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We need to plan a response to climate change impacts

By: Benito Müller

Benito Müller argues that attempts to reduce the contribution of human activity to climate-related impacts must now be backed up by measures that focus on responding to those impacts.

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Global climate change has become an unavoidable reality. There is thus an urgent need for a more balanced approach towards the phenomenon to meet its complex challenges, including the weather-related disasters that are already occurring in many parts of the world, ranging from tropical storms to severe drought. The past emphasis on preventing or reducing the human causes of climate-related impacts, primarily through mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, must be complemented by giving attention to measures needed to respond to such impacts.

Since the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, multilateral negotiations have almost exclusively been concerned with *reducing* future climate impacts. The focus for this has been on

mitigating their human cause, namely greenhouse gas emissions. Recently, there has been increased interest in so-called “adaptation” measures for this purpose, reflected in the creation of several funds encouraging these measures especially in developing countries, which are likely to bear the brunt of climate impacts. These adaptation measures are designed to encourage changes that reduce the vulnerability of people likely to be affected by climate impacts.

But viewing climate impacts in this way as a medium- to long-term problem that can still be sufficiently reduced – if not prevented – entirely overlooks the urgent need to prepare for climate-related impacts and disasters that are already with us.

A continuum of disaster management

From a disaster management perspective, the task we face is two-fold: first, to minimise or reduce the risk of disastrous impacts of climate change, and second, to ensure an adequate response, should they still happen. The international climate change negotiations are beginning to acknowledge that greenhouse gas mitigation alone may not be sufficient to guarantee the required *reduction* of adverse climate impacts. But they are extremely reluctant to face the possibility that we have already passed the point of no return in trying to do so.

For the next few decades at the very least, we are locked into an inescapable rise in global temperature. As a result, disastrous near-term climate impacts are very likely and, as long as there is a residual risk of disasters, appropriate impact *response* measures remain critical. An adequate climate impact regime must therefore ensure that such response measures are provided.

Fortunately there are signs that the international community may be moving in this direction. For example, at the Bonn session in 2001 the Conference of the UNFCCC Parties (COP) agreed to consider "the implementation of insurance-related actions to meet the specific needs and concerns of developing country parties arising from the adverse effects of climate change". [1] The inclusion of

such insurance issues in the UNFCCC agenda means that the Parties to the climate convention are at least willing to consider some impact response measures under it.

Three components of disaster response:

- *Relief*: assistance and/or intervention during or after disasters to meet life preservation and basic subsistence needs
- *Rehabilitation*: operations and decisions taken after a disaster to restore a community to its former living conditions, while facilitating the necessary adjustments to the changes caused by the disaster.
- *Reconstruction (recovery)*: actions taken to re-establish a community after a period of rehabilitation following a disaster

This is no doubt a welcome development. But it will need to be taken further, in order to integrate systematically the three branches of disaster response: relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction (see box). It stands to reason that this can ultimately only be achieved through a new instrument under the UNFCCC, such as the “Adaptation Protocol” first tabled by the Indian government at the 2002 Delhi COP.

A first step: creating a Climate Impact Relief Fund

Although rehabilitation and reconstruction are undeniably key to disaster/impact response, they benefit only those who survive. This is why the first component – humanitarian relief – must not be neglected in this context. One way in which this initial component of impact response could be addressed is through the creation of a new fund covering the costs of international relief efforts for climate-related impacts and disasters.

The concept of such a Climate Impact Relief Fund (CIRF) is not new, but represents a reform of existing disaster relief funding mechanisms – as currently coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – by essentially shifting to a system of advance (‘up-front’) contributions, as opposed to retrospective (‘ex-post’) donations. Such a fund could be replenished annually through contributions from the industrialised countries that

have signed the UNFCCC, perhaps proportional to their differentiated responsibilities and/or their ability to pay. It could be administered by OCHA in collaboration with international aid agencies, under the guidance of the COP and the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, as key representative of the UN disaster management system.

These reforms could be carried out with only marginal additional costs – but considerable benefits – to the international community. This is largely because they aim to make existing spending more effective, rather than seek 'new money'. And there are important additional benefits, including the involvement of key players in the disaster response community at the heart of the UNFCCC process, such as the International Red Cross Movement, which has already acknowledged the importance of climate change for its future planning. Advance availability of these relief funds would also permit the systematic funding of a number of disaster and impact preparedness measures that are known to be very effective in reducing relief costs.

Establishing a CIRF, on its own, cannot solve the problem of unavoidable adverse climate impacts. But it could serve as the starting point for a legal instrument that would deal with the previously neglected issue of climate impact response, as part of a genuinely balanced international climate change regime.

References

[1] Annex to Decision 5/CP.6: The Bonn Agreements on the implementation of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action; FCCC/CP/2001/5/, p 40.
<http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/cop6secpart/05.pdf>

Further reading by the author, all available at *www.OxfordClimatePolicy.org*

An FCCC Impact Response Instrument as part of a Balanced Global Climate Change Regime (2002)

Equity in Climate Change: The Great Divide, Oxford: OIES (2002)

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