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Justice moves centre-stage in IPCC climate report

Latest IPCC report shows equity and justice are essential to successful climate action

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – the voice of scientific consensus on climate change - first reported in 1990. Every six or seven years since, it has produced an updated assessment of the science and impacts of climate change and advice on how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The [newly published report](#), on impacts by IPCC Working Group 2, has warned yet again of the enormous consequences for humans and wildlife alike from global warming. Yet again, it's stated that the most marginalised countries and people will be hit hardest, despite contributing least to the emissions that cause climate change. And yet again, it has warned that some impacts may be irreversible.



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While the volume on the warnings has ramped up, it's hard not to think of the publication of the report as a dystopian Groundhog Day. Scientists warn. Politician's nod, issue soundbites but maintain business as usual as though very little has changed

Perhaps the film [Don't Look Up](#) is more of a documentary than the work of fiction that we'd like to believe.

Is there anything new in the latest report?

Close observers of the evolution of IPCC reports will have noticed some significant changes, beyond the now deafening levels of alarm about actual and future impacts of climate breakdown.

Justice

For the first time, the scientists have been crystal clear that a justice-based response is needed. The IPCC says “better outcomes are obtained by choosing just ones” and that achieving adaptation goals requires “engaging with the concepts of equity, justice and effectiveness”.

For many of us the need for a justice-based response is a statement of the obvious. It's been central to Friends of the Earth's thinking since we were founded in 1971 and it's a core value for the organisation. But for the IPCC justice has been a difficult – because politicised - arena.

A potent example of this politicisation is demonstrated by the USA government. It has fought hard to avoid wording within the Summary for Policy Makers (SPM) that implied it needed to financially compensate poorer countries for the damage caused by the pollution it has released and continues to release, or to fund adaptation in poorer countries. The USA is by far the largest [historical polluter](#) (the UK comes in at 8th position).

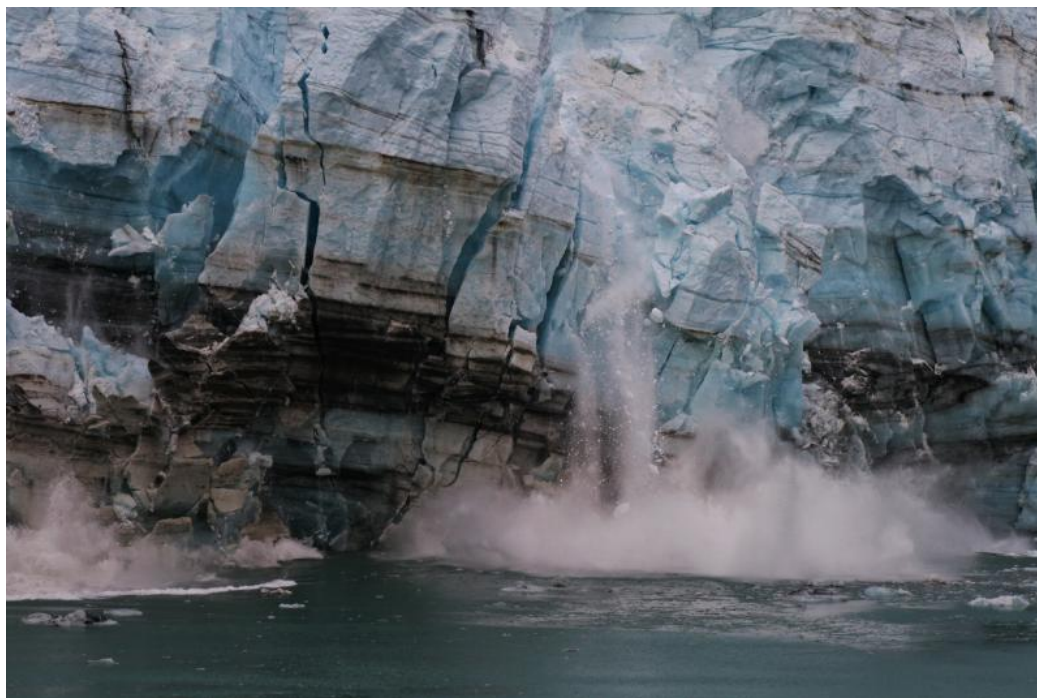
For too long the IPCC has steered clear of this debate. Even now it is not shouting it from the rooftops, despite the clear evidence for a justice-based response to climate breakdown. But the blame for inaction on justice lies not at the door of the timidity of the IPCC in confronting rich countries, but instead at the door of those countries which have grown rich through fossil-fuel based economies and refusal to accept responsibility for the harm this is causing to others.



Industrial pollution, smoking chimneys, ship loading in foreground Unsplash

Adaptation

For many years adaptation was a dirty word. Talking about adaptation was considered a weakening of resolve to cut emissions and as a dangerous signal to politicians that we can live with some climate change. But as IPCC scientists have increasingly warned of the devastating impacts at lower levels of global warming, the issue has moved more centre-stage, including in this latest IPCC report.



Ice melting from glacier with water pouring into the sea Unsplash

The report identifies that adaptation can be done well or badly. For example, it warns that tree planting on naturally un-forested land, or bioenergy, with or without carbon capture and storage, can harm biodiversity, water and food security, and harm livelihoods especially in parts of the world with insecure land tenure. It says that inclusive decision making with local communities and Indigenous Peoples is “integral to successful forest adaptation”.

But importantly the IPCC is also clear that there are limits to adaptation. We need to adapt to the warming we already have and the floods, droughts, storms and wildfires that are now commonplace. But we just won't be able to adapt if temperatures get much above 1.5 degrees and we will not be able to live in some parts of the world.



Dramatic photo of forest burning, flames in foreground, trees in silhouette in background iStock

The report tells us:

- Ecosystems already reaching or surpassing adaptation limits include some warm water coral reefs, some coastal wetlands, some rainforests, and some polar and mountain ecosystems .
- Climate change has caused substantial damage and increasingly irreversible losses in terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and open ocean marine ecosystems. The extent and magnitude of climate change impacts are larger than estimated in previous assessments.
- Climate change including increases in frequency and intensity of extremes have already reduced food and water security.

Is anyone listening?

It is undeniable that awareness of the risks of climate change is higher than ever before. It is also undeniable that some action is being taken to reduce or limit emissions. But the gap between what needs to happen and is happening is enormous and, if anything, growing. The IPCC has significantly upped the volume on its warnings within its report. For example, the scientists now say:

- Almost half of the world's population lives in areas that are highly vulnerable to climate change. A high proportion of species are also vulnerable to climate change.

- Projected climate change, combined with non-climatic drivers, will cause loss and degradation of much of the world's forests, coral reefs, and low-lying coastal wetlands.



Underwater shot of bleached coral reef iStock

- Risk of severe impacts increase with every additional increment of global warming beyond 1.5 degrees warming, including increased wildfires, mass mortality of trees, drying of peatlands, and thawing of permafrost, which will weaken natural carbon sinks and increase releases of greenhouse gases.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres called the IPCC report "an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership."



Closeup of Climate Justice Now hand-drawn placard being held above the heads of a demonstrating crowd Unsplash

Friends of the Earth will continue to campaign nationally and internationally for a justice-based response to the climate and ecological emergency. In the UK we secured the Climate Change Act and are now taking the government to court for failing to produce plans that are fit for purpose.

Locally our activists are pushing for more climate action by councils. Internationally we are fighting to secure a 'loss and damage' agreement that will get poorer countries the money they need to adapt and grow clean, green economies. We have achieved much since we started in 1971, but the IPCC report also tells us that there is still much we need to do.