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COVID-19, conflict, climate change, and the human rights of people living in African prisons



The 2022 UN Climate Change Implementation Plan acknowledged the necessity of taking action to address climate change and safeguard water and food security within a human-rights-based approach.¹ Low-income and middle-income countries are disproportionately affected by climate change and have less capacity to respond to climate-related impacts such as sea-level rise, extreme weather events, drought, population displacement, and disease.

Aspects of criminal justice involvement overlap with determinants of climate vulnerability, underpinned by structural inequalities such as poverty, social exclusion, and stigma.² A disproportionate number of the target groups of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (eg, people with low income, marginalised people, and Indigenous people) live in prisons and are crucial to achieving its aims (eg, improving health, improving access to safe drinking water, reducing poverty, and reducing hunger). Although the global prison population has reached its largest size ever (more than 11.5 million people are living in prison worldwide),³ the Climate Change Implementation Plan does not explicitly mention prisons, despite the unique health vulnerabilities of people living in prison, their almost complete reliance on the government, and their consequent inability to protect themselves from climate-related and disease-related threats to health and life.⁴ The 2021 UN Common Position on Incarceration has documented continued under-resourcing of prison systems and low priority of prison reforms in many countries.⁵ During COVID-19, many domestic policies and responses either excluded or failed to adequately include people living and working in prisons, and the prison systems themselves. Prisons are frequently excluded from domestic climate adaptation and disaster mitigation planning, and are forgotten in the aftermath of extreme weather events.³

The UN expresses substantial concern about the disproportionate effects of climate change on Africa and the potential for destabilisation of countries and regions due to drought emergencies (eg, in the Sahel or the Horn of Africa), extreme heat and wildfires, flooding, damaging locust swarms, crop failures, water shocks

and food insecurity, increased poverty, and backsliding of the rule of law.⁶

More than 1 million people are living in prison in Africa,³ and they are considerably affected by COVID-19, conflict, and climate change. COVID-19 amplified the substantial inequalities and environmental health risks to which these people are exposed.⁷⁻⁸ Standards of care remain inadequate, especially in low-income African countries, due to under-investment in post-colonial infrastructure, staffing, and biohazard management.⁷⁻⁸

Furthermore, prisons in Africa are not immune to the consequences of the Ukraine conflict. In times of scarcity, the needs of people living in prison tend to be given low priority due to their virtually non-existent political power and the stigma that surrounds them. Africa remains heavily reliant on the supply of fuel and basic commodities (eg, wheat, corn, and sunflower oil) from Ukraine and Russia. At the time of writing, the Black Sea Grain Initiative has only been extended for 4 months.

Climate change is a new and serious threat to the lives and health of people living in African prisons. The confounding aspects of insufficient domestic resourcing of disaster and disease responses; infrastructural damage by extreme weather; and housing of congested, malnourished, and chronically ill people living in prisons not only threatens the lives and health of the African prison population, but also potentially jeopardises Africa's achievement of the 2025 UNAIDS targets.⁹

A joint civil society submission (which was contributed to by some of the authors of this Comment) to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2023 highlighted important concerns regarding the severe overcrowding; poor infrastructure, ventilation, hygiene, and sanitation; water shortages; interrupted electricity and supply of medicine; frequent disease outbreaks; and hunger crises—people living in prison will go without food for up to 5 days—in prisons in Malawi.¹⁰ These prisons have not escaped substantial damage from record-breaking Cyclone Freddy, which has killed almost 500 people in Malawi. In Madagascar, the Southern African Litigation Centre reported that “prisoners are the invisible victims of the environmental

crisis” due to their complete inability to escape or protect themselves from the effects of severe weather.¹¹

Increased global and regional collaboration on human-rights-based measures to mitigate climate-related and conflict-related impacts on people living in African prisons is urgently required. Recommendations for future climate-change-responsive prison policies in Africa are warranted and should incorporate agreed human-rights-based development frameworks to detect, understand, prevent, and respond to the impact of climate change on operations. At a minimum, these frameworks include increasing the resilience of prison systems in implementing early warning systems for extreme weather events and disrupted supply chains; creating contingency and evacuation plans; training staff; identifying vulnerable people living in prison (eg, those who are chronically ill or of older age); devising robust supply chains for medicine—including HIV drugs—and basic needs such as food and clean water; protecting infrastructure and essential services (eg, electricity and sanitation); using renewable energies for clean water supply, cooling mechanisms, and heating mechanisms; and expanding sustainable development approaches to improve food security (eg, by establishing farms in prisons).⁴

The urgent identification of high-risk prisons, and the implementation of climate-related and conflict-related adaptation and resilience measures, is key.⁴ Further research to better understand the intersection between climate change, conflict, disease outbreaks, and incarceration is also warranted to help policy makers and practitioners develop more effective policies and programmes. Africa’s most vulnerable people should not be forgotten.

We declare no competing interests.

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