

CLIMATE CHANGE & MENTAL HEALTH

ADDRESSING THE INVISIBLE
CRISIS IN KERALA

2024



Climate Change & Mental Health in Kerala

In an era where climate change is no longer a distant threat, its impacts stretch far beyond the physical changes of our environment. This global phenomenon, marked by rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and ecological disruptions, carries with it a less visible but equally devastating consequence - the profound impact on mental health.

Its impact on mental health is far-reaching and diverse, ranging from mild stress to severe disorders like anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Extreme climate events not only result in physical damage but also inflict acute and long-term mental health challenges (IPCC, 2014).

In recent years, Kerala has witnessed the devastating effects of the Okchi cyclone in 2017, and catastrophic floods in 2018 and 2019, causing extensive damage to properties and affecting thousands of people. The occurrences of such disasters have escalated in frequency and severity. This warming trend presents health hazards to its population, particularly among vulnerable groups.

Monsoon onset has become unpredictable, causing challenges for farmers in planning their crops leading to economic distress. Amid increasing temperatures, the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority has officially recognized heatwaves and heat strokes as significant threats

Flow of Event

Introduction **Sustera and INECC**

Chief guest **Smt. Shailaja Teacher**
(Former Health Minister, Kerala)

Panel Discussion 1

Assessing and Enhancing Mental Health Support in the Context of Climate Change in Kerala



Akhil Menon, IAS
Dr. Abhijith, CUSAT
Dr. Dinesh, Psychiatrist
Joe John George, UNICEF

Panel Discussion 2

Psycho Social Support Post-Disaster: Strategies and Implementation



Maneeja Murali,
Senior program officer, ATREE
Vipin Das,
Program Coordinator, CSCF
Syama Prabha,
SPO, Dept. of Social Justice,
Carol Wilson,
Policy Researcher, JNU

Brainstorming and Activity Session



within the state of Kerala. With a vast coastline, Kerala is particularly susceptible to sea-level rise due to global warming. Diminished agricultural yields, interruptions in the fisheries sector, and infrastructure damage stemming from extreme weather events and other changes can exert adverse influences on livelihoods and hinder economic growth.

To empower mental health professionals, first responders and social workers, to address this issue of climate change, the Sustera Foundation in collaboration with INECC and LAYA organized a one-day training program which was presided over by Smt. KK. Shailaja Teacher, former Health Minister of Kerala. The program included expert roundtable discussions on the immediate, gradual and long-term impacts of climate change on mental health, various risk amplifiers and the need for a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) programme.

The Psychological Impact of Climate Change

Climate change significantly impacts people's mental health and well-being, both directly and indirectly. Vulnerable groups, including those with pre-existing mental health conditions, are disproportionately affected by climate change-related hazards.

Following a climate-related event or displacement, individuals may experience a diminished sense of self, reduced social interaction and solastalgia—the loss of a sense of place and security tied to one's environment. Climate anxiety is a growing concern. It is a feeling of great stress caused by constant exposure to upsetting climate-related news and events which is now common among children. The uncertainty and fear associated with a changing climate future can cause mental stress and helplessness among people.

Increasing temperature is also leading to a decrease in productivity. A recent study also attributed increasing temperature to an increase in physical and sexual domestic violence across three South Asian countries.

People often delay seeking help for mental health problems because of the stigma associated with them. To tackle this, we must offer psychological first aid, grief counselling, and psychotherapy to provide both immediate and long-term support. Addressing the impact of climate change on mental health requires a differentiated approach based on geographical and demographic variations. Gradual impacts such as rising temperatures, rising sea levels and changing precipitation patterns can cause chronic stress.

Despite the impact of climate change, mental health services remain constrained due to funding gaps and a shortage of adequately trained personnel. In this regard, we consulted with experts to understand the long-term impacts of climate change on mental health, the Indirect Impacts of climate change on mental health, various risk amplifiers, and the need for Psychosocial Support. The roundtable also examined how the residents from vulnerable regions in Kerala cope with recurring flooding events. Post the event, group discussions were organized to discuss the findings with participants and other experts in the domain.

"The impacts are there and the mental stress is very, very different for the poorer communities to the richer communities."

-Myron Mendes, INECC



Mental Health Challenges in Vulnerable Communities

While climate change poses risks to all, its impacts are not distributed equally. Children, the elderly, and women are particularly vulnerable to the mental health consequences of climate change. Disadvantaged populations living in vulnerable geographies, individuals with pre-existing mental illnesses, and those closely connected to the land, such as farmers and tribal communities, are also at risk of experiencing adverse mental health effects due to climate change. The poor and marginalized are not only the most physically affected, but also the most mentally affected, due to the economic impact and limited resources towards building the adaptive capacity.

Climate disasters have a significant impact on children in Kerala. Harsh figures underscore their vulnerability. For instance, in the floods of 2018, children accounted for 15% of the total fatalities, with approximately 67 children losing their lives. These numbers highlight the immense toll climate disasters take on children's education, safety, and well-being of children in the region. The roundtable also observed that children with disabilities and those from poor coastal villages face increased vulnerability to climate change impacts.

Kerala's ageing population is growing faster than the rest of India. While the national annual growth rate of the elderly population stands at 3.28%, Kerala's rate is notably higher at 3.96% (Economic Review of 2021). This demographic shift highlights the urgent need to prioritize preparedness and provide adequate support for the elderly population, who are vulnerable during disasters.

Transgender individuals and Persons with Disabilities encounter distinct challenges in the face of climate-related disasters, magnified by their day-to-day experiences. Often overlooked in disaster management planning, their unique needs and circumstances heighten their vulnerability, underscoring the critical need for inclusive and equitable approaches in both policy and practice.

Recommendations

Recommendations are compiled based on suggestions made by experts at the roundtable and validated with external research.

- Policymakers and government officials should **integrate mental health considerations into climate change adaptation and mitigation plans.** Mental health support and psychosocial services must be made available to communities vulnerable to climate impacts.
- Disaster management plans should **reflect the diverse needs of communities,** including gender-specific requirements and support for vulnerable groups (UNDRR, 2019)
- Governments and NGOs should conduct **awareness campaigns and training programs to raise awareness** about mental health issues related to climate change. This will help build resilience and coping strategies among communities.
- Invest in mental health support services, especially in vulnerable regions like coastal areas and marginalized communities. **Strengthening mental health infrastructure and providing access to counselling and psychotherapy** services can help individuals cope with climate-induced stress (Berry et al., 2018).



Recommendations from the Round Table Discussions

- Educational institutions should be equipped to address climate-related mental health challenges. **Develop programs to educate students and staff about climate change and mental well-being**, and establish support systems to aid those affected by climate disasters (WHO, 2018)
 - Promote **collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, research institutions like NIMHANS, and community-based organizations** to address climate-related mental health challenges comprehensively.
 - Invest in **community-based education** on the mental health impacts of climate change and equip community members with coping strategies.
 - Efforts should focus on identifying climate-related stressors, assessing vulnerability, enhancing MHPSS emergency preparedness, and establishing effective **monitoring and evaluation** mechanisms for MHPSS activities.
 - Prioritize mental health support for marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as **the indigenous communities, who are frequently affected by climate events.**
 - Recognize and address the increasing mental **health strains on administrators and elected representatives the responsibility of decision-making** during climatic emergencies. Special sessions and programs must be organized to support their mental health and provide them with the necessary motivation to continue their work.
 - **Create a Standard Operating procedure** for District Administration that details the procedures involved in psychosocial support pre-, post and during a climate-related disaster. The SOP should have a clear allocation
- of roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders. Additionally, create a trained cohort of volunteers that can work with the district administration in this regard.
- Recognize and **address the increasing instances of cumulative and compound events.** These events, such as coastal flooding coupled with salinity increase, have layered implications for local communities.
 - Proactively **disseminating information on resources available, such as professional counsellors** from the health department, especially during and after disasters, is essential to supporting the mental health of individuals and communities.
 - Offering training in **psychological first aid (PFA) for** community leaders, teachers, and youth in coastal areas is a valuable way to promote community-driven support in the aftermath of a traumatic event. PFA is a set of basic skills that can be used to provide immediate support to people who have experienced a traumatic event. PFA training can teach participants how to:
 - Assess the situation and provide safety
 - Research on specific challenges of mental health in areas of geographical disadvantage and special needs of vulnerable groups.
 - Listen to and support people
 - Provide comfort and encouragement
 - Identify and connect people with resources
 - PFA training can be delivered in a variety of formats, including in-person workshops, online courses, and self-paced learning modules.



- Develop a **comprehensive list of mental health resources available** in the community, including the names and contact information of professional counselors from the health department.
- **Updating census and survey data collection methodologies to ensure that transgender and non-binary** individuals and persons with disability are accurately represented is essential for ensuring that this population has access to the mental health services and support it needs.
- Media campaigns can be a powerful tool for **raising awareness about climate-related mental health issues**, such as eco-anxiety, grief related to environmental losses, and other climate-related mental health issues.
- **Collaboration with other states and countries to share best practices**, resources, and knowledge is essential to addressing the global mental health impacts of climate change.
- The indirect impact of climate change on mental health can be caused by a variety of psychological stressors, including, Economic insecurity, Displacement or Social disruption. This need to be kept in consideration in Disaster Management plans by Local Self Government Institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is an urgent need to address mental health issues arising from climate change. The impact of climate change is aggravating the already extremely difficult situation for mental health and mental health services globally.

The discussions underscored the lack of formal recognition and procedures addressing this nexus. More comprehensive strategies and collaborations are essential in integrating mental health considerations into climate action

"And about us, I got diabetes after becoming a minister. I can't show my tension outside. If I get tensed, the whole state will get tensed. They would think even the minister is scared so we can't survive it. So I had to hide the tension. I never showed it out. People ask me how can I smile in front of the media in the midst of a crisis. I try to keep my mind free while talking to them to make them feel like we can handle the crisis."

-Shailaja Teacher

and policy. The event's insights emphasize the need for tailored support mechanisms, especially for vulnerable communities, and underscore further research and dialogue in this crucial area. The discussions also revealed a gap in awareness and preparedness, suggesting a vital role for education and community engagement in building resilience against climate-induced mental health challenges.

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes the compounded impact of climate change on mental health, highlighting the urgency to address these issues globally. Recognizing climate change as a serious threat, comprehensive models for mental health preparedness in relation to climate change must be developed. Kerala is well-positioned to create and implement such models, potentially setting a standard for other regions to follow in integrating climate resilience with mental health strategies.



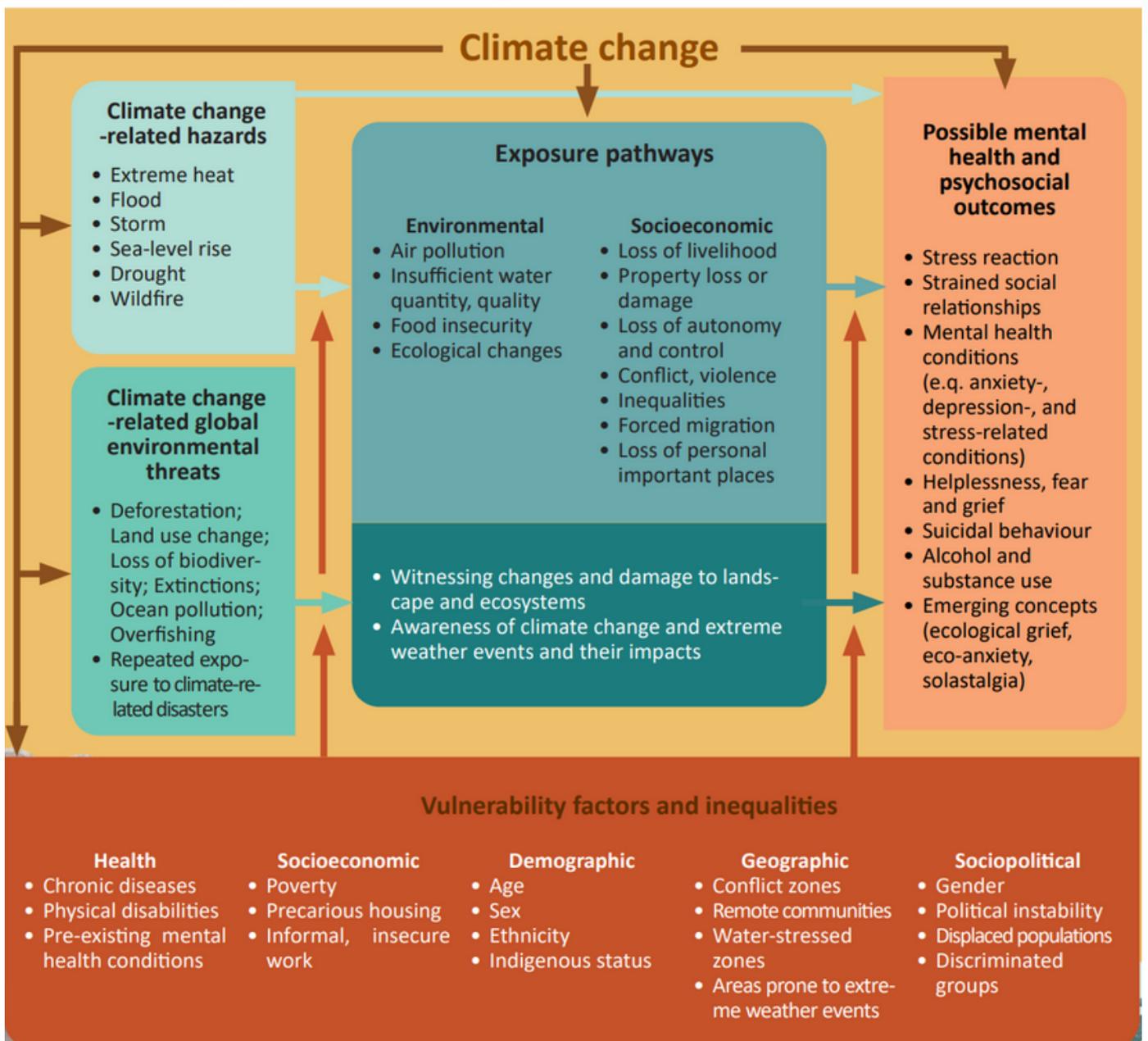
The diagram illustrates the intricate pathways through which climate change affects people's mental health and psychosocial well-being. These pathways involve both direct and indirect factors:

- 1. Climate-Related Hazards:** These include extreme weather events (such as storms and floods) that can overlap, leading to cascading effects.
- 2. Long-Term Risks:** Persistent climate risks, land use change or prolonged droughts, contribute to mental health challenges.
- 3. Exposure Pathways:** Individuals may simultaneously face exposure to multiple stressors, such as contaminated water, food insecurity, and mosquito breeding sites.
- 4. Population Vulnerabilities:** Existing vulnerabilities within communities can be exacerbated by climate hazards, resulting in increased inequities.
- 5. Implications:** The combined effects of these factors significantly impact mental health and overall well-being.

This diagram underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address climate-related mental health concerns, emphasizing equity and resilience.

SOURCE: [Mental Health and Climate Change: Policy Brief. WHO, 2022](#)

Figure 1: Main interlinkages between climate change and mental health.





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SCAN TO WATCH



Roubtable 1: Assessing
and Enhancing Mental
Health Support in the
Context of Climate
Change in Kerala"



Roubtable 2: Psycho
social support post
disaster: Strategies and
interventions