Climate Change and Health Inequalities, with Dr. Gueladio Cisse

[music] Anne Johnson: This is Global Environmental Health Chat, the podcast that explores environmental health issues that transcend national boundaries. I'm your host Anne Johnson, and this podcast is produced by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

Johnson: Our guest today is a man who has lived in more countries than most people have even traveled to. Born in Mauritania, West Africa, Dr. Guéladio Cissé has studied and worked in Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, and Europe [music]. He's currently living in Switzerland as a senior research coordinator in Ecosystem Health Sciences at the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. There, he conducts research at the intersection of water, health, and climate change in West African cities. We asked him how climate change might impact public health in Africa.

Cissé: My feeling is that the water related diseases, or the vector-born diseases, will be very much impacted in the coming years.

Johnson: Waterborne diseases include persistent problems like cholera and diarrheal diseases. Vector-borne diseases are those spread by animals such as mosquitoes, like malaria and dengue fever. Guéladio says these types of diseases are likely to get harder to control in Africa as the climate warms and weather patterns change. And he says facing these mounting challenges is especially difficult in Africa because so many people lack access to healthcare.

Cissé: the African region has the highest levels of domestic inequities in health standards, of all the world regions. Climate change will be exacerbating, even more, the inequalities if we don't do something about it. So, for me, waking the health professionals to the challenges that climate change is bringing to the public health is, for me, the first concern that I have.

Johnson: Despite the continent's enormous problems, he said some portion of Africa's public health professionals need to shift their gaze from today's challenges to the even more complex challenges of tomorrow. Issues of water and sanitation provide one example of how climate change could exacerbate current problems.

Cissé: If the climate change course is the trend that we see, some areas would have more drought coming in, and some areas are still reliying on wells, [and] they have sanitation coverage very low. So when you take the other extreme of climate change events like flooding, the first runoff of water will take all the waste into the street and this water will go into the wells.

Johnson: Increases in weather disasters like flooding could also put Africa's fragile public health infrastructure even more at risk.

Cissé: In some areas you have only two or three health care services for big areas, and then you could have something like a flood come in, destroying maybe the health center, or sometimes the disaster have broken some bridges or some areas and then people have no access. There are so many

consequences of the climate change events that would exacerbate the inequalities existing already and making them worst.

Johnson: He said public health disparities exist both within countries and between countries on a global scale. Climate change, and the disasters associated with it, won't affect all countries in the same way.

Cissé: There are some very interesting illustration of cases between the United States and Bangladesh, for instance, where the storm of the same power will destroy a lot of matter in the United States, but maybe not many casualties. The same power of storm coming in Bangladesh will kill thousands of hundreds of people because the vulnerabilities are not the same and the capacity is not the same. So then, the same extremities of climate change will then again exacerbate inequalities.

Johnson: That's why he urges public health researchers, leaders, and practitioners to take the long view and begin preparing regions like Africa to be more resilient in a changing climate. You can learn more about capacity building and public health around the globe at our website. I want to thank Dr. Guéladio Cissé for speaking with us about this important global issue.

Johnson: You've been listening to Global Environmental Health Chat, brought to you by the Global Environmental Health program of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Our website is niehs.nih.gov/podcasts.