

Web-exclusive comment

Adapting to climate change: Now is the time to act

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In recent months, global awareness on the risks associated with climate change has shifted drastically. Few would now dare to argue against the view that climate change does and will present an enormous humanitarian challenge. Even if progress was made in reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases, we should not forget that weather patterns have already changed, global temperatures have already risen and, above all, climate change is already taking a heavy human toll around the globe.

For far too long, climate change has been seen as a problem of the future, one that only a limited range of ministries and institutions should manage. This must change now. Climate change requires broader engagement.

We need to build up knowledge on how the most vulnerable communities can protect and adapt themselves and what types of global support systems are needed. How will millions of people in Africa and Asia be affected by changing monsoon seasons? How will the poor cope with more frequent and intense droughts and floods? How will the weakest survive more agonizing heat waves and violent tropical storms? How can we diffuse the tensions that are likely to erupt as food and water shortages worsen? What are the security implications of the mass migrations predicated by many experts? Should we start identifying safe land for coastal and insular populations? How can the latest advances in agriculture and water harvesting be made available to those most in need? How can the humanitarian community enlist the help of all sectors to face those challenges? And who will pay the bills? These are just few of the many questions that come to mind.

Adapting to the adverse effects of climate change also means increasing the resilience of the communities at risk. Achieving this objective involves efforts and expertise in areas ranging from economic development to risk reduction, from disaster relief to private investment. Co-ordinated work at the global, regional and local levels will be required in order to find practical solutions. These efforts will carry a cost. Thus, there is also a major need for the international community to mobilize the necessary human and financial resources.



Former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan. (Reuters)

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Climate report

A report due in November from the UN's Panel on Climate Change says greenhouse gases have reached levels not expected for a decade



Wednesday, I will launch the Global Humanitarian Forum in Geneva. Its mission is to foster dialogue and partnerships that strengthen the international community's ability to address current and future humanitarian challenges. The forum will urge effective action to protect people who are most vulnerable and in need of help.

In its first phase of existence, the forum will focus on the adverse humanitarian consequences of climate change. It will seek to provide an impartial and inclusive platform where decision-makers can break through the current barriers to adaptation and work together to search for solutions; where scientists and economists can meet with leaders of communities that are already trying to adapt to a changing climate; and where we can better harness the business community's ability to work for the common good.

Its outcomes are expected to contribute to the upcoming negotiations for a future climate-change regime, of which adaptation will form an integral part. The forum will seek to be a catalyst for action and to help increase support to communities most exposed to climate risks.

The scale and impact of climate change require unprecedented collaboration. Now is the time to act.

Kofi Annan is president of the Global Humanitarian Forum and former secretary-general of the United Nations.

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