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UN climate change report warns of severe and irreversible effects

A binding, meaningful and enforceable framework is needed to limit the consequences of global warming

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by [Lauren Carasik](#) [@LCarasik](#)

A woman carries a decorated sign of Mother Earth along West 72nd Street during the People's Climate March in New York on Sept. 21. Mike Segar / iandov

On Nov. 2, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released [a landmark report](#) (PDF) on the effects of global warming. Its findings were emphatic, stark and categorical: Left unabated, climate change will increase “the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems.”

The report represents a distillation of the IPCC's assessments over the past 13 months and will serve as the blueprint for negotiations toward a global treaty at next year's U.N. Climate Change Conference in Paris. The IPCC notes that while no country will escape the deleterious effects of climate change, the risks “are generally greater for disadvantaged people and communities in countries at all levels of development” and that limiting the effects of climate change is critical to sustainable development and eliminating poverty.

The window to address the threats of climate change is rapidly closing. The fight to preserve the planet's health is intertwined with broader issues of social and economic justice and demands a unified global effort to confront it. A sustainable and vibrant movement is needed to upend the status quo on climate change. Such an effort must strike the right balance between conveying the exigency of the crisis, building coalitions among diverse and historically divided constituencies and demanding a reorientation of global priorities set by governments and corporations.

Urgent and growing threat

While critics refuse to accept the IPCC's conclusive scientific evidence, others have already suggested that the report was [too conservative and that it underestimated](#) the threats of global warming in order to achieve consensus among the IPCC's many constituencies. Many Americans, still loath to acknowledge the link between human activity and increasingly extreme weather, are among the skeptics. Denial of the causes and effects of climate change continues to impede the adoption of urgent and dramatic remedial measures necessary to avert an environmental and humanitarian catastrophe.

On Sept. 23, in remarks at the U.N. Climate Summit, President Barack Obama [highlighted](#), “the urgent and growing threat of a changing climate” as the most pressing challenge, which “will define the contours of this century more dramatically than any other” global crises confronting world leaders. He emphasized that the world's largest polluters — the United States and China — should take the lead in reducing emissions. He touted his administration's initiatives in reducing emissions and investments in clean energy, emphasizing no nation could take a pass on mitigating environmental harms. His comments came only days after the People's Climate March, the largest climate march in history, which drew more than 300,000 protesters in New York City alone, with parallel demonstrations around the globe. The IPCC report reinforces the urgency of the threat posed by climate change and urges the international community to embrace a combination of adaptation and mitigation strategies, including a dramatic reduction in greenhouse emissions, before the effects of climate change become irreversible.

However, U.S. leaders and the United Nations have thus far failed to muster the political will to surmount entrenched interests and undue corporate influence that are blocking meaningful progress at local, national and international levels. The IPCC offers clear and comprehensive scientific evidence to embolden the masses that turned out worldwide in September to continue pressuring global leaders to elevate the well-being of people over the profit-driven policies that are wreaking havoc on our planet.

The clarity and urgency of the IPCC report provides a platform for activists and civil society organizations to demand a unified, meaningful and enforceable climate change framework.

The IPCC findings are corroborated by other independent assessments. For example, last month the Department of Defense issued [a report](#) concluding that climate change poses an immediate threat to national security. Yet our spending priorities continue to be misplaced. Last year U.S. carbon emissions [rose by 2.9 percent](#), but the U.S. government spent [24 times as much](#) on the military than on combating climate change.

The economic costs of climate change are already staggering. Shaun Donovan, the new director of the U.S. Office of Management and the Budget said [climate denial would cost American taxpayers billions of dollars](#), noting that extreme weather events in 2011 and 2012 inflicted \$188 billion in damage.

Despite scientific evidence and eloquent admonitions, the Obama administration has been unable to derail corporate machinations to avert dramatic changes to our global energy policies. In September, even as the climate summit loomed, the White House [extended the comment period](#) for a signature component of Obama's climate change plan after intense pressure from Republicans and the coal industry.

Obama's commitment to ameliorating climate change is also undermined by the outsize role of climate change deniers and their deep pockets. Among their ranks are many politicians who are beholden to [large donors bent on thwarting progress](#), such as [Charles and David Koch](#) — the billionaire brothers behind Koch Industries and funders of conservative causes — and [dark money](#) funds that are spent on elections without disclosure of their sources. Meanwhile, the oil and gas industries have expended nearly [\\$103 million in lobbying](#) so far this year alone.

To effectively push for the dramatic reforms necessary to tackle climate change, the role of money in electoral politics must be addressed. In September, Senate Democrats voted to advance a constitutional amendment to overturn the [Supreme Court's Citizens United decision](#), which relaxed existing rules and restrictions on campaign donations. But the measure failed to garner the necessary votes to advance and received scant media attention.

Capitalism versus the climate

Reports of the climate peril we are facing are dire. Scientists have warned that if global warming continues at its current pace, the earth's environment [will not be able to sustain human civilization](#) by the end of the century. In April, [World Bank President Jim Yong Kim said](#) that climate change would engender social unrest and battles over food and water within the next five to 10 years.

Still, for many Americans, the fear about climate change has been eclipsed by more immediate concerns. A [recent Gallup poll](#) found that only 1 percent of Americans were concerned about the environment, with 41 percent citing more pressing economic concerns. Income inequality continues to grow, with nearly [45.3 million Americans living in poverty](#). A similar survey by [The New York Times/CBS News](#) confirmed the low ranking of environmental issues, even as more than half the 1,000 respondents polled believed global warming is caused by human actions. But the economy and the environment are not separate issues.

In her new book, "[This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate](#)," journalist Naomi Klein makes a clear link between climate change and the deregulated capitalism of the past three decades. Klein argues that economic hardship and climate change are the natural outgrowth of unfettered corporate power and suggests that nothing short of a radical paradigm shift can avert the crisis we now face. With lack of action from elected officials, such a shift requires mass mobilization premised on an understanding of our shared humanity and collective fate. And in a globalized economy, fostering solidarity across borders is

critical: We will all ultimately lose in a race to the bottom for cheap labor and lax environmental regulations.

There have been some positive signs lately. In September the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, founded and run by heirs to the Standard Oil fortune, announced plans to divest from fossil fuels. Stephen Heintz, the fund's manager, noted that divestment was both a [moral imperative and an economic opportunity](#). The fund joins 180 other institutions and 650 individuals collectively controlling \$50 billion in assets in the global Divest-Invest initiative. Similarly, on Sept. 22, [Google announced](#) plans to stop funding the conservative group the American Legislative Exchange Council because the group has been "literally lying" about climate change.

As the IPCC report notes, despite the grim outlook, scalable and affordable solutions are available if we can muster the political will to adopt them. The clarity and urgency of the report provides a platform for activists and civil society organizations to demand a unified, meaningful and enforceable climate change framework at the Paris conference and to insist that safeguarding the environment take primacy over corporate influence and profits.

As one climate marcher's sign pithily observed, "There is no planet B."

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.