



5 Conclusion

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An opportunity for change

Kofi Annan spoke of the need for international solidarity for a just deal in Copenhagen. The necessity for such a deal is as unequivocal as the change in the global climate system itself. However, since we imply the restructuring of an entire global economy along a low-carbon path, we cannot avoid long-term timescales. Even an ambitious agreement will have trouble reducing the growth in greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change prior to 2020. That means the world must brace for more severe climate change and more severe impacts of that change. The international community is already struggling to deal with its vast humanitarian mandate just as the world's poorest groups are already struggling to survive. How can we bear more?

Climate change needs to be seen as an opportunity. The scale of the problem at hand, and the urgency with which we must tackle it, is precisely the opportunity to galvanize calls for reform and innovation. We need to question the capacity of the entire system with which we plan to respond to climate change, and the slow and abrupt disasters it causes.

Preparing for greater climate impacts

Given the staggering account laid out in this report, the desperate urgency of Copenhagen has never been more apparent.

Copenhagen is set to address the global situation post-2012. Before then, and after then, we are only predicting expansion of emissions, at least for a number of years. Copenhagen will have to enact a full circle change in the direction of human activities in a space of less than ten years, and bring human society to less than 20 percent of current emissions in less than forty years. An extremely ambitious project given the entire planet is involved, including all of the major economies of the world. If Copenhagen fails totally or is postponed, the level of ambition will only increase because we cannot push back the date for contracting emissions. Since a high ambition climate deal in Copenhagen is already going to be a major challenge, it is clear that Copenhagen could well be the last chance for avoiding global catastrophe. Yet the earth's atmosphere will increase in temperature to very close to two degrees regardless of how ambitious Copenhagen is. The impacts associated with 0.74 degrees of warming today — the widespread suffering accounted for in this report — would pale in comparison to the devastation of two degrees. No matter what, therefore, the suffering documented in this report is only the beginning.

It can be said that climate change is the antithesis of sustainable development. Sustainable development aims at increasing economic prosperity, safeguarding the environment and improving social equity. As it stands, climate change will impact heavily on the economy — the per year equivalent of the GDP of three quarters of the world's countries already today, according to this report — and is causing millions of people to enter poverty once more. It will cause massive degradation to the environment and human habitat worldwide, including glacial and ice-cap melting, desertification, coastal flooding and soil salination, in addition to much, much more.

Above all, climate change affects the world's poorest first and foremost. 99 percent of all casualties occur in developing countries. The billions already living on the edge of survival have nowhere to turn when climate change levels its additional burden. Social impacts are diffuse and diverse, people living on two meals a day may be forced to get by on one, basic nutrition or health care are neglected, children may be taken out of school, or women forced into prostitution. In sum, social inequities will become entrenched globally. So climate change undermines the key principles of sustainable development, constituting a serious threat to socio-economic progress worldwide.

Redefining sustainable development

Nevertheless, it is entirely possible to improve the ability of communities to cope with these changes, and take preventative measures that minimize if not avert disasters. The trouble is the scale and scope of the challenge, and the architecture and financial means available to the broader humanitarian community for addressing these concerns.

Since climate change will only intensify, it is imperative that the concept of sustainable development as we know it today is redefined. Resilience in the face of climate change must be added as an additional pillar to the concept of sustainable development. Development must not only be sustainable, but also climate-proof. That redefinition will not come for free. Substantial resources must be spent on adaptation to climate change. But these resources will safeguard past investments in development that have been sourced over decades mainly from public coffers. Much of this public money is at great risk today.

There are many reasons why a comprehensive report on the human impact of climate change is only available in mid-2009. Our lack of ability to understand and account for the risks mirrors our inability to analyze threats and map these same risks. Climate change is shifting the ground from underneath us. Farmers who once relied on traditional knowledge, handed down over generations, for choosing when to plant and when to harvest are now at the mercy of erratic rainfall patterns or dry spells. Floods follow droughts follow floods. And while climate change benefits from the world's largest scientific body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, our understanding of the impacts is still limited. Phenomenal gaps in research exist. Climate change was always considered a theoretical future problem, until now. In which directions will the deserts expand? At what point will sea-level rise cause salt to permeate the soil destroying its natural fertility? We cannot answer these questions, and yet we must if we are to plan ahead and minimize suffering.

So while this report is based on the best available scientific evidence, its estimative nature in a number of respects mean that it cannot possibly comply in all regards with the rigours of full-scale scientific enquiry. But we have to begin to piece together the information available to us into a plausible narrative of what is actually occurring. If we continue to ignore the trends, we will only find ourselves ill-prepared. That would be a terrible error in judgement, given that this report suggests that we are clearly dealing with the single greatest emerging humanitarian threat ever encountered.

Integrating humanitarian and development work

While this knowledge is the basis of all effective policies, that is only the beginning of the challenge. The policies themselves demand adequate financial means in order to be realized. That also requires the greatest urgency, given the half a billion people who live at extreme risk today – a number set to increase substantially in coming years.

Part of a redefinition of development must include an integration of development and humanitarian efforts. The humanitarians and the development actors must conduct risk analysis together. Prevention and preparedness needs to take into account the socio-economic, cultural and environmental parameters of each community affected. Both groups also need to undertake serious capacity-building within their institutions in order to ready for greater climate shocks, to better manage risks rather than continually operating in reaction mode, and to prepare for working together to tackle climate change. All actors must innovate and drive for effective solutions rather than administering concerns.

Investment in prevention is also critical no matter where the resources are drawn from. There is a complementarity between multi-lateral and bi-lateral approaches to aid work. Discussions about which is more effective will take us nowhere. Both will be needed, and the combination must be extremely well coordinated. We can better spend the over 100 billion dollars of Official Development Assistance (ODA), in ways that will minimize the 125 billion dollars of annual losses indicated by this report as a consequence of climate change.

Humanitarian actors have a great interest in preventative work since the alternative is an increasing number of humanitarian disasters. While development actors have an incentive to protect past efforts already damaged or at risk. Unfortunately, prevention continues to be difficult to sell. People continue only to react to disasters and lack the political foresight to invest in prevention. We can do better if we fuse the two systems of actors. Today there are separate institutional, budgetary and governance structures for development and humanitarian work. This hinders rapid-reaction and the evolution of priorities to overcome new, emerging and growing challenges. Integration would dramatically increase flexibility in facing increasingly complex and multiple stress situations that blur the boundaries between relief and development.

Beyond the Paris Declaration

All actors involved in efforts to improve the state of the world must endeavour to go beyond the 2005 Paris Declaration of Aid Effectiveness, towards a true integration of efforts. Again, multilateral and bilateral approaches are complementary and should not polarize. Otherwise the international community and local actors stand no chance in dealing with the additional burdens of climate change. And while adaptation can safeguard ODA, greatly minimizing the threat on investments, it should not be derived from ODA. ODA still falls far short of the 0.7 percent of GDP promise. Further reducing that margin by attributing a proportion of the money currently allocated towards adaptation would cause internationally recognized development goals to suffer another setback. Even as in some regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, we are clearly not meeting our targets, particularly for the Millennium Development Goals. The international community would simply be committing itself to not fulfilling long-standing promises once more. There has to be a substantial additionality of financial means for adaptation.

It is crucial that climate change adaptation also ranks in the first 3-5 priorities of National Poverty Reduction Strategies, so as to ensure adequate attention from donors. But the whole framework needs to be expanded for adaptation needs. Local development of Strategies and National Adaptation Programmes for Action requires additional funds, and should include full community participation.

Equitable climate policies

The poorest countries also require additional capacity in order to attract investment, public and private. Emissions transfer schemes, such as the Clean Development Mechanism, continue to benefit mainly emerging economies, where the need for new jobs, technology and investment is not as great. These schemes should not be linked to national economic interests, and corporate supply chains. Such linkages create effectively another form of tied aid. It has to be untied and remain untied with respect to economic and other interests. Copenhagen has a clear mandate to fill the shortfall in additional financing, providing for adaptation, including reliable assistance to those countries worst affected. In order to reorganize the global economy towards a low-carbon path, Copenhagen is likely to generate some sort of global pricing system on emissions. It must go for mechanisms and sanctions, including a globally accepted solution on taxing CO₂. It is imperative, however, that the effects of such a pricing system do not create yet another burden for the poor. What will effectively act as a global price on carbon, will also act as a regressive tax, similar to value-added taxes, since the additional costs of pollution will eventually be passed on to consumers. The increased costs will have the greatest effect on the world's poorest groups, where individuals will have to forgo a larger proportion of their income otherwise spend on basic nutrition and health needs. Any climate policy must also compensate for these effects through financial redistribution, or risk further exacerbating inequities yet again.

Multiple responses to climate and energy policies

Technology transfer for adaptation as well as clean development is also key. Energy poverty afflicts close to one third of the population of this planet, who benefit from no form of modern energy supply whatsoever — instead relying on the burning of soot and dung. This has huge ramifications for human health, triggering respiratory diseases over time, as well as carbon emissions. Providing decentralized renewable energy for the poor would be a revolution. It would lead to a rapid contribution to reducing emissions — up to 18 percent of warming being due to black carbon from soot. It would bring modern energy to places far beyond the existing grid and likely energize the Millennium Development Goals. The benefits would be of particular importance to women and children, who spend hours of their day gathering firewood, often at great risk, and inhaling hazardous smoke while cooking. It will also be necessary to revisit the research agenda to provide access to suitable technologies beyond wealthy countries. There is, for instance, no reason why research undertaken in developed countries using public money could not be made accessible to everyone.

Dealing with mass displacement of people

If we do not act, ultimately, people will either die or they will move. Millions of people are already on the move today because of climate change. What are termed here Climate Displaced People are often difficult to identify down to the individual. Climate change is a generalized phenomenon. It is rare that an impact, such as a storm or a flood, can be entirely blamed on climate change. Most low-elevation territory is reclaimed through a combination of sea-level rise and ordinary geological subsidence, although climate change greatly accelerates this process. So if a cyclone hits, it would be impossible to say if one particular individual is a climate displaced person or not. This report attributes 40 percent of extreme weather-related events to climate change, based on their steady increase over the last 30 years. That itself is an average, which would vary greatly from situation to situation, if applicable at all to that specific a level. But globally we can say with some degree of confidence that around 40 percent of those displaced because of extreme weather events are in fact Climate Displaced People. We count over 26 million Climate Displaced People today. That is likely to triple by the 2020s. It does not, however, include those economic migrants who might also be attributed to climate change, since varied climate shocks can and do act as drivers of such migration. There is little protection or assistance available under international law today for these vast numbers of people. In fact, the international community struggles with existing populations of Internally Displaced People and official Refugees. Protection for Climate Displaced People is particularly weak when the crossing of national borders is involved. They will also encounter legal lacunas, such as when a low-elevation state is entirely submerged by rising-seas. These shortcomings will soon become crippling for the international community, given the sheer numbers of people involved.

A strengthened global community

There is a particular need today for a new solidarity around the concept of climate justice. Every person on this planet has a number of reasons to call for climate justice. Action to tackle climate change and protect those people and communities most at risk is overdue — as told by the story of this silent crisis. Climate change should not be allowed to become another social ill we oblige ourselves to be accustomed to, if simply because it will intensify so quickly that the international community risks being completely unarmed and overwhelmed.

We cannot ignore the stark truth that the poor are suffering the brunt of a problem they have not caused. And we cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering we are accepting on behalf of our children and grandchildren if we do not act, — suffering we would not stand for ourselves. We must have a global deal that will prevent catastrophe, and protect lives and investments already at extreme risk. In the interim, however, climate change will intensify, and all efforts will be needed to prepare the broader humanitarian community for the more severe impacts of climate change that we no longer have the power to avert.

The Global Humanitarian Forum itself, who is at the origin of this report, strives to establish a stronger community of actors from across the global society. It aims, in particular, to bring together stakeholders from different sub-communities to better deal with key humanitarian concerns, including climate change.

The unique challenge of climate change requires a unique response which is itself an opportunity for integrating a fragmented international humanitarian and development system. That endeavour will should not only enable us to better combat climate change, but also to reap benefits that will ring true for wideranging humanitarian challenges of today and tomorrow.