitation and related outbreaks of pest and diseases can reduce production, with poor people in countries that depend on food imports particularly vulnerable,

according to FAO. “If we’re looking to assess vulnerability to climate change, it makes very good sense to look at food security as one important indicator,” said Müller.

FAO suggests that global climate change adaptation mechanisms include greater attention to risks arising from slow-onset impacts of climate change, particularly the effect on food security.

A key measure highlighted in the FAO submission is the need to develop staple food varieties that are better adapted to future climatic conditions. Plant genetic material stored in gene banks should be screened with future requirements in mind, and additional plant genetic resources – including those from wild relatives of food crops – should be collected and studied because of the risk that they may disappear, FAO recommends.

Climate-adapted crops such varieties of major cereals that are resistant to heat, drought, submergence and salty water, the agency suggests, stressing this should be done in ways that respect breeders’ and farmers’ rights, in accordance with the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources.

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