

An Exploration of Climate Change Awareness Amongst Coastal Residents in Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

The issue of climate change has been a growing concern in Jamaica. Satellite imageries show that many coastal communities across the southern belt of the island are experiencing the phenomenon of sea level rise and as such, coastal flooding and erosion are threats to them and their livelihoods. Familiarity with these effects encourages public engagement and effective adaptation that will limit negative impacts and facilitate positive changes (Whitmarsh, 2017). This research can be considered a platform for a needs assessment study since it highlights the gap in awareness. The perception of the population on the issue of climate change is vital, as it will give policy makers an understanding of the general view of the public, the extent to which public education needs to be heightened, and the intervention that needs to be employed. The purpose of this study was to explore climate change awareness amongst coastal residents in Jamaica by examining their views and factors influencing such perceptions. The methodology was of a qualitative nature, where the semi-structured interview was the main data collection tool. It was found out that the respondents are aware of climate change, but possessed little knowledge about its causes and how they have contributed to the issue on an individual level. They have seen increases in temperatures in recent times, reduced rainfall, rising sea levels and coastal flooding. Amidst these observations, the adaptation efforts on their part as well as the government's are rudimentary and therefore require more serious attention.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change usually refers to the rise in global temperatures from the mid-20th century to the present (National Geographic, 2012). Despite the fact that many coastal communities across Jamaica have been experiencing climate change, little is known about the effects of the phenomenon by residents and business operators. Among the most prevalent issues are sea level rise, coastal erosion and the effects of more frequent storms. Using a qualitative approach, the study takes into consideration the general perception of the population by exploring the degree to which the Alligator Pond residents are aware of the phenomenon of climate change. The study also explores how their level of education influences their perception and examines the need for public education. The Alligator Pond Community, located on the south coast of island, is a fishing village that is highly dependent upon the sea for its economic sustenance. It is one of the largest fishing villages in Jamaica (Jamaica Beach Policy, 2000).

OBJECTIVES

- ❖ To explore climate change awareness amongst coastal residents.
- ❖ To investigate the extent to which socio-demographic factors influence their perception.
- ❖ To ascertain the extent to which public education needs to be heightened and the interventions that need to be employed.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in March 2019 within a qualitative framework which included:

- ❖ **Semi-Structured Interviews:** The residents interviewed included fisherfolks and fish vendors.
- ❖ **Observation:** Physical effects of sea level rise and coastal erosion was captured by picture taking and detailed note taking.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing volume of research on the awareness of individuals of climate change. Howe, Leiserowitz, Markowitz, Lee & Ko (2015) found that climate change awareness and risk perception were unevenly distributed around the world in 2007–2008. The highest levels of awareness (over 90%) were reported in the developed world, including North America, Europe and Japan. By contrast, majorities in developing countries reported that they had never heard of climate change. In common with these findings, my research in Jamaica also found that the overwhelming majority of the residents who are most at risk are also largely unaware of the dimensions of climate change. Increasing the level of their awareness of climate change could promote the creation of a climate resilient society especially in the developing countries. The youths could be targeted, because they have the energy to lead towards such future. Wibby (2013) as cited in Barreda (2018), posits that their energy and technical knowledge could be incorporated in developing programmes geared at raising awareness and adopting environmentally friendly practices.

FINDINGS

❖ Climate change awareness among coastal residents

- Respondents are aware of the term climate change, but they do not know what it is. They are largely unaware of the causes and effects of climate change. Some of them knows nothing beyond the term 'climate change'.
- The residents are aware of sea level rise and its effects on the coast. They also noticed that temperature in the community is increasing and is receiving less rainfall in comparison to previous years.
- Respondents believed climate change is caused by nature taking its course or an "act of God". They are of the assumption that their actions do not change the climate.
- Most of the respondents stated that they will not migrate from the area, even in the event that it is at risk of being covered with water.

❖ Socio-demographic factor that influences residents' perception

- The highest level of educational attainment possessed by the respondents is secondary. Majority of the respondents have only completed the primary level of education and there are several others who have never gone to school.
- Education and climate change awareness are strongly linked.
- The educational background of the residents results in a low climate change literacy.

❖ The relevance of public education and interventions

- This research calls for public education on climate change.
- The respondents believed that they need to be more sensitized on the phenomenon of climate change.
- Respondents believed that being educated on the issue, they will be empowered with the knowledge to save their community from being destroyed.
- Residents believe that the government and the relevant environmental organizations are responsible for preparing the community for climate change.



CONCLUSION

- ❖ The study reveals that the residents of Alligator Pond do not know what climate change is nor the associated implications.
- ❖ The residents have noticed a significant rise in the sea level, less rainfall and an increase in the temperature over the past 10 years.
- ❖ The low educational background of the residents impacts their awareness and perception of climate change.
- ❖ There is a great need for climate change awareness programmes in the community.
- ❖ Residents are adamant that they will not migrate from the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ There needs to be education and training programmes to heighten climate change literacy amongst the residents.
- ❖ Ministry of education could tailor the National Standard Curriculum at the primary level, to have a section of the curriculum being designated to climate change awareness.
- ❖ More emphasis needs to be made to promote the educational development of youths in the community, such as the development of a skill training centre. This will diversify the economic activities being practiced in the community.

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