

Headline: Accountability for climate catastrophes

Byline: Vinod Thomas

Published Date: 05:04 AM October 28, 2021

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4880

Content:

SINGAPORE — Scientific evidence can now link specific weather disasters to human-induced climate change. This connection should finally dispel the misconception that nature's wrath alone is to blame for these disasters, and make it possible to hold industries and governments that are hooked on fossil fuels accountable for their actions.

Climate data clearly show that high-carbon energy is responsible for the atmospheric shifts that cause more extreme floods, droughts, and wildfires. But much of the global public has yet to connect these disasters to climate change, much less recognize the role of big polluters in causing them. Media reporting on disasters also does not highlight the strong connection between these events and global warming. For example, an analysis by the news-monitoring organization Media Matters revealed that cable news in the United States largely ignored the role of climate change when covering last year's wildfires along the West Coast.

Scientific research directly linking smoking to cancer played a major role in changing public opinion about tobacco use. Something similar must happen to encourage meaningful action to combat climate change.

The growing body of evidence making the connection between global warming and natural disasters is becoming harder to ignore. According to the World Weather Attribution initiative, a global collaboration of climate scientists, climate change made this summer's floods in Belgium and Germany significantly more likely to occur. The initiative also determined that the heat waves in the Pacific Northwest and Siberia would have been "almost impossible" without human-caused climate change.

Like the tobacco companies that sought to hide the data connecting tobacco use and cancer, big polluters are doing their best to inject doubt into the science on global warming. The oil industry has known about its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions since the 1970s, but has downplayed the repercussions. Major oil companies have spent millions of dollars in the European Union and the US to mislead the public about the climate impact of burning fossil fuels. Meanwhile, the global incidence of climate-related disasters has risen sharply since the 1970s. There has not been a similar increase in natural disasters that are not influenced by climate change, like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Many governments contribute to the problem through politically popular fossil fuel subsidies, which the International Monetary Fund estimates amount to \$5 trillion per year. In 2019 and 2020, governments spent 20 percent more on financing fossil fuel projects than they did on reducing emissions. China is the largest public financier of coal-fired power plants globally, and Japan and the US are close behind. In 2020, the nine major multilateral development banks, including the World Bank and the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, together provided \$3 billion for fossil fuel projects.

This financing continues even though the danger global warming poses to the environment and the economy has been recognized for decades. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and former US Vice President Al Gore won the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to raise awareness about "man-made climate change." And economist William D. Nordhaus won a Nobel Prize in 2018 for "integrating climate change into long-run macroeconomic analysis." But that work

seriously understated the need for climate action, because it did not recognize exponential damages, tipping points, and the irreversibility of certain losses.

Overall, mainstream economics has not factored in the daunting challenge posed by climate change. The discipline's leading scholarly journals rarely publish research on environmental and climate constraints on economic growth and well-being. A 2019 review found that the Quarterly Journal of Economics had not published any articles on climate change, and the quantitative journal Econometrica had published only two. Economists either have been largely silent on the issue or have applauded growth even when it is based on burning fossil fuels.

Climate scientists have done their part to sound the alarm about global warming, but we have yet to see sufficient action to address the issue. The evidence connecting climate change to weather disasters creates an opening to engage the public, demand accountability from industries and governments, and take decisive steps toward mitigation.

\* \* \*

Vinod Thomas is a former senior vice president at the World Bank and former director-general at the Asian Development Bank. He is a visiting professor at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.