VIEWPOINT

How Can We Overcome the Great Procrastination to Respond to the Climate Emergency?

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The climate emergency is undermining human rights progress globally, presenting humanity with a complex problem that demands a transformative approach to our fundamental existence, including what we eat, how we live, and how we travel and commute. Five years ago the editorial in this Journal's issue on Climate Justice and the Right to Health asked if our era will be viewed as the era of the "Great Procrastination" guilty of "Squandering time, dithering on action, and engaging in half-measures woefully incapable of addressing a threat that our best science warns will be more catastrophic and less reversible each year."

International cooperation to address climate change is centered around the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) and related processes, but in the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres the outcomes of the 2019 25th Conference of the Parties (COP25) to the FCCC were "disappointing". At COP25 state parties failed to advance on 2015 Paris Agreement commitments to act collectively to increase ambition on climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts and related financing mechanisms. Specifically they did not: agree the set of rules governing the new global carbon market (including the introduction of a human rights review), agree terms related to the level of ambition found in their emissions pledges or agree on steps to ensure that climate adaptation financing, including to the Green Climate Fund, is sufficient, predictable, and respected as a legal obligation. These failures have consequences for human rights, and in particular health-related rights of communities on the front line of climate change. How can the health and human rights community contribute to driving the global action and cooperation needed to address climate change and human rights?

Human rights and climate change

Mary Robinson characterizes climate change as, "the greatest threat to human rights in the 21st century" and getting global political leaders to stop talking and act effectively is clearly eluding humanity. The seven Climate Justice Principles developed by the Mary Robinson Foundation offer a rights-based path to engaging with climate change debate and decision making (Table 1).

This approach helps preempt human rights violations by demanding access to information related to the development of all climate-relevant policies and ensuring the engagement of diverse civil society groups in decision-making processes. It includes accountability and rule of law components which ensure access to justice and effective remedies for people whose rights are violated by climate change impacts.

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However, after 20 years of health and human rights advocacy, I question whether these and other human rights principles, are fit for addressing an emergency. How will these principles push the urgent, radical type of global cooperation needed to tackle the climate emergency? If, in the words of Greta Thunberg at the 2019 Davos Forum, "our house is on fire" what do we need to do differently? Wrestling with these questions has led me to identify key challenges with which health and human rights scholars and advocates must engage to be relevant in the Anthropocene Era.

Challenging the economic neutrality of human rights

Firstly we must interrogate the dominant capitalist economic model's role in driving climate change. We need to engage with the arguments advanced by Naomi Klein, among others, about neoliberalism and its promotion of rampant consumption that is hostile to health and the planet. International human rights principles purport to be neutral *vis a vis* economics. However, the role of international law and international human rights in legitimizing the current economic system needs greater exploration. If the current neoliberal capitalist system undermines rights and is a key driver of the climate emergency, human rights scholars need to analyze and advocate for innovative economic climate-friendly models, like the circular economy, that extend beyond focusing on short term profits.[1] Changes are also needed in the global trade regime which exacerbates global inequality, including health inequalities, and contributes to climate change.[2]

Remaining relevant and effective by engaging across disciplinary boundaries

Evidence has shown that development programs and policies are not co-terminus with advancing rights. Similarly, the risk that climate change action may undermine or compromise progress on human rights requires the focused attention of the health and human rights community. Important work is being done to integrate action on climate change and CO_2 emissions into sustainable development. For example, Jason Hickel's innovative work challenges us to assess "human development" by linking it with planetary boundaries. Hickel's Sustainable Development Index (SDI) employs five indicators (life expectancy, education, per capita income, material footprint, and CO_2 emissions) to challenge mainstream development assessments.[3] His SDI strips away high carbon consumption "CO_2 steroids" and excessive consumption, to question the conventional wisdom (including that applied to the Sustainable Development Goals) about which countries should serve as models for sustainable development. For example, the oft cited Scandinavian countries do not score highly on his model as they achieve their gains through Co_2 steroids. His analysis shares the same concerns about neoliberal economics and its impact on environmental and human rights. Roberto Bissio claims that Hickel's analysis does not yet account for governance, human rights, or inequalities, all of which are central to Climate Justice Principles. These principles are appealing because they build on a human rights edifice. Health and human rights scholars can contribute to these innovative analyses and actions through their interdisciplinary approaches to development challenges and paradigms.

TABLE 1. Climate Justice Principles

1. Respect and Protect Human Rights
2. Ensure that Decisions on Climate Change are Participatory, Transparent, and Accountable
3. Harness the Transformative Power of Education for Climate Stewardship
4. Highlight Gender Equality and Equity
5. Share Benefits and Burdens Equitably
6. Support the Right to Development
7. Use Effective Partnerships to Secure Climate Justice

Interrogating our tools and principles

Human rights activists have encountered implementation and accountability challenges for decades. Unfortunately, our solutions are often fragmentary and the goal of universalizing respect for rights remains elusive. We need to acknowledge that our traditional methods and tools may not be sufficiently robust or time sensitive to respond effectively to the climate emergency. Further, the evidence of human-driven devastation of other species and planetary biodiversity may require a fundamental re-examination of the basic tenets underpinning human rights—namely that humans deserve special rights merely because they are human. How do we align the demands of human rights with the rights of other species to exist? How do we make our tools sharper?

Collective action and cooperation

The climate emergency challenges us to redress past and ongoing injustices, including colonialism, that impact on the future of everyone. The effects of climate change are greatest in those parts of the world that contributed least to the problem and have limited capacity to mitigate the impact. Recognition of this imbalance is reflected in the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (CBDR) anchored in article 3.1 of the Framework Convention on Climate Change. This echoes the language of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which commits State Parties to take steps individually and through "international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical" to realize Covenant rights, including article 12, the right to the highest attainable state of physical and mental health.

In the health and human rights field we know that employing the principle of shared responsibility to expand access to anti-retrovirals (ARVs) and anti-malarials has enjoyed limited success. Long-term civil society efforts, mobilization, and dynamism has been crucial to achieve global access to medicines, and maintain the political will to comply with human rights obligations across all government departments. These ongoing challenges show how difficult it is to sustain attention and commitment to ensure human rights commitments are not overlooked when priorities are set. These experiences and insights should inform the strategies of those who advocate for, amongst others, the Green Climate Fund, which aims to mobilize funding at scale to invest in low-emission and climate-resilient development.

Conclusions

As health and human rights scholars, advocates, and activists, we need to push for transformative, progressive, rights-based engagement with the climate emergency. In parallel with these efforts we need stronger global cooperation and a profound interrogation of the neoliberal ideology that drives the culture of consumption and related economic policies. Growing economic inequality, mass migration, and the climate emergency can push humanity towards greater cooperation or dangerous nationalist policies such as those in countries as diverse as Brazil, the United States, the Philippines, India, Turkey, and Hungary. Clearly, we need to recommit ourselves to working with communities the world over to amplify the voice of those who are marginalized or ignored in decision-making processes that affect their lives or, in the case of small island developing states like Kiribati, their very existence. However, we also need to acknowledge the limitations of our tools and work across disciplinary borders to strengthen global cooperation. The current UN-based multilateral system has many flaws, but it is the only means we have found to bring countries together to address global problems. To remain relevant and influential the UN needs to engage broadly with youth, for the climate emergency is intimately intertwined with the rights of future generations.

When powerful countries, like the United States, actively resist engagement in multilateral efforts to address the climate emergency, while undermining international progress on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), health and human rights advocates must continue to call for

global action at every opportunity and engage with other disciplines to achieve the necessary rapid transformative actions. Continuing as we have done is not tenable. People in high carbon consumption countries need to reflect on the global consequences of development that have contributed to the human rights gains they enjoy. To deliver on health rights for all we need a radical rethink of the way we live and interact with the planet.

References

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