

The United Nations Summit: Adaptation

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This is from a Facebook post I put up yesterday, and somebody's response. Feel free to comment at the bottom, I'd love to make this a larger conversation!

Here goes...

I'm in favor of cutting emissions as much as anybody, and think we need to devote an immense amount of energy to make that happen. But with all the talk this week about cutting emissions, something seems missing from both the activists' and officials' discussions. Climate change is already happening and is only going to get worse, especially with positive feedback loops such as reduced albedo from Arctic sea ice and methane releases from melting permafrost. I feel like the coming climate change and all its implications are being under-addressed at all levels.

We will need massive adaptation efforts, including preparing proactively for migrations, making significant infrastructure investments, and instituting smart development policies (like stopping the construction of new buildings in Miami). And there are dozens more. Is this being addressed at the UN Summit in New York right now? Where were these arguments amongst all the protesters in New York and nationwide? The answer to both of those is, "if at all, certainly not enough, and definitely without enough urgency."

In a way, fighting against the fossil fuel industry is easier than pushing policymakers to completely change our way of life. And it's a whole lot less scary: there's a false impression by anti-emissions activists & policymakers that if we cut down quickly enough, we can prevent the worst of this and eventually go back to normal. But the truth is, we can't: climate change isn't preventable, but rather a question of through which effects, how quickly, and how intensely. And in addition to cutting emissions, we have to get ready for the truly frightening future. Fast.

One of my friends then linked to this article:

<http://grist.org/climate-energy/preventing-climate-change-and-adapting-to-it-are-not-morally-equivalent/>

Its main argument is that climate change mitigation is inherently altruistic, because for every dollar I spend on mitigation I only get 1/7 billionth of the benefit. Meanwhile, adaptation happens at much more local scales, so my actions in pressuring local officials to prepare has a more direct benefit on me. So people that say "well, if the climate is changing, let's just focus on that rather than cut down our emissions" are taking a morally inferior position, especially if they live in a developed country with more ability to adapt - and less provision of help to folks in developing countries that need it most.

So, given that, I threw out this response:

I see so much wrong with that article. First of all, they may not be "morally equivalent," but they certainly aren't mutually exclusive - and claiming that it's simply an issue of where to spend our money

is foolish. We as a society always make decisions about development and investments (hopefully, that's the goal of smart public policy), so we should change them to make sense for a changing world. Sure, it's "altruistic" to be spending money on climate change mitigation, but so is adaptation (just, using his logic, in a slightly larger ratio). And I'd argue that adaptation isn't just "local," - it's regional and even global. At some point, there will be more and more migrations (hell, we're even dealing with them now) that we'll have to work through. And it'll be plenty altruistic to, say, set up an immigration plan for people that are forced to move out of low lying island nations. Or maybe Miami...

Just as with reducing carbon emissions, the UN and other decision-making bodies at all scales (local through global) have the ability to begin shaping plans for the future. And those at higher levels can create policies and recommendations for decision-makers below them. This week, the UN should be developing global recommendations that governments, communities, etc. need to begin making major investments in resiliency, working together to generate plans for upcoming migrations, and other climate-related foresight. I actually think that that's more likely to have a tangible impact on people worldwide, because at this point every dollar spent on adaptation is arguably more likely to make a larger difference for people and communities.

I still think that this type of argument is doing the exact same thing that I mentioned in this status's last paragraph. It's shirking responsibility to make the tough decisions that will impact everyone around us. And it's also, once again, pretending that throwing all of our money and energy at mitigation will make it so that we don't have to adapt (or at least minimizing the need).

Also, what about the morality of seeing something coming and doing nothing about it? If you were working on train crossing safety plans, and saw someone whose car was broken down and parked on the train tracks, with the train 30 seconds away, would you say "sorry, I'm in the middle of making sure this won't happen to other folks. Good luck."? We need to do both, and divide our efforts appropriately.

So, what are your thoughts?