

Averting disaster

In recent times, Category 5 hurricanes in the Caribbean and in the American mainland; record floods across Bangladesh, India and Nepal; and drought emergencies in 20 countries in Africa have damaged these regions, killed hundreds, and ruined the lives of millions. For those countries that are least developed, the impact of disasters can strip away livelihoods; for developed and middle-income countries, the economic losses from infrastructure alone can be massive; for both, these events reiterate the need to act on a changing climate, the effects of which have been revelatory.

While 4.2 million people dying prematurely each year from ambient pollution gets relatively little media attention, the effect of heat-trapping greenhouse gases on extreme weather events is coming into sharper focus. It could not be otherwise when the impacts of these weather events are so profound. During the last two years, over 40 million people, mainly in countries which contribute least to global warming, have been forced from their homes by disasters. There is clear consensus: rising temperatures are increasing the amount of water vapour in the atmosphere, leading to more intense rainfall and flooding in some places, and drought in others. Some areas experience both. TOPEX/Poseidon, the first satellite to precisely measure rising sea levels, was launched 25 years ago. Those measurements have observed a global increase of 3.4 millimeters per year since then; that's a total of 85 millimeters over 25 years. Rising and warming seas are contributing to the intensity of tropical storms worldwide.

While the Paris Agreement has set the world on a long-term path towards a low-carbon future, it is a windy path that reflects pragmatism and realities in each individual country. Thus, while carbon emissions are expected to drop as countries meet their targets, the impacts of climate change may be felt for some time, leaving the world with little choice but to invest, simultaneously, in efforts to adapt to climate change and reduce disaster risk. This will require international cooperation. Restoring the ecological balance between emissions and the natural absorptive capacity of the planet is the long-term goal. It is critical to remember that the long-term reduction of emissions is the most important risk reduction tactic we have, and we must deliver on that ambition. The November UN Climate Conference in Bonn provides an opportunity to not only accelerate emission reductions but to also boost the work of ensuring that the management of climate risk is integrated into disaster risk management as a whole. Poverty, rapid urbanisation, poor land use, ecosystems decline and other risk factors will amplify the impacts of climate change. Today, on International Day for Disaster Reduction, we call for them to be addressed in a holistic way.

This article has been cut for length. Achim Steiner is Administrator of the UNDP; Patricia Espinosa is Executive Secretary of UN Climate Change; Robert Glasser is the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction

The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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