

Environment & Energy

IPCC Report Shows Urgent Need for Two International Climate Policies

By Karen C. Sokol

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The Interdisciplinary Panel on Climate Change report released Aug. 9 declared that evidence is now unequivocal that human activity is driving global warming, and immediate steps must be taken to mitigate profound changes. Karen C. Sokol, professor at Loyola University New Orleans College of Law, says two essential international policies must be taken—ending fossil fuel production and providing communities with the resources to adapt.

Since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its massive report on Aug. 9, the report's "key takeaways" have been widely covered. One of the scientists who authored the report powerfully distilled its import down to one key takeaway.

"[W]e know enough," Dr. Joeri Rogelj of the Grantham Institute for Climate Change said. "Let's get on with working towards addressing this challenge that will define humanity over the next decades and centuries."

That is: Policymakers, you have the facts. Respond to the alarm. The IPCC report, which will inform the upcoming international climate negotiations in Glasgow, Scotland, highlights the urgent need for two key international policies.

End Production of Fossil Fuels

First, fossil fuel use is incompatible with a habitable planet. As U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres noted, "This report must sound a death knell for coal and fossil fuels, before they destroy our planet."

To end fossil fuel use, we must end fossil fuel production. That requires a change in the law's current demand-side approach by making supply-side measures the centerpiece of climate policy.

To achieve this on a global scale, scholars Peter Newell and Andrew Simms argued in a 2020 article for the establishment of a Fossil-Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty "to deal with emissions at [the] source." Such a treaty, modeled on the 1970 Treaty for the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, has since been endorsed by hundreds of civil society organizations as a necessary complement to the Paris Agreement, which codifies current international climate law.

The Paris Agreement obligates countries to make the emissions reductions necessary to limit global

temperature rise to 1.5 °C, but it doesn't specifically address fossil fuel production. The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty would add the supply-side measures necessary to shift the global economy away from fossil fuels by: (1) ending all new exploration and production (which, notably, the International Energy Agency recently called for), (2) phasing out existing production in line with the Paris temperature goal, and (3) ensuring a just transition to clean, renewable energy.

Provide Communities with Resources to Adapt

The second policy imperative is providing communities with resources to adapt to extreme weather events and other dangers fueled by the climate crisis and to repair the loss and damage they have already suffered.

In response to the report, Mohamed Nasheed, former president of the Maldives and an ambassador of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, an alliance of the 48 most climate-vulnerable nations in the world, said, "This report is devastating news for the most climate-vulnerable countries like the Maldives because it confirms we are on the edge of extinction. While the climate emergency is intensifying each day...the most climate-vulnerable nations in the world are on the frontlines. Our nations are already battered by storms, droughts and rising seas."

The Paris Agreement obligates the U.S. and other wealthy nations to provide funding to the Maldives and other countries of the Global South to adapt to climate dangers and recover from existing damage. Wealthy nations bear the most responsibility for the climate crisis, but they have so far failed to meet their funding obligations. The U.S., as the highest historical emitter, tops this ignominious list.

As Nasheed further noted, "We should never forget the fundamental injustice at the heart of the climate emergency: Our people are dying in vulnerable developing countries because of the fossil fuel burning for consumption and economic growth in rich countries. We are paying with our lives for the carbon someone else emitted."

Nations of the Global South

Paying this past-due debt is necessary not only as a moral matter, but also as a strategic one. Addressing a planetary emergency requires leaving no one behind, particularly those whom the climate crisis has driven to the edge of extinction. In their fight for survival, the most climate-vulnerable nations have long been advocating for the very collective climate action necessary to ensure that all people and the planet can thrive.

Importantly, it was the advocacy of climate-vulnerable nations that led the IPCC to publish its landmark 2018 special report that laid out the scientific basis for capping global temperature rise at the Paris goal of 1.5 °C. These nations have also consistently advanced the sort of supply-side measures that are necessary to achieve that critical goal.

This year's IPCC report makes clear that the scientific evidence of the catastrophic effects of exceeding 1.5 °C has only grown stronger. Indeed, if wealthy nations had heeded, as Secretary-General Guterres put it, the "deafening" "alarm bells" that the nations of the Global South have been sounding for decades, this

most recent IPCC report would be one of progress rather than urgency.

Responding to the alarm bells of the IPCC's latest report requires international climate policy that centers both supply-side measures designed to end fossil fuel production and the nations of the Global South that have long been fighting on the frontlines of the climate emergency as the climate leaders that they are.

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