

Poor due to climate impacts

The threat of climate apartheid looms large over the world, says new UN Report

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UN special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Phillip Alston, recently released a [report](#) assessing the impact of climate change on human rights, especially the rights of people living in poverty, who are also the most vulnerable to climatic catastrophes. Poor people are most exposed to climate vulnerability because of where they live, their livelihood activities or lack of resources to cope with climatic shocks. It leaves people in destruction, with no access to clean water and food, no livelihood, and looming fear of death, affecting the most basic rights of a human being. Consequently, climate change is a human rights issue and not merely an ecological and economical one. This contribution stresses the vulnerability to climate shocks and extreme weather events of those living in poverty, and, in the light of the relationship between climate change and human rights, the responsibility of the states to take immediate corrective and preventive measures to ensure a healthy life for everyone.

The report says that although everyone is bound to face the impact of climate change, the worst effects will be borne by those living in poverty in developed and developing countries. The poor will have to face the exacerbating [malnutrition](#), diarrhoea and dehydration due to loss of global crop yield, which is expected to cause 250,000 additional deaths per year from 2030 to 2050. People in poverty also face a very real threat of [losing their homes](#), with the climate conditions potentially displacing 140 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America alone. The recent wildfires in [Paradise, California](#) forced 52,000 people to evacuate and burned through 150,000 acres in seventeen days. [Research](#) from prior disasters shows that the rich hit by the disasters migrate out of the area, while the poor are left, grappling to sustain themselves after losing their homes and livelihood.

The report further states that, without immediate action, 120 million people are likely to be pushed into poverty by 2030. Developing countries will bear an estimated 75-80% of the costs of climate change. According to the report, the goal of keeping global temperature below 1.5°C, which was decided upon in the [2015 Paris Agreement](#), is an “unrealistic, best case scenario”. Alston also observes that the lacklustre response from countries and human rights organizations in the face of the “[global climate emergency](#)” may lead to a situation of “climate apartheid”, where the rich buy their way out of the fire and famine of climate change while the poor are left to suffer. An example cited in the report does well to illustrate this: In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy hit New York, low income groups were stranded and New Yorkers were vulnerable without access to power and healthcare. The Goldman Sachs

headquarters, however, were protected by tens of thousands of its own sandbags and power from its generators.

Climate change and human rights

Alston, in the report, voices his concern over the treatment of climate change as an issue of marginal concern by the human rights community. It is undeniable that a clean, healthy and functional environment is integral to the enjoyment of human rights, such as the rights to life, health, food and an adequate standard of living. Climate change poses a serious threat to enjoyment and exercise of these fundamental human rights across the world. Although the UN Human Rights Council now recognizes that climate change can interfere with the realization of fundamental, internationally recognized human rights, this relationship was not an easy one to establish. In 2005, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (a group of individuals belonging to the Arctic region of USA and Canada), presented the first ever [petition](#) at the Inter American Commission on Human Rights seeking relief from violations caused due to global warming and its impact on the rights of indigenous peoples of the Arctic. In 2007, the [Male Declaration](#), the first international agreement to explicitly recognize that “climate change has clear and immediate implications for the full enjoyment of human rights”, was signed. These two events together sparked a searching international dialogue on climate change. Since then, UNHCR has issued five resolutions recognizing the linkages between climate change and human rights. Human rights have also been playing an increasingly dominant role in academic contributions to climate change, with [scholars](#) and [governments](#) highlighting the impact of climate change on human rights, along with suggesting sustainable methods of growth and global cooperation to secure the quality of life of global citizens.

Principle 1 of the 1972 Declaration [of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment](#) (the Stockholm Declaration) states that there is “a fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being”. In 2009, OHCHR also released a [report](#) highlighting the impact of climate change on human rights, and its effects which will “have implications for a varied range on human rights” namely, the right to life, right to health, right to adequate living standard, right to food, right to water and sanitation, and the right to property all over the world.

In 2018, the Netherlands became the first country to recognise the positive legal obligation of the state to prevent climate change in the case of [Urgenda Foundation v State of Netherlands](#). The Dutch Court of Appeals, agreeing with Urgenda’s contention that the state had a duty to impose further reductions on greenhouse gas emissions above the limits already established in Dutch climate policy, held that the state was breaching its duty of care by “failing to pursue a more ambitious reduction” of greenhouse gas emissions. The state was held to be in violation of [Articles 2 and 8 of the European Court of Human Rights](#) (the right to life and the right to respect for private and family life), explaining that these provisions impose a positive obligation on the state to protect its citizens from “all activities – public and non-public, which could endanger the rights protected in these articles.” This comes on the heels of the [sharp rise in the CO2 emissions](#) in 2018, touching an all-time high of 37.1 billion

tonnes, with contributions from all countries including China where emissions leaped up by 4.7%, in the US by 2.5% and in India by 6.3% in 2018. There is a need for states to understand the gravity of the climate crisis at an individual level. The world, at large, is at stake and all the states have a collective responsibility towards it. This is why, in this era of sheep mentality, where states continue to kick the can down the road and try to pass off the responsibility of reducing emissions to others, this decision of the Dutch Court of Appeals is a welcome step.

Present scenario

[Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration \(1992\)](#) emphatically states that in view of different contributions to global environment degradations, States have common but differentiated responsibilities, meaning that those who have contributed more to the devastation will have to take more preventive measures in the same proportion. The reality, however, could not be farther away. Greenhouse gases which are caused by “haves” hit the “have-nots” the hardest. [According to a 2015 report](#), the poorest half of the world (3.5 billion people) is responsible only for 10% of the carbon emissions, but still is the most vulnerable to the catastrophic storms, droughts, and various other severe weather shocks.

As per the [Kyoto Protocol](#), nations with high carbon emissions have a responsibility of reducing it, but instead of making emission reductions domestically, the low carbon emitting countries are given small monetary sums to cut their emissions instead. The resulting “carbon credits” are then counted as emissions cuts by the buyers. This phenomenon is known as “Carbon trading”, which, in turn, affects the indigenous and local population of the seller country. In Kenya, the Sengwer indigenous people were [violently evicted](#) from the Embobut forest due to pressures from voluntary international offset schemes that provide financial incentives for forest preservation.

Climate change exacerbates the scale of natural disasters and amplifies the risks of extreme weather disasters. Increase of air and water temperatures leads to rising sea levels, supercharged storms and higher wind speeds, more intense and prolonged droughts, heavier precipitation and flooding. Since June 2017, roughly [41 million people](#) have been affected by flooding. More than 150 million people are living on land that will be below sea level or regular flood levels by the end of the century. [Hurricane Irma, Hurricane Maria](#), deadly heat waves in [Europe](#) and elsewhere, and torrential raining and flooding in [India](#) and [Japan](#), are just a few of the devastating natural disasters the world has seen in the past few years, killing thousands and displacing millions of people. Water scarcity continues to be the biggest challenge for the poor, with more than 844 million people living without access to safe water.

[William Nordhaus](#), co-recipient of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Economics, advocates economic growth over working for climate change. His theory, however, has been widely criticized as it fails to bring human rights within its purview. The more serious concern it poses is its endorsement to keep warming the planet to about 3.5°C over preindustrial levels – vastly in excess of the 1.5°C threshold the IPCC insists on

– terming it to be “optimal” from the economic standpoint. According to [climate activists](#), his idea of growth over climate change has been conveniently ascribed to by policymakers around the world, giving them the leeway to overlook the present and grave climate problems in lieu of economic growth, which has prevented persuasive climate action.

Conclusion

Even with the Paris Agreement, the world is still headed towards a global temperature of 3.4°C. In times when the leaders of the free world are expounding ideas like “[climate is not changing, we are changing](#)” (Narendra Modi, Indian Prime Minister), and “[climate change is an expensive hoax](#)” (Donald Trump, US President), it is imperative that people are informed about climate change as a real and immediate problem that needs to be acted upon right now, if we are to even hope to avert the problems that haunt the mankind. Former Unilever boss, [Paul Polman](#), has called to address inequality and change, and find ways to more inclusive methods of doing business. The United Nations Development Programme espouses adaptive social protection approaches that help communities anticipate, absorb and adapt to climate risk to build the resilience of those most vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather events. It is now undeniable that the two defining social problems of today – wealth inequality and rising natural hazard damages – are inextricably linked, requiring new lines of research and policy making in the future. Climate change is, among other things, an unconscionable assault on the poor, and to tackle this we need to acknowledge the urgency of need for transformational change and revitalize social and economic rights.

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