CLIMATE FIXES?
CALLS FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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Comment

O n top of the millions of deaths and protracted health consequences, what is being written about by this pandemic, Covid-19 is a particularly cruel crisis that it isolates and deprives people of the comfort they would normally derive from the affirming company of other human beings. As Andrew Brown says on p8: “We are social animals. We need to get together to share thoughts, feelings, ideas, hopes, and sometimes complaints.”

Of course, technology has helped with multiple ways of communicating that were unimaginable just a few years ago. But although many of today’s virtual methods of communication are widely viewed as being here to stay, in some circumstances human contact is, quite simply, irreplaceable. Virtual connections can never fully replicate the complex subtects and nuanced cues when meeting another person face-to-face.

Words and body language are vital, as described in Jeanie Barr’s exploration of communication and the results of a design-led journey into making design a standard approach.”
Alice C Hill and Madeline Babin say that we have little or no experience of the ferocity of the events that climate change is likely to spawn and that this unfamiliarity risks leaving us deeply unprepared. However, communities can make investments now to improve future outcomes – but we must act now.

Humans have little or no experience with the ferocity of the events that climate change will likely spawn. That unfamiliarity risks leaving us deeply unprepared. But the signs are clear. Communities can make investments now to improve future outcomes.

For over three decades, the world has been on notice that climate change will bring greater destructive forces that wreak havoc. It's time to stop waffling and, instead, act now on preparedness.

On a sweltering day in June 1988 in Washington, DC, a government scientist with the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Dr Jim Hansen, raised his right hand and swore to tell the truth. A soft-spoken man, Hansen had come to the US Capitol to testify on the reality of human-caused global warming before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Taking his seat at the long table facing the Senators, he told them he had concluded with 99 per cent certainty that the year’s record temperatures were not the result of a natural fluctuation in the climate. Rather, the growing concentration of pollutants such as carbon dioxide and other gases in the atmosphere resulting from human activity – in other words, the ‘greenhouse effect’ – was to blame. Seven years earlier, in the journal Science, Hansen had predicted that the burning of fossil fuels could drive global average temperatures to increase by 2.5°C. In a statement to reporters following the second of what would become several congressional testimonies, he warned: “It’s time to stop waffling... the greenhouse effect is here and is affecting our climate now.”

Two decades after Hansen’s testimony, in the face of global inaction to address climate change, the National Academy of Sciences undertook its own study designed to aid national security experts in assessing the security threats to the United States posed by climate change. The results of the study published in 2012 warned that it was prudent to: “Expect climate surprises in the coming decades, including unexpected and potentially disruptive single events... and for them to become progressively more serious and more frequent thereafter, most likely at an accelerating rate.”

All these predictions have proven true, yet the United States continues to be set back on its heels when it comes to climatic events. Failing to prepare, however, comes at a tremendous cost. It is time to address the growing risks proactively and that means investing in preparedness to ensure a safer future.

Early 2021 gave the United States a vivid example of how much the failure to prepare could cost. In February, a severe winter storm propelled the entire state of Texas – the largest state in the continental United States – into a state of emergency. The culprit? Extreme cold.

Repeated warning signs
Texas is no stranger to bouts of freezing weather. Over 120 years ago, Texas experienced record cold as temperatures plunged to 23 degrees below zero Fahrenheit in February 1899. Some 30 years later, in 1933, frigid temperatures tied this all-time record. In 1989, blistering cold hit again forcing the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (Ercot), the energy grid operator for over 90 per cent of the state, to resort to rolling blackouts. In the wake of that disaster, the Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUC) recommended that all utilities “Incorporate the
lessons learned during December of 1989 into the design of new grid-control systems, and to develop new methods for predicting problems ahead of time.

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The energy infrastructure. Again, the state of Texas failed to heed the warning to protect itself against future extremes. By mid-February, the state had been through a week of below freezing conditions with temperatures dropping to -2 degrees Fahrenheit (-19°C) in some areas. This cold spell also bore the hallmark signs of climate change. The polar vortex—where the ring of winds circling around the North Pole—had weakened, causing cold air to shoot out to the Arctic. Scientists have found that cold extremes are stronger when the temperature breaches its average value of 0°C in the Arctic; it has the ability to alter the polar vortex, which increases the likelihood that frigid Arctic air will escape to shocked other parts of the planet.

The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) recorded that as the polar vortex spewed the coldest air since 1989 across the central United States in February 2021, the average temperature was 6°C below the long-term mean. Minimum temperature records were broken across the country in just six days. With cold air and freezing wind gripping the state, the electrical grid was struggling to cope. A 4.5 million residents plunged into darkness. Across the state, people went without heat in below freezing conditions for several days. Over 14.6 million residents were left without water to drink when the cold temperatures caused pipes to freeze and then burst. And for those residents with water, the cold air and freezing wind needed to boil it and render it safe for drinking. Nearly 200 people died in the freezing conditions, some in their beds. At 10% of those fatalities resulted from hypothermia.

Officials lamented how most of these deaths were preventable and “attributable to the fact that Texas simply could not ensure that its energy infrastructure was winterized to the extent necessary to withstand the severity of winter storms.”

In the absence of electricity, oil refineries and petrochemical companies released nearly four million pounds of extra pollutants. One facility in Texas emitted 262,522 pounds of methane over just two days, a “sizeable quantity of greenhouse gases,” and to the surprise of state authorities, “mysterious negative pressure transducers reached or dropped below expected operating equipment prior to the onset of cold weather.” Texas failed to heed the advice.

Another freeze settled over the state in 2011. That year, as extreme cold continued, the state’s power generators once again began to fail. Natural gas wells froze while coal plants faltered. Electrical companies turned to their reserves of natural gas, and for them to become progressively more severe...
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