

Beyond the Forecast: IGAD Need Integrate Mental Health into Climate Anticipatory Action

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Between October and December 2023, Kenya experienced these climate effects firsthand. Heavy rainfall affected 43 counties, causing floods, displacement, damaged infrastructure, disease outbreaks, and significant economic losses (KMD, 2024). (State of the Climate Report (2024 (State of the Climate Report (2024), n.d.)), n.d.) With OND 2026 forecasts pointing to similar weather ahead, preparedness needs to do more than just protect infrastructure and jobs. It should also focus on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, which is often overlooked in climate planning.

Climate scientists are closely watching the Pacific and Indian Oceans for signs of a Positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) and changing El Niño conditions, both of which can affect rainfall in Eastern Africa. Although El Niño and Positive IOD can happen separately, both have often brought more rain during October to December rainy season. In fact, positive IOD events usually have a bigger impact on East African rainfall than El Niño alone (ICPAC, 2023). Climate Shocks Are Human Shocks with Great Ramifications.

Climate disasters impact more than just the land and buildings—they affect people in many ways that are not always visible. While discussions often highlight damaged roads, ruined crops, and lost livestock, the emotional and mental toll is just as serious. Floods, displacement, lost livelihoods, and uncertainty about the future can deeply affect both individuals and communities (WHO, 2022). That’s why mental health should be a core part of climate preparedness, not just an afterthought.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognizes climate change as a major threat multiplier, exacerbating vulnerabilities and affecting health, livelihoods, and social systems (IPCC, 2023). In 2023, heavy rainfall caused widespread flooding in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania, and Burundi, prompting emergency responses. The region’s predominantly arid-to-semiarid climate, with erratic rainfall and high temperatures, makes such extreme events a serious threat, especially to rural, often impoverished pastoral communities. (Gavin, 2022) The ICPAC Technical Report on Flood Impacts (2024), as reported by ReliefWeb, indicated that over 700,000 people were displaced by flooding, despite early warnings that did not prompt adequate action. Communities exposed to recurrent climate shocks often undergo increased levels of stress, anxiety, grief, and psychological distress. For many families, emotional recovery can take much longer than rebuilding homes or restoring livelihoods. (Goodman et al., 2023)

Rapid sea-level rise, severe coastal abrasion, and disappearing shorelines contribute to profound solastalgia, a distressing sense of homesickness experienced while remaining at home. (Phillips & Murphy, 2021). Extended shifts, confined living quarters, and irregular schedules already place significant strain on mariners. The occurrence of unexpected, climate-induced severe storms additionally worsens this isolation, frequently causing acute trauma and panic. (Mental Health and Stress-Related Disorders | Climate and Health | CDC, 2024). Rapid ocean warming disrupts marine ecosystems and causes fish stocks to migrate. This loss of predictability leads to chronic financial anxiety and severe depression among families dependent on fishing. (Rogers et al., 2019) (Rogers et al., 2019).

Climate change should therefore be viewed not only as an environmental challenge but also as a public health and mental health concern (WHO, 2022). Climate extremes are increasingly frequent and severe, exposing communities to major climate-health challenges. (Omay et al., 2023) A recent ACCRCC study in Sub-Saharan Africa identified a strong link between climate change, food insecurity, and mental health (ACCRCC, 2026). Loss of livelihoods, displacement, and disease resulting from climate extremes are linked to distress, trauma, depression, anxiety, and substance use. (The perceived impact of climate change on mental health and suicidality in Kenyan high school students, 2024) (Ndetei et al., 2024)

The At-risk Populations at the Community Levels Bear the Greatest Burden

There is growing evidence that climate disasters are closely linked to mental health problems. Floods, droughts, storms, and displacement have all been connected to higher risks of depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance misuse, and emotional distress (Cianconi, Betrò, & Janiri, 2020; Charlson et al., 2021).

Older people may have trouble evacuating during floods, getting health care, or staying connected with others. They also face risks like malnutrition, homelessness, and violence. People with disabilities often struggle to get early warning information, emergency help, and recovery services. Pastoralist communities may lose livestock, which threatens not only their income but also their cultural traditions and social bonds. For those already dealing with mental health issues, climate emergencies can disrupt treatment and medication, making symptoms worse and increasing their vulnerability (WHO, 2021). (Ayalon et al., 2021, pp. 1038-1040)

Not everyone is affected by extreme weather and climate events in the same way. People who are already at risk often face even greater dangers because of social, economic, and health inequalities. Children and teenagers may suffer trauma after seeing destruction, injury, or loss of life, and may also face more poverty and lack of basic needs. When schools close or families are displaced, it can disrupt both learning and emotional development (UNDRR, 2022). Women and girls are hit harder by climate disasters due to social inequalities, such as limited land ownership and greater dependence on subsistence farming (Kaithuru, 2017). During emergencies, they often take on extra caregiving duties and face higher risks of gender-based violence and exploitation in crowded shelters and displacement camps. (Awiti, 2022)

The Invisible Mental Health Emergency in the midst of the Climate Shocks

Studies show that repeatedly facing climate disasters can erode people's resilience and lead to long-term stress, ecological grief, and climate anxiety (Charlson et al., 2021). Communities hit by repeated climate shocks often feel helpless, uncertain, and less hopeful about the future. These mental health effects can slow recovery, reduce productivity, weaken community bonds, and put additional pressure on already stretched health systems (WHO, 2022). (Why mental health is a priority for action on climate change, 2022)

Even with more evidence available, mental health is still mostly missing from disaster preparedness and anticipatory action plans. Governments in the Greater Horn of Africa have established national climate policies, including Climate Action Plans, Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, Climate Financing Frameworks, and Disaster Risk Reduction strategies. The region also uses important information systems such as Hazard Watch, Drought Watch, and Flood Watch. But these systems do not do enough to address mental health issues, even though their importance is clear (Kaithuru & Misian, 2023). This gap makes it harder to adapt, reduces resilience, and slows long-term development, especially for vulnerable groups like women, youth, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. (Suran, 2023) Some frameworks, such as the WHO Africa Mental Health Framework (2013-2030) and the Kenya Mental Health Policy 2015-2030, do include mental health, but integration remains limited. Not responding to climate-related mental illnesses lowers quality of life, increases disease, and holds back progress on SDG 3 and other health and human rights goals. (Cianconi et al., 2020)

An Intentional Approach; Re-imagining Anticipatory Action

Anticipatory Action (AA) is a modern, proactive approach to managing disaster risks. By using weather forecasts and climate data to act before hazards happen, governments and humanitarian groups can reduce losses, save lives, and protect livelihoods (IFRC, 2020).

But anticipatory action should not only focus on physical things. It also needs to consider and protect people's mental health, dignity, and social resilience to make interventions truly effective. Adding Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) to these frameworks is a big chance for the region to build climate resilience and protect vulnerable groups. This integration is key to completing anticipatory action. (Regional Climate Action Plan for the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes 2023-2028, n.d.)

Early warning messages should not only share the likelihood of heavy rain or flooding, but also offer advice on emotional readiness, stress management, family communication, and where to find psychosocial support. Communities need help preparing mentally and physically for upcoming climate shocks (WHO, 2022).

Strengthening community-based psychosocial support is essential for effective anticipatory action. These efforts show a commitment to both economic resilience and mental wellbeing. ((IGAD), n.d.) Before disasters happen, community health workers, teachers, religious leaders, and local volunteers can be trained in Psychological First Aid (PFA) and basic psychological support. These investments help communities spot, support, and refer people in distress during emergencies (WHO, 2021). Engaging networks of profession counseling and psychologists to strengthen mental health interventions, through prevention, promotive, and treatment approaches. Early detection promotes treatment and delays disease progression for at-risk individuals, contributing to low morbidity and mortality.

Money worries are a big cause of stress during disasters. Cash transfers based on forecasts, aimed at vulnerable families, can help them protect their belongings, keep food on the table, and reduce anxiety about what's coming (IFRC, 2020). This empowers those in need of treatment to afford the services at local levels.

Schools can become centers of resilience by integrating psychosocial preparedness into disaster risk activities and adopting child-centered, school-based plans. Creating safe spaces, ensuring learning continues, and establishing school counseling can help protect children's well-being before, during, and after climate emergencies (UNDRR, 2022).

Inclusive Anticipatory Action needs to consider older persons, persons with disabilities, and marginalized populations intentionally in preparedness planning. Accessible early warning systems, targeted outreach, and local support mechanisms can greatly reduce both physical and psychological harm. (Yore et al., 2023) Supporting Front-line Respondents in climate-disasters, including healthcare workers, humanitarian personnel, community volunteers, and emergency workers, who frequently experience emotional strain while responding to disasters. Their wellbeing should be protected through peer support systems, psychosocial care, and staff wellbeing programs (WHO, 2021). Existing, understood, and acceptable support mechanisms need to be accounted for. (Omar, 2024)

Climate-responsive Mental Health Systems

IGAD has made strong progress in improving climate services, disaster risk reduction, and anticipatory action. Still, there is an important chance to include mental health in these efforts. As climate change becomes more unpredictable and extreme weather events occur more often, preparedness must protect the whole person—not just their safety and jobs, but also their dignity, well-being, and hope. (Suran, 2023)

Assimilating mental health considerations into marine weather forecasts and climate change strategies requires integrating meteorological safety data with psychological support systems to safeguard vulnerable coastal and maritime populations. Extreme maritime weather, shifting fish stocks, and rising sea levels now represent not only physical threats but also significant drivers of eco-anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and financial distress among mariners and coastal residents. (Mengesha & Sarnyai, 2025). To build a climate-resilient maritime sector, early warning tools must expand beyond wind speed and wave height to actively address the vulnerability of maritime and coastal populations.

A weather forecast should be more than just a prediction of rain—it should also warn us about possible impacts on people. Every climate warning should lead to actions that protect both physical and mental health. Building climate resilience is not just about stronger infrastructure and better forecasts, but also about stronger minds, communities, and support systems. By including mental health in Anticipatory Action, IGAD can lead the way in creating resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities that can handle the growing effects of climate change (IPCC, 2023; WHO, 2022). Early Warning for Early Action must include Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for everyone.

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