

End of the World Isn't Nigh



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Peddling paranoia creates sensationalism. It gives both researchers and media subtle incentives to make their work reach the 'intended' audience. However, one must remember that extravagant claims or distorted scientific findings are like a double-edged sword. They can instil hope. But, at the same time, they can contribute towards unwarranted fear. The unwarranted fear, in some cases, nudges states to take action that may not be always prudent.

'Heat-related deaths in India are up 55% because of climate change' was a headline reported by various media outlets last week. While this was a faithful restatement of the '2022 Report of the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change' (bit.ly/3fyzkaA), this claim is simply not true.

Good COP, Bad COP

Setting the record straight is of importance. This claim is just one among many being peddled at present, in the lead-up to the next global 'COP' (Conference of the Parties) climate conference organised by the United Nations, in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. A plethora of articles and studies is being produced to tell us of the lamentable consequences of climate change.

The authors of the Lancet report

are pushing India and other countries towards adopting astonishingly costly policies. One estimate from McKinsey finds that the cost for India for a net-zero climate policy would be some ₹20 lakh crore. This would be more than two-thirds of the total Indian tax revenue, or twice the total government spend on education in India. In public policy, spending needs to be prioritised, especially by least developed countries (LDCs) and the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

Thus, for governments to be able to spend resources sensibly, we need a solid, sound knowledge base. Which means that scientific reporting must be impeccable and impartial, presenting the evidence even-handedly and with care. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. Too many reports today use highly selected statistics, reading more like environmental NGO campaign pamphlets than serious scientific evidence.

The report that the many media outlets published, including the prestigious and typically sound medical journal Lancet, tells us that heat deaths among people aged 65 and above are dramatically increasing 'because of the rapidly increasing temperatures'. The report shows that for India, the number of heat deaths among older people has increased by 55% from 2000-04 to 2017-21. This, indeed, sounds ominous. If older people were, in fact, dying much more because of just 17 years of global warming, it would follow that India and other countries should consider spending untold crores on even marginally effective climate policies.

Along with other media outlets around the world, Indian ones, too, faithfully reported that the high tempera-



Reading statistics correctly is vital

tures are killing more Indians. Even the UN secretary general António Guterres was taken in, saying in response to the report that 'the climate crisis is killing us'.

The Heat is on Untruths

The report finds that in the early part of this century, 20,000 older people died each year from heat, while now it finds that about 31,000 people die every year. This translates into a 55% increase. These figures are accurate. But presenting this shift as a result of 'rapidly increasing temperatures' commits an amateur statistical fallacy. The report left out the inconvenient and incredibly important truth that the number of old people in India has *also* increased. As there are more old people, even a stable risk of heat death would result in more overall deaths.

For India, the story is even more absurd, because the number of people 65 years and older has increased *much more* than the number of heat deaths. While the Lancet report finds heat deaths have increased 55%, India's 65-plus population has, over the same time, increased from 5.1 crore to

almost 9 crore, an increase of 76%. When we correct for the growth of the older population, heat deaths for India have actually *declined* from 39.5 per lakh to 34.8 per lakh, a reduction of 12%.

Choosing to not correct for an increasing population is simply irresponsible scaremongering. It is clear that the scary but deceptive message, which formed the headlines in media stories, sends a very different message from the correct information.

Disturbingly, this is not the first time that reputed scientific journals have made this error: One year ago, Lancet committed the same mistake, causing one of us (Lomborg) to send a detailed letter explaining this amateurish mistake. Moreover, the Lancet report's insistence on focusing on relatively few heat deaths actually takes away from the much larger problem, both globally but also here in India — of cold deaths. A July 2021 study published in the Lancet Planetary Health (bit.ly/3zIKHDX) shows that cold deaths globally outweigh heat deaths 9 to 1. India shows a similar tendency. Policymakers in India and elsewhere should be focused on ensuring access to cheap and reliable energy for people to handle low temperatures.

Readers can rest assured that the elderly of India are not dying in vastly increased numbers as a result of rising temperatures. A crucial role of journalism is to sieve through competing claims and arguments, to identify the facts. This is made incredibly difficult when the likes of the Lancet appear to prioritise activism over getting the facts right. Reminds you of Vitalstatistix and his fear of the sky falling down on his head tomorrow.

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