

Headline: Children at risk

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"We're the most clever of species," biologist Jane Goodall wrote. "How is it we destroy the only planet we have?"

That remark resonates in World Bank's new report: "Turn Down The Heat." Current efforts to tamp down global warming below a 2-degrees-Celsius increase are faltering, it says. A 4-degrees-Celsius hotter world will wreak havoc everywhere.

"The question about climate change is no longer whether it's real," WB president Jim Yong Kim says. "(It) is what the world is going to look like for our children. I have a three-year-old son. And when he is my age, he could be living in a world completely different from ours."

The journal Science this November carried a National Center for Atmospheric Research analysis of 10 years' humidity. "The most closely matched measurements predicted the most extreme global warming," it reported.

"Greenhouse gases reached a record high in 2011," World Meteorological Organization reports. These "caused a 30-percent increase of warming effect between 1990 and 2011."

On Monday, the UN Climate Change Conference started in Doha, Qatar. Negotiators are cobbling a global deal on climate by 2015. "But the gulf between ambition and reality" threatens to become even wider, cautioned Unep (UN Environmental Programme) executive director Achim Steiner.

"Greenhouse gases are 14 percent above where they need to be in 2020 for temperature rises this century to remain below 2° C," says the "Emissions Gap Report 2012" at Doha. Compiled by 55 scientists from 20 countries, it cautions: Even if the most ambitious pledges to trim emissions are honored, the gap will widen. Total greenhouse gas emissions in last year's fissure equaled that of the world's entire industrial sector today.

Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research prepared the technical study for World Bank. "Sea levels rises by 0.5 to 1 meter by 2100 is likely," it says. Some of the most highly vulnerable cities are in the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mexico and Venezuela.

"The most vulnerable regions cluster in the tropics, sub-tropics and towards the poles, where multiple impacts are likely to come together," the WB report says. ("In a far warmer world, fish sizes could shrink by almost a quarter," University of British Columbia's Walter Cheung fears.) Agriculture, water, human health, biodiversity and ecosystem services will be severely impacted. This could displace populations, with adverse consequences for human security and economies, the report projects.

"Many small islands may not be able to sustain their populations. Some could be swamped. For small island-developing states, a four degree world is simply unthinkable," said Tillman Thomas, prime minister of Grenada, who cochairs the Global Islands Alliance.

When warming levels reach 1.4 degrees Celsius in 2030s, coral reefs may stop growing, the report warns. Oceans will turn even more acidic as a result of higher CO2 concentrations. At 2.4 degrees Celsius, coral reefs, in several areas, may start to disintegrate. These would have an impact on food supplies, tourism and shoreline protection. (Only 4 percent of Philippine corals remain in pristine condition.)

When superheat waves occur, forests shrink, taking wildlife along with them. Salt will seep into coastal aquifers, as inland water tables slump. In Cebu, salt has irreversibly contaminated aquifers up to the edge of city mountain barangays.

Agriculture would reel from prolonged droughts. Extreme heat stress would be whiplashed by torrential rain, straining food production. That would lead to higher malnutrition rates. "[E]ach 'growing degree day' spent at a temperature of 30 degrees decreases yields by 1 percent under drought-free rain-fed conditions," a study cited by "Turn Down The Heat" warns.

In its new Climate Change Vulnerability Index, Maplecroft pegs the Philippines in 10th slot, Bangladesh (second), Vietnam (23rd), Indonesia (27th) and India (28th). The need to adapt to climate change will increase as global population surges to 9 billion in 2050.

"If we venture far beyond the 2 degrees celsius guardrail, towards the 4 degree line, the risk of crossing tipping points rises sharply," cautions Postdam Institute's director John Schellnhuber. "The only way to avoid this is to break the business-as-usual pattern of production and consumption."

In its report to the Doha conference, Unep highlights examples of relatively inexpensive ways to curbing emissions: higher performance standards for vehicles and appliances. Singapore mandates, for example, low water use in showers and loos, plus higher tariffs to curb water use. Economic incentives to reduce deforestation can be useful.

"If we want politicians to endorse these policies, they must be able to sell them on the basis of benefits they create for their people, not just for the planet," cautions Unep lead author, Dr. Monica Araya.

A 4-degrees-Celsius world is not inevitable, World Bank's Kim says. Countries can shift towards "a new path of climate-smart development and shared prosperity. But time is very short."

There are doors open to a very low-carbon world: That would include, among others, inclusive green growth, factoring in the value of environment into economic decisions to increasing share of renewable power.

"Can we create an enormous market for new technologies focused on mitigation of climate change?... We simply must. Our children's future depends on us taking action." Kim is talking about our grandchildren too.

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