

Editorial: The Great Procrastination

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We wonder, given the evidence underlying the mounting climate crisis, if future generations will regard ours—amongst the epochs of history—as “The Great Procrastination.” Squandering time, dithering on action, and engaging in half-measures woefully incapable of addressing a threat that our best science warns will be more catastrophic and less reversible each year.

The health effects of anthropogenic climate change are increasingly apparent and accelerating at an ominous pace. Global warming will now continue under all future scenarios, and immediate action can only slow, not reverse, the rate of warming. Our risk assessment has yet to translate into meaningful mitigation and, even with this knowledge, major industrial nations are continuing to invest significantly in new carbon-based energy technologies.

This issue of the *Health and Human Rights Journal* explores a range of threats to human health from climate change, and examines these dangers as issues of human rights. Immediate morbidity and mortality impacts from extreme weather events and sea level rise are known and visible; less obvious and more insidious are health threats arising from the ongoing displacement, disenfranchisement, and deprivation brought about by the effects of climate change.

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The people who will suffer most are those who were most vulnerable to begin with, living in regions of the world with perilous human security, pervasive poverty, little fulfillment of human rights, geographic disadvantage, and contributing the least towards greenhouse gas emissions. It is in these places that the threat-multiplying effects of climate change will denigrate human dignity, health, and potential the most. It is in these same disadvantaged settings that fragile health systems are least able to cope with the increased demands they will face.

Responsibility, governance, and accountability for climate change remain elusive. There is a chasm between apparent comprehension of the seriousness of climate threats and appetite for policy change and effective personal action. Ambitious long-term energy policies are absent and the complex science of climate change is subject to political lobbying, corporate greed, and rampant skepticism. This leads to an unnecessary and deliberate sense of confusion that undermines an imperative for intervention. Without a clear mandate for action, policymakers ignore the long-term threat for short-term gains. It's still easier to win elections in 2014 by supporting fracking than by promoting a cap-and-trade program to control greenhouse gas emissions. Human health is the price we are already paying.

But the case for climate change is becoming easier to make, as Mary Robinson (former President of Ireland and former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) states in her foreword to our special issue on Climate Justice and the Right to Health. In early 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its Fifth Assessment Report (AR5). The report uses best available evidence to describe the diverse and multi-faceted health threats related to climate change. The prevalence of heat-related illness, food insecurity, and waterborne and vectorborne infectious disease is predicted to increase this century, especially among vulnerable populations living in developing countries. AR5 also links climate change with worsening human security through population displacement, violent conflict, and poverty entrenchment.

The human rights based approach to climate justice

In its resolution on human rights and climate change (2009), the Human Rights Council noted that climate change-related impacts have a range of implications, both direct and indirect, for the effective enjoyment of human rights, including the right to life, the right to adequate food, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to adequate housing, the right to self determination, and human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation. The resolution also recognized that the effects of climate change will be felt most acutely by those segments of the population who are already vulnerable and marginalized due to factors such as geography, poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status, and disability.

Adopting a rights-based approach to climate change action begins by recognizing the obligations of states to respect, protect, and fulfill all human rights threatened by climate change. It then requires states to begin a transparent and participatory process with their own people, and international partners, to determine a plan of mitigation and adaptation, addressing the rights of the most vulnerable first.

In order to avoid “The Great Procrastination” as the rightful definition of this generation, it is imperative that states affirm their commitment to human rights by:

1. acknowledging the irrefutable science linking climate change to human health; and
2. proactively instituting climate change mitigation in a participatory, transparent, and accountable manner.

Climate justice seeks redress for those whose human rights are threatened by climate change. It requires international institutional action, organization, and global governance that promote equity, and avoid historic patterns of further disadvan-

taging the developing world. By invoking personal action, we have the opportunity to keep the climate change conversation relevant to individuals worldwide. Until most people, especially those in positions of influence, understand that immediate action is needed to prevent even more negative outcomes and suffering associated with climate change, our procrastination will continue and pressure on political leaders will remain too little.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created in response to global outrage at the human suffering and atrocities of the Second World War. The world united to ensure that humankind would never again experience such loss of dignity and freedom. Unabated climate change poses exactly this threat; it is imperative that we use our human rights entitlements to guide the process and actions to mitigate such disaster.