

Headline: Big polluters, pay up

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JAKARTA—Earlier this year in Burma (Myanmar), torrential rain caused mudslides that wiped out hundreds of houses and caused large-scale crop destruction. More than 1.3 million people were affected, and over 100 died. In Vietnam, the same deluges caused toxic slurry pits from coal mines to overflow and run through villages, and into the World Heritage-listed Ha Long Bay; the death toll was 17. As such weather events become increasingly frequent and intense, the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change is becoming more urgent than ever.

And make no mistake: These events are, at least partly, the result of climate change. As the climate scientist Kevin Trenberth of the US National Center for Atmospheric Research points out, nowadays, “[a]ll weather events are affected by climate change, because the environment in which they occur is warmer and moister than it used to be.”

International climate negotiators recognize this, to some extent. The effects faced by the people of Burma and Vietnam are considered unavoidable costs of failing to adapt to climate change, which officials classify as “loss and damage.” But such language fails to capture the full scale of the consequences—especially their impact on human lives. The people who died in Burma and Vietnam are not just “unavoidable costs,” and their loved ones cannot simply “adapt” to losing them.

This kind of bloodless rhetoric reflects the inadequacy of the responses to climate change that international negotiations have so far produced. In fact, if the industrialized world had done what was needed to stop climate change, as promised a generation ago, Burma and Vietnam most likely would have been spared their recent “loss and damage.”

The so-called advanced economies’ failure to fulfill their commitments means that Burma and Vietnam are hardly the most vulnerable developing countries today. The tiny island-states of the Pacific, for example, have been unable to erect adequate defenses against the “king tides” that are encroaching on their land and causing the freshwater “lenses” beneath their atolls to become brackish. Their populations—among the world’s poorest people—are paying for climate change with their lives and livelihoods. And without the resources to adapt, they will continue to suffer.

But it gets even more perverse. Those behind the problem—the world’s biggest polluters—continue to reap billions in profits, while receiving huge energy subsidies from governments (projected to reach \$5.3 trillion in 2015, or about \$10 million per minute).

So who are these polluters? According to a 2013 study by the scientist Rick Heede, nearly two-thirds of carbon dioxide emitted since the 1750s can be traced to just 90 of the largest fossil-fuel- and cement-producing entities, most of which still operate. Fifty are investor-owned companies, including ChevronTexaco, ExxonMobil, Shell, BP and Peabody Energy; 31 are state-owned companies, such as Saudi Aramco and Norway’s Statoil; and nine are states like Saudi Arabia and China.

Recognizing the blatant injustice—not to mention the destructiveness—of this state of affairs, a new initiative, launched by the Carbon Levy Project and supported by a growing number of individuals and organizations, has emerged to demand compensation for vulnerable developing countries from

the big polluters. Specifically, the Carbon Levy Project proposes a tax at the point of extraction for fossil fuels.

Such a tax is consistent with international law, including the “polluter pays” principle, and would provide a new and predictable source of finance—amounting to billions of dollars—for the communities that need it most, without letting governments off the hook for providing public sources of finance. And, by raising the cost of extracting fossil fuels, it would contribute to the eventual phaseout of a sector that has no place in a climate-safe world.

Fortunately, the world will not have to wait for moral suasion to carry the day. Fossil-fuel companies and governments are already facing intensifying legal pressure. Typhoon survivors in the Philippines delivered a complaint to the country’s Commission on Human Rights, calling for an investigation into big fossil-fuel companies’ responsibility for causing climate change. The Dutch group Urgenda and nearly 900 plaintiffs successfully sued the Dutch government, forcing it to adopt more stringent climate policies. A Peruvian farmer now intends to sue the German coal company RWE to cover the costs of protecting his home, which lies in the flood path of a glacial lake. And the signatories of the Peoples’ Declaration for Climate Justice from Pacific Island countries are committed to bringing a case against big polluters for activities resulting in the destruction of their homes.

If no action is taken, such lawsuits will only become more frequent and difficult to defeat. Big Oil, Big Gas, and Big Coal need to accept responsibility for climate change and start making real contributions to adaptation, or prepare to battle for their own survival—a battle that, in the long term, they simply cannot win. Project Syndicate

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