

Millions at Risk

There is a fundamental injustice at the heart of the climate change problem. The first and worst impacts of climate change are being felt by the poor in the developing world. Drought in sub-Saharan Africa, floods in China and India, and a near tripling of people affected by extreme weather and other natural disasters globally in the last two decades, almost all in the developing world, affecting those who are most vulnerable and least able to cope. The responsibility for the problem, however, lies elsewhere, primarily in the rich countries of the OECD but increasingly with rapidly industrializing countries.

Defining the Risk

With each IPCC report since the first in 1990, the assessed scale of the risks has grown. The impact studies that went into the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Third Assessment Report¹ showed that hundreds of million of people are likely to be at grave risk in the future from climate change. An increasing numbers of people were projected to be at risk from water shortage, malaria, hunger and coastal flooding from climate change against various future scenarios for global temperature rise. By 2050 the numbers are shocking and by 2080, even more so. The Fourth Assessment Report will show different numbers and sometimes different issues but the picture remains similar: the hotter it gets the greater the risk

While varying estimates for the socio-economic baseline for development could change these numbers, three central messages emerge:

1. Unmitigated climate change will have absolutely unacceptable human costs;
2. There are enormous benefits to keeping global temperature rise well below 2° C; and
3. In the long term, an aggressive emissions reduction regime is necessary to keep climate change impacts within a range to which it is possible to adapt.

A substantial degree of 'dangerous climate change' is already with us, and more is unavoidable. The climate regime must seek both to minimize the damage and at the same time provide the means for adaptation to those most vulnerable.

Costs – Human and Economic

There has been much discussion in the climate debate about the relative merits and costs of mitigation vs. adaptation. Some large emitting countries have argued that the emission reductions dictated by the science for mitigating climate change are too expensive. However, the economic disruption associated with a major shift in global agriculture, droughts, floods, coastal flooding, forest fires and an increase in vector-borne diseases would be enormous especially when compounded by millions of refugees fleeing flooded coastal areas, abandoning lands that no longer will support them.

¹ Key findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Third Assessment Report were drawn together in "Millions at Risk" by Parry, M., et al, Global Environment Change 11:3(2001): 1-3; available on line at: <http://www.cru.uea.ac.uk/tiempo/floor0/archive/issue4445/t4445a7.htm>

The Stern Review², published in October 2006, estimates that if we don't act, the overall costs and risks of climate change will be equivalent to losing at least 5% of global GDP each year, now and forever. If a wider range of risks and impacts is taken into account, the estimates of damage could rise to 20% of GDP or more. In contrast, the costs of action – reducing greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the worst impacts of climate change – can be limited to around 1% of global GDP each year.

Adaptation is essential according to Stern and adaptation efforts, especially in developing countries, should be accelerated. Studies point to many adaptation options that will provide benefits in excess of cost but as temperatures rise the costs of adaptation will accelerate.

Sustainable Development?

While the international community is wrestling with its failure to date to make progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals, a new awareness is emerging that one of the greatest threats to sustainable development is climate change itself. Massive new funding is required to address the growing need for disaster preparedness and relief measures in the face of increasing climate change-induced disasters. A global assessment of the damages costs associated with adapting to climate change is needed with a renewed commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals as well as avoiding dangerous climate change. The two have become inseparable.

Climate change presents humankind with an unprecedented challenge. We need global cooperation in responding to a planetary-scale problem over many decades and ultimately over centuries, with actions predicated on our best understanding of their effects far into the future. At the same time the urgency for immediate action cannot be overstated. We need:

- a dramatic transformation of our energy system - a 'new energy revolution'³ to create a low carbon economy;
- massive expenditures to adapt to the changes to which we have already committed ourselves through the profligate spending of our 'carbon budget' over the past century and a half;
- to provide the means for those in the developing world most vulnerable to climate change - yet who are not responsible for the problem - to develop in a sustainable matter in a world subject to climate change, with an equitable sharing of the world's resources within our planet's means.

...and we need to do all these things at the same time.

Climate change is a threat to all of us, North and South. While the North bears the primary burden of historical responsibility, it is clear that an effective response in terms of both mitigation and adaptation requires a renewed commitment to sustainable development by all governments and sectors of society.

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² "Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change" available online at: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/independent_reviews_index.cfm

³ "energy (r)evolution: A Sustainable World Energy Outlook" by the European Renewable Energy Council and Greenpeace. Available online at: <http://www.energyblueprint.info/>