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CLIMATE CHALLENGES: LET US ALL RETURN TO ALMA ATA

'Ekkub'omunaku telikya! And we would burst into laughter; we were young and the world was young too. Now I have grown up, the world has grown too, and I have come to understand and put in perspective this proverb from Buganda (the central part of Uganda). Directly translated, *'Ekkub'omunaku telikya!* means: when it starts raining on the poor man, it just will not stop. It gives an impression that the rain falling on the poor is harsher compared to that falling on the rich. When I was a child we used this for those times or days when everything just seemed to go unrelentingly wrong, and for some reason it was always hilarious, if it did not involve you. I have grown up and this no longer seems to apply to anything hilarious, it only seems to apply to hardships. The misfortunes befalling the world just don't seem to stop or come to an end – poverty, disease, war, crime, hunger and now climate change. Without climate change, the health of the disadvantaged was already a challenge and so 60 years ago the world put their hearts together at Alma Ata to find health for all by the year 2000. In that year 2000 the world renewed its efforts in New York at the dawn of the new millennium with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), aiming to eradicate extreme poverty and improve the health and welfare of the world's poorest people within 15 years. Funding, research, capacity building and a lot more are all being scaled up to meet these goals and make the world a better place. But the challenges do not stop coming in; just like the harsh rain that falls on the poor.

Just after we thought we had identified the main issues causing dire poverty and set goals and targets to get rid of them, climate change is here and with it comes a whole set of new problems threatening health and human security. Research into old and new interventions will be needed. Vulnerable populations are still in trouble and they present new challenges for researchers. With extreme weather and natural disasters like flooding, they will continue to be displaced from their homes and well-established population habitats. Displaced people are difficult to involve in research, even if that research will eventually help them. Such people are also prone to new problems during displacement, all of which complicates research. Researchers will be now faced with a resurgence of old diseases like cholera. These were problems that we were beginning to pop champagne about, but we will need to revisit them and pull out our old guns to take care of them. These old guns will have to be given a new polish with the new global trends in mind.

As we fret about old problems, new ones will be taking the scene as well. Because of the over-production of some species (harsh weather actually supports some species), and later, migration of these to more comfortable places, new and strange vectors will and have begun to appear in different places, bringing along disease. Research and finding solutions for these is not always easy. Some answers take decades and lots of input. In many of the disadvantaged areas, there is no structure

for surveillance and so diseases will be noticed only after they have already made a disastrous impact on the area and population. Rates of mortality will escalate. Even with surveillance systems present, they often require upgrading and the situation at times is overwhelming as experienced during the Asian tsunami. And because of harsh seasons that are not synchronized, the seasonal growth of plants commonly used as foods will be interrupted and these foods will no longer be available. This means more people will go hungry and the cost of food will be higher. This will make the entire cost of living higher too. Vulnerable as the disadvantaged populations already are, they will be plunged into further poverty having lost their social and economic livelihoods. This has severe implications for the fight we have already set for ourselves to eradicate poverty through our MDGs. We shall need to come up with more ideas to take care of populations that face these disasters and policy-makers are waiting on researchers for good evidence so they can develop urgent policy.

There are other issues that researchers still need to find answers to. What happens to the demography trends and the projections for different populations? Will these stand in the face of climate change or shall we need new facts and figures? So while we need answers to new problems, we need to revisit the old ones too.

We also need to find ways to halt further damage to the climate, especially with vulnerable people in mind. How do we deal with issues like the dumping of hazardous waste, industrial pollution, urban crowding and so on, especially in developing countries? Without intending to, developing countries have become and will continue to be havens of some of the factors that uncontrollably and unnecessarily assault the environment. How do we help them halt the dangerous and seemingly easy path they are already treading?

Climate change is the result of decades of assault on the environment, meaning that what we are experiencing now is due to what was done far back in time. That also means what we do now determines what will be experienced in decades to come. Until a few years ago, the hullabaloo about climate change was exactly that to me, hullabaloo. I did not think it was something I needed to worry about, let alone something I could do anything about. In fact it was all that complicated ozone layer stuff that somebody else was supposed to take care of. I later discovered that I could do something too depending on the car I chose to drive, how I responded to calls for tree planting, how I shared the information I had, and other actions. We need to know that we are all important when it comes to the environment. All our actions, small as they may seem, are a big part of the puzzle that eventually leads to or prevents further climate damage.

Everybody is and should be responsible for their environment. Everybody is a researcher in this effort, especially research for knowledge; knowledge is the power with which we can achieve more than we ever thought. Armed with our knowledge, the reality of working with limited resources will be one to contend with. It will call for prioritizing of resources – human, financial and material. Researchers, especially in the social sciences, will have to advise us on how to deal with the diversity in this global village. Solutions are not as straightforward as they used to be; mobility has led to diversity and to impacts on the environment. How do we deal with the ever-diversifying issues and not lose what we gain from them?

There is a lot of work to be done and how to divide up the roles is the challenge. It is not a time for pointing fingers and apportioning blame, but a time that calls for the Alma Ata spirit of unity in fighting a common enemy. The challenges are many, not only for researchers and vulnerable groups faced with increasing disadvantages, but for you and I. We shall all need to return to Alma Ata to take care of the environment and the challenges it is throwing at us – to stop the rain that will not stop tormenting the poor man.

Rhona Mijumbi completed Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degrees at Mbarara University, Uganda in 2002, before embarking on a one-year internship. She worked as a volunteer with the Department of Neurosurgery in Mulago National Referral Hospital, Uganda, then later as a medical officer and research assistant with the Pediatric Infectious Disease Institute, Uganda on HIV research. In 2006, Rhona joined Makerere University for a master's in Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics before receiving a scholarship from the Australian Government's overseas aid program (AUSAID) to pursue a Master's in International Public Health at the University of Queensland, Australia in January 2008. Her main interest is health policy and she is currently working on international health worker migration and introductions to medical geology.