News
EarthBeat



Two boys plant mangrove seedlings in the tidal zone on the west coast of the Indonesian island of Nias. Mangrove swamps provide habitat for fish and shellfish and help buffer against storms that are becoming more frequent and severe as the climate warms. (CNS photo/Paul Jeffrey)



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Amadou Diallo, a program manager for Catholic Relief Services in his native Senegal, knows from talking with the farmers and cattle herders that the cyclical droughts the country experienced occurred about once every 10 years for generations.

More recently, he has learned from conversations with them that the droughts occur more often, perhaps every three or four years, and are unpredictable in duration.

The more frequent droughts cause the herders to take their cattle elsewhere, possibly opening the way to conflict. For people who grow crops to sell, their yields are smaller, limiting their ability to provide enough food for their families. At times, parents pull their children from school and send them to work to help support their families.

It's all a sign of climate change, Diallo said.

Such changes in traditional practices of the Senegalese people, 80% of whom depend on agriculture as their source of income, are an example of the impact of a changing climate in communities around the world, according to the latest climate assessment report from the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC.

Severe flooding, long-term drought, wildfires and extremes of heat and cold are all resulting from climate change, the report said.

Related: Earth's climate outlook grim but not hopeless, faith leaders say

Released Aug. 9, the massive document, covering 3,900-plus pages, serves as a "reality check" on how the planet is being reshaped by rising global temperatures, said Valérie Masson-Delmotte, co-chair of the IPCC scientific working group that compiled it.

The report, the first since 2013, was written by 234 climate scientists and draws its conclusions based on over 14,000 studies.

It says that temperatures have risen by 1.1 degrees Celsius (2 degrees Fahrenheit) since the 19th century, reaching their highest level in more than 100,000 years. The report concludes that human activities, including the burning of fossil fuels, like oil, coal and natural gas, account for almost all of the temperature rise. Use of those fuels releases heat-trapping greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide and methane.

The warming atmosphere is affecting virtually every part of the planet, the report said. Rising temperatures are leading to the melting of glaciers, ice packs and sea ice, contributing to rising sea levels that threaten coastal communities. The warming climate is also causing more extreme weather, such as stronger hurricanes, torrential rains — like those that have recently caused widespread flooding in Europe and China — and droughts that can lead to wildfires and the loss of tillable farmland.

The report also projects a series of paths that would result in increasingly greater warming and progressively dire outcomes across the planet by the mid-21st century. Nevertheless, the scientists said that it's not too late to slow those changes and avoid the worst environmental catastrophes.

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Catholic leaders in the environmental movement said the church can cement a leading role in addressing climate change based on the report's conclusions.

Dan Misleh, executive director of the Catholic Climate Covenant, told CNS that the science behind the report makes clear it is time for people to reduce the consumption of fossil fuels in an effort to slow climate change.

"These reports come out regularly, and each time the scientists are saying this is a problem and we need to address it," he said. "The difference now is more and more people are experiencing the impact of climate change. Perhaps this time the message will fall on a few more ears than it has in previous IPCC reports."

Misleh turned to a Gospel story to stress his concern, citing Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus asks the disciples, "What parent among you would hand your child a stone when your child asks for bread?"

"Young people are asking of us older people to give them bread and nourishment and we keep handing them stones. We don't do what we need to do, to pass the gift of God's creation to them as we've done before," Misleh said.

Key to the church's response will be the Laudato Si' Action Platform, introduced in May by Pope Francis. It is designed to carry out a global grassroots movement to create a more inclusive, fraternal, peaceful and sustainable world based on the pope's 2015 encyclical on the environment.



Youth climate activists in Manila, Philippines, take part in the Global Climate Strike in September 2019. (CNS photo/courtesy Global Catholic Climate Movement)

Marianist Sr. Leanne Jablonski, director of the Marianist Environmental Education Center in Dayton, Ohio, said people, especially young people, are interested in taking steps to protect the environment.

One such effort she identified emerged in Dayton, where a group of University of Dayton graduates developed Mission of Mary, a community-supported agriculture program to provide food in a "food desert" in one of the city's neighborhoods. "Graduates started living in the neighborhood, forming relationships. They took an abandoned swimming pool lot and are helping neighbors grow a garden," she said.

Such efforts also can help address environmental injustices that find people of color and low-income communities adversely affected by polluting practices with no plan for corrective action, said Sister Jablonski who also is a scholar for faith and environment at the university's Hanley Sustainability Institute.

The report also points to the need for Catholics to "understand the stakes and the realities" warming temperatures pose to all life on earth, said Michael Schuck, co-director of the International Jesuit Ecology Project at Loyola University Chicago.

"We have to go again with Pope Francis' emphasis on integral ecology, not only the integration of the ecology and the social, but the integration of the inner self and the outer. Our own souls need transformation," Schuck explained.

He also encouraged people who are passionate about protecting God's creation to talk about it with others, and said the report that made headlines can be a starting point for small steps that can lead to significant action.

It's also time to allow the younger generation to lead, Schuck added.

"We elders, we have to keep listening and empathizing with the next generation."