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U.N. panel calls for rapid action against climate change to secure a liveable future

Failure to prevent the earth from heating 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels will result in irreversible adverse impacts on certain ecosystems with low resilience, says the IPCC in a report

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Climate change is a threat to human well-being and planetary health and there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said in a report on March 20, 2023.

This is the final report of the sixth assessment cycle of the UN panel. Through its multiple assessment cycles beginning 1990, the IPCC has collated and analysed research by scientists on global warming, the role humans have had in exacerbating it, the long-term climate impact from current and future emissions and what people can do about it.

The IPCC does not itself undertake scientific assessments but only evaluates the state of scientific evidence on various aspects of climate change.

The current report does not weigh in on new scientific evidence but synthesises findings from three working groups: Working Group I (which evaluated the physical science basis of climate change), Working Group II (impacts, adaptation and vulnerability) and Working Group III (mitigation, or reducing future greenhouse gas emissions).

It also integrates evidence from three special reports during the sixth assessment cycle: Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (October 2018), Special Report on Climate Change and Land (August 2019), and Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate (September 2019).

Future reports of the IPCC aren't expected until 2030 and that's already marked out as a boundary point year beyond which – if significant action to cut emissions are not taken – it would be impossible to prevent the earth from heating 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels.

“Overshooting 1.5°C will result in irreversible adverse impacts on certain ecosystems with low resilience, such as polar, mountain, and coastal ecosystems, impacted by ice-sheet, glacier melt, or by accelerating and higher committed sea level rise,” the IPCC said in the report.

Certain future changes are “unavoidable and/or irreversible” but could be limited by deep, rapid and sustained global greenhouse gas emissions reduction, it added.

“Mainstreaming effective and equitable climate action will not only reduce losses and damages for nature and people, it will also provide wider benefits,” IPCC Chair Hoesung Lee said in a statement.

“This synthesis report underscores the urgency of taking more ambitious action and shows that, if we act now, we can still secure a liveable sustainable future for all.”

The report was finalised at Interlaken, Switzerland after a week-long meeting.

“Climate justice is crucial because those who have contributed least to climate change are being disproportionately affected,” Aditi Mukherji, one of the 93 authors of the report, said.

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav tweeted that India “welcomed” the report and it “reaffirmed” the principle that historically few developed rich countries were responsible for the crisis.

“Role of unsustainable lifestyles and patterns of consumption have been emphasized...current (financial) flows are inadequate and this includes the promised but never received \$100 billion,” he said.

Anjal Prakash, research director, Bharti Institute of Public Policy, Indian School of Business, said in a statement said that the report reiterated the impact of climate change on India.

“One of the most significant implications of the report for India is the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. These events could have dire consequences for agriculture, the economy, and public health. The report highlights the need for policymakers to prioritise investments in disaster risk reduction, including early warning systems, evacuation plans, and infrastructure development to protect vulnerable populations.”