

Looking at Climate in the Multilateral System through the Lens of Inequality and Humanitarian Crises

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In his address at the G20 summit, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of a climate “disaster.” Perhaps, with all the new [evidence](#) on climate change, the word disaster now seems appropriate. What was most attention grabbing was the secretary general’s diagnosis of why the world is here in the first place: “[dangerous levels of mistrust](#)” among the G20 bloc, and between high-, middle-, and low-income countries, including emerging economies. He urged for greater ambition and action, noting, “The most important objective of this G20 Summit must be to re-establish trust—by tackling the main sources of mistrust—rooted in injustices, inequalities, and geo-political divides.”

In recent years, CIC has focused on exactly these linkages—climate, inequality, and the loss of credibility in the multilateral system as promises of building back better rang hollow.

Climate and Inequality

One of the more prominent conversations happening around COP26 is the gap between those causing the dangerous uptick in harmful gases in the atmosphere, and those who are consequently suffering the effects, represents a injustice at the heart of the climate crisis. Marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples in Brazil are on the frontline of the disaster, even though they shoulder the least blame. It is not just happening in the poorest parts of the world such as countries from Bangladesh to Sudan, but also high-income countries such as the United States. This injustice has become a rallying call for action.

In unequal societies, most of the productive assets are owned by influential elite groups who can skew policies to their advantage, maintaining a status quo that benefits them; a pattern that also applies to climate issues. Take, for example, [research](#) from Greenpeace accusing the American oil and gas multinational company ExxonMobil of buying political influence in order to protect its interests. American billionaire Jeff Bezos may now be donating a modest share of his wealth to climate action, but his reluctance to pay taxes on his record-breaking levels of income and wealth means there is less money available for the government to address climate change. It took him a \$5.5 billion space visit to see “[the world so finite, so fragile](#)” to donate funds. Those on the shorelines of the Fiji Islands do not need to go to space for such insight.

Climate and Debt

Debt is another issue where we can see a connection with climate action. Our [analysis](#) found that over 100 countries, more than half of all nations, are teetering on the edge of fiscal consolidation. A complicated mix of debt—from IFIs, countries, as well as private creditors—entangled with increased public spending to abate the health and economic consequences of COVID-19, has taken a bad situation and made it much worse. As countries are faced with the need to make cuts, they will find themselves squeezed on even the basics on health and education, let alone new spending on climate adaptation and mitigation. How can a country like Ghana, now spending 37 percent of its national budget on debt interest payments every year, find the fiscal space for the necessary climate investments? A [new study](#) found lower income countries are, on average, spending five times more on paying back debt than they are on climate action. Even if rich nations deliver on the \$100 billion promised in climate finance, without debt relief it is easy to see how low- and middle-income countries will be unable to make ends meet.

What does a world look like where we do not tackle inequality alongside the climate crisis? Perhaps the [gilet jaunes](#) or yellow vests protests are a good reminder of why distributional consequences of policies need to be considered. Macron's green tax was met with severe backlash from working class and rural groups saying they could not afford the new green tax of diesel.

Whether exploring impacts, causes, or solutions, inequality is intrinsically linked to the climate crisis. One of the biggest mistakes we can make, both in terms of narrative and policy design, is separating the two.

Climate and Humanitarian Crises

The impacts of climate change are being felt most keenly in countries already locked in humanitarian crises. Between 1970 and 2019, more than 90 percent of deaths from [disasters](#) occurred in poor and fragile countries. Of the twenty countries most vulnerable to climatic shocks, most had an inter-agency humanitarian appeal in 2020. Not only do these countries have the fewest resources with which to cope with such shocks, they also bear the least responsibility for creating the crisis that now afflicts them disproportionately. According to one analysis, the twenty-seven most climate-vulnerable countries that are also humanitarian hotspots produce [less than 5 percent](#) of the level of greenhouse gas emissions released by the G7.

The upsurge of severe drought in crisis-affected countries and regions is perhaps the most harrowing example of this perverse climate-humanitarian link. In the [Lake Chad basin](#), which is warming 1.5 times faster than the global average, drought and resource depletion have locked nearly the entire population into a state of acute desperation. In the [Horn of Africa](#), consecutive seasons of drought, alongside conflict and political instability, are producing a hunger crisis of alarming proportions. The drought in Afghanistan, expected to last into 2022, is similarly devastating. Indeed it is helping to produce what the UN predicts will soon be [the world's worst humanitarian crisis](#); fully [95 percent](#) of Afghans are already without enough food. The situation in [Madagascar](#) is similarly catastrophic: one million people are at risk of starvation amid one of the worst droughts in the country's history.

Overall, as the World Food Programme recently warned, more than 40 million people across forty-three countries are currently on the brink of outright [famine](#), with drought among the leading drivers of this suffering.

In addition to hunger, the impact of the climate crisis on humanitarian hotspots is also leading to record levels of human displacement. It is no coincidence that four such hotspots—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ethiopia, and Sudan—are among the top five countries with the [highest number of persons displaced due to climatic shocks](#) (the fifth is India). Here too, drought is a leading cause: as land dries out and crops fail, people are increasingly being forced to abandon their homes, pastures, and farmlands in search of food and alternative means of survival. Yet in many hotspots, the problem is too much water, rather than too little. In Mozambique, [Tropical Cyclone Idai](#), and the floods it unleashed, displaced nearly 150,000 people, destroyed one million acres of farmland, and destroyed \$1 billion worth of property and infrastructure. Even more recently, in South Sudan, the [worst flooding in decades](#) has forced entire populations to flee in search of safety, shelter, and high ground. Similar tragedies are unfolding from Myanmar to Haiti; countries already experiencing humanitarian emergencies are seeing more frequent and more devastating typhoons, hurricanes, floods, and landslides, which are in turn producing unprecedented levels of human upheaval.

In fact, the climate crisis is now by far the main driver of internal displacement. Between September 2020 and February 2021, [10.3 million people were internally displaced by climatic shocks](#), compared to 2.3 million displaced by conflict. As the recently published [report](#) of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement notes, “disasters and the adverse effects of climate change are ... responsible for the majority of new internal displacements each year.” This is expected to increase meteorically in the next several decades. More than [1 billion people](#) may be forced to migrate by 2050, mostly due to climate change.

So where does all this leave us? Perhaps right back at where the secretary-general started—with the call of true multilateral leadership on these issues. The evidence is clear that climate change cannot be treated as separate from inequality, debt, and migration. If COP26 is to be the turning point for a world in “disaster,” it provides an opportunity to go beyond rhetoric of building back better and bridge the trust gap.

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