

Millions At Risk – Dangerous to Whom?

There is a fundamental irony and injustice at the heart of the climate change problem. Today's growing body of evidence of climate change indicates very clearly that 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

Martin Parry, et al's paper "Millions at Risk"¹, which draws together key findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Third Assessment Report, throws these issues into stark relief. It plots the increasing numbers of people 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: additional tens of millions of people at risk of hunger and coastal flooding, additional hundreds of millions at risk of malaria, and 3 *billion* or more additional people at risk of water shortage.

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 cost of inaction is likely to be many times higher. While it is difficult to come up with precise predictions of the economic costs of a particular degree of climate change, the economic damages associated with the impacts outlined in the Parry, et. al., paper referenced above would run into the hundreds of billions per annum. 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. When compounded by millions of refugees fleeing flooded coastal areas, abandoning lands that no longer will support them, the costs may be incalculable.

¹ "Parry, M., et al "Millions At Risk", Global Environment Change 11:3(2001): 1-3; available on line at: <http://www.cru.uea.ac.uk/tiempo/floor0/archive/issue4445/t4445a7.htm>

Evidence as to the likely costs of adaptation to climate change is hinted at by the many billions of dollars already being spent by the governments of rich countries at present to adapt to climate change. A new report for Greenpeace by the New Economics Foundation, which will be released at COP 10, outlines current spending by rich countries in order to protect themselves against climate change. Contrast these billions with the USD 410 million per year pledged by some industrialized countries for both mitigation and adaptation in developing countries at COP 7², (which will supposedly become available in 2005) and the conceptual dysjunct and hypocrisy are clear. France alone is spending nearly twice that amount in response to the European heat wave in 2003...while OECD governments continue to subsidize the fossil fuel industry to the tune of around 73 billion USD/year.

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. In recognition of this, a broad cross-section of environment and development organizations joined forces in the UK to call for new models of development that will be both *climate-proof* and *climate friendly* and that address climate change adaptation issues in the context of development. *Up In Smoke*³ outlines the requirement for massive new funding to address the growing need for disaster preparedness and relief measures in the face of increasing climate change-induced disasters; calls for a global assessment of the damages costs associated with adapting to climate change; and seeks a renewed commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals as well as avoiding dangerous climate change, while acknowledging that 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 industrial revolution' 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.

² <http://unfccc.int> - document FCCC/CP/2001/MISC

³ See 'Up In Smoke' at: http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_PublicationDetail.aspx?pid=196