

Athena Tiwari

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The Effect of Climate Change
on the World's Poorest People

In August of 2003 an oppressive dome of heat lay over most of Europe. It was hot, but for most people life went on as usual. The people of France were accustomed to dealing with hot summers, and Parisians in particular streamed out of the capital city to enjoy their yearly vacation in cooler climates. In Paris, it was emergency room personnel who received the first intimations of the nightmare that was unfolding. Ambulances began delivering patients in severe heat exhaustion, close to death, and curiously these were mostly elderly people. These were the lucky ones. Thousands of elderly Parisians were discovered dead and decomposing in their small apartments, noticed by other residents only after the smell of death became apparent. Across Europe, over 30,000 people died in the heatwave of 2003, but it was the 14,802 who died in France, chiefly in Paris, who sparked an anguished re-examination of the role of society in the effect of climate change on the poor. The elderly who died were poor and marginalized, and typically lived on the top floors of the iconic tin-roofed apartments of Paris. Their tiny dwelling places were intended as maids' quarters, and had not been designed for the climate of the twenty-first century.

If there could be this massive death toll concentrated on the poor in a wealthy industrialized country, how is climate change affecting the poor in countries where the majority of the population is not wealthy by Western standards? What happens when an entire country, or entire region, grapples with warming effects in the absence of sufficient resources?

In his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis notes that world's poor people, the typically marginalized or "excluded," (p. 34) constitute the majority of world population, while the centers of power are geographically and socially removed from this majority. Pope Francis urges us to realize that approaches to climate change must be socially as well as ecologically informed, and that we must "hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (p. 35).

Recent research has identified tropical countries as being more vulnerable to climate change. These countries tend to be significantly poorer than mid-latitude countries, and are at the same time accustomed to only minor variations in climate. Traditionally wealthy, mid-latitude countries experience marked seasonal climate differences, so many people are equipped for extreme heat with air conditioning. At the same time, a very hot day in a mid-latitude country is usually not life-threatening, except in instances when people choose to over-exert themselves in recreation. Contrast this with the situation last year in Karachi Pakistan, where a heat wave with temperatures between 104 and 111 degrees Fahrenheit went on for several days. Working people had no choice but to continue doing their jobs, including working

outside or near boilers in textile factories. Climate change also brings increased flooding, and more violent hurricanes, especially to tropical countries. If crops are ruined, there may be an inadequate safety net for farmers. In the aftermath of intense rain events there may be landslides, where densely packed handmade wooden housing associated with poverty offers little safety.

Many writers have commented on the irony of the effects of climate change falling hardest on countries that produced only a small fraction of the increase in greenhouse gases since the Industrial Revolution. However, the situation has brought out caring and creativity in wealthier countries, not just indifference or denial. One encouraging idea is to farm salt-resistant strains of vegetables in the desert, using seawater. Salt-resistant cucumbers, carrots, and other vegetables grown in this way are in demand at restaurants in wealthy countries. As this practice scales up, funded by wealthy Western and Middle-Eastern states, both world hunger and climate change can be addressed. Excess carbon dioxide is removed from the air as plants grow, and creating food from salt water will mitigate the effects of drought. Let us keep faith that we live in a time of light as well as darkness, and let us do all we can to join in cooperative solutions with respect and love.