

Foreword

President Lyndon B. Johnson famously said: “We can draw lessons from the past, but we cannot live in it.” In the case of climate change, this is an unfortunate truth. Human activity has irrevocably changed the composition of the world’s atmosphere, and we will never again be able to live, as our parents and grandparents did, without the consequences of global warming.

The impacts are staggering. Antarctic ice is thinning at increasingly rapid rates—with correspondingly massive influxes of fresh water into the world’s oceans. Siberia has warmed 3° C since 1960. Humanity is increasing hurricane intensity and rainfall. And make no mistake: this is not a problem whose consequences lie in the distant future or in the furthest uninhabited reaches of the world. Lima, Peru, located in the world’s driest desert, expects the Andean glaciers that provide water to the city’s 9 million people to disappear by 2030. Scientists at the World Health Organization have established clear links between climatic factors and disease rates for malaria, dengue, cholera, meningitis and encephalitis. And climate change induced sea-level rise is expected to displace as many as 50 million people worldwide by 2050.

Dr. Thomas Fuller, a British physician living in the 18th century said: “Get the facts, or the facts will get you. And when you get them, get them right, or they will get you wrong.” In this volume, the World Resources Institute has provided the facts, setting them out accurately and accessibly. And those facts speak clearly: emissions that drive global warming are ubiquitous. They come from the energy we consume, the food we produce and the forest stocks we deplete. They come from the very fabric of modern life. While a relatively small number of countries produce the overwhelming majority of emissions, those countries include both developing and developed nations. And these emissions are growing at a pace too rapid to ignore, rising more than 15 percent in the last decade alone.

However, this book would be only an interesting collection of facts (alarming though they may be) if it did not also seek to evaluate what might be extracted from these trends to help prepare for a more stable and climate-friendly future. What do we know? We know that some countries have both more responsibility and more capacity than others. These countries must move first if we are to succeed. But a solution will only be found by working to adopt policies that fit the needs of both developed and developing nations. We know that it is possible to decouple our energy use from the emissions of greenhouse gases that are causing the problem. While this certainly offers hope for the future, we know that the longer we wait, the bigger a step will be needed to bring the climate system into balance. We know that some sectors contribute more than others to the global climate problem. Transport and energy production—which are also implicated in issues such as energy security and balance of trade payments—are ones we need to address quickly. But taken too narrowly, action in any one of these sectors alone will not form an adequate basis for international agreements. We know that solving this problem requires a broad, comprehensive effort covering multiple sectors and multiple gases and nations from around the world. Only through global coordination will we be able to move our society to a more sustainable future.

As Yogi Berra said: “The future ain’t what it used to be.” But if we can translate the facts into an impetus for action, we may still be able to forestall the worst of the damages that climate change will bring. But we must hurry; time is not on our side.

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