Intersection 1: Rights and Responsibilities Amid Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

The first decade of the 21st century has seen devastating cyclones, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and extreme temperatures. These natural phenomena continue to influence the lives of people around the world, not only through their immediate consequences for population morbidity and mortality, but even more so through displacement, disenfranchisement, and deprivation. The people who suffer most are often those who were most vulnerable to begin with, living in regions of the world with perilous human insecurity.[1]

At the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali in December 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared that the time for equivocation is over. "The science is clear; climate change is happening, the impact is real. The time to act is now," he said.[2] And yet, we have also seen questions raised about the reality of climate change, allowing reluctant states to renege on their commitment to intervene. The overwhelming consensus among climate scientists is that these doubts are unfounded. What is beyond dispute is that environmental change and degradation have a profound and adverse impact on human health. Temperature drifts change the demographic milieu of organisms with which human societies share their habitats, introducing new vector-borne illnesses into unimmunized populations.[3] The loss of biodiversity also destroys natural repositories of medicinal substances, limiting the frontiers of discovery in science and medicine. We are rapidly losing many diverse biomes such as rainforests, wetlands, and grasslands, which have intrinsic stabilization capacities and serve as buffers against climate change and environmental insults.[4]

Change is inevitable. Population growth and burgeoning industrialization in the Global South will continue to add to the atmospheric carbon burden and produce pollutants that threaten populations both near and far. The precarious conditions that exist now will only worsen.[5] Rapid urbanization and shrinking agrarian societies and limited arable land will gravely impact food security. While there is enough food to feed the world currently, a highly inefficient and failing food distribution system keeps millions in starvation. But moving forward, even food supply—distribution networks notwithstanding—will only keep up with population growth if we see serious transnational cooperation supporting advances in food technology and production.[6] In 2009, G8 leaders pledged more than $20 billion for agricultural development in the world's poorest countries.[7] The G20 quickly followed suit. But as of 2011 it has proven increasingly difficult to stop the U.S. Congress from cutting budgets previously committed to these programs.

The reluctance to act quickly and decisively to guarantee our food security can also be seen in our collective inability to agree on methods to mitigate and mediate environmental change. Despite some progress, current international frameworks have little provision for responsibility and accountability.

The politics are easily understood. While less than 20 nations account for approximately 75% of global emissions, no one nation accounts for greater than 25%.[8] Current international agreements for multilateral action against climate change do not include the US as a signatory (the Kyoto Protocol) and

lack meaningful consequences for noncompliance. Likewise, these conventions fail to provide emerging major emitters like China and India with meaningful targets and incentives to curb their carbon outputs.[9]

Questions of how to adequately track carbon emissions and the financial costs of doing so preclude consensus on monitoring. National sovereignty also remains a sensitive issue in the face of proposed international monitoring systems. Without strong multilateral cooperation and coordination, there are few incentives for states to break the status quo. The cost of emissions from any one country is distributed globally, and inadequate efforts by some states relative to others may therefore incentivize noncompliant states to exploit uneven emission controls to gain competitive advantage.[10]

Yet the sense of urgency to compromise and to act is dependent on a variety of factors, and there will be great differences between cities such as New York and Beijing relative to cities like Dhaka and Port-au-Prince. The inequity, of course, stems from the fact that the citizens of the first two cities have the resources to shield their peoples from environmental change. Those in the latter may not -- and it is this discrepancy on which we plan to focus.

We seek thoughtful discussion on the rights, roles, and responsibilities of the various actors at the forefront of the climate change debate: the vulnerable disenfranchised millions, the historical polluters, the emerging emitters, multilateral agencies, non-governmental organizations, and social media. We would like to initiate an exploration of current tools available to combat climate change: legal, technical and social; examine the greatest threats that climate change poses to human health and security; seek areas of high-impact intervention where the discourse of rights can be brought to bear upon those whose inaction would have devastating consequences on global food security and human health; and find ways to strengthen the legitimacy of mutual enforcement.

The right to health will increasingly depend on the right to a safe environment and a stable climate. History tells us that those who are most marginalized are most at risk. They will be expected to bear the greatest health consequences of dwindling resources, perilous migratory patterns, unsafe habitats, and emerging diseases. By invoking action in defense of human rights, we can foster a greater imperative for advocacy and establish a more effective fulcrum to empower global governance.

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