

The world is not moving fast enough on climate change—social sciences can help explain why

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In late 2023 the United States government released [its Fifth National Climate Assessment](#) (NCA). The NCA is a semi-regular summation of the impacts of climate change upon the U.S. and the fifth assessment was notable for being the first to include [a chapter on social systems and justice](#).

Built on decades of social science research on climate change, the fifth NCA contends with two truths that are increasingly being reckoned with in [U.S. popular](#) and [academic conversations](#).

The first is that climate change has the potential to exacerbate health, social and [economic outcomes](#) for Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) and [low-income communities](#). The second is that social systems and institutionsâincluding governmental, cultural, spiritual and economic structuresâare the only places where adaptation and mitigation can occur.

We only have to compare [mortality rates for the COVID-19 pandemic disaggregated by race, income, and other axes of inequality](#) to recognize that we are not all in the same boat, despite experiencing the same storm. Today, [race](#) and [income](#) similarly predict who is likely to be displaced permanently after a [major hurricane](#)âand forced relocation can have negative impacts on individuals and communities for generations.

Understanding how existing social systems influence, and are influenced by, climate change is key to not only slowing the effects of an increasingly warming Earth, but also ensuring that society's transition to a new world is a [just one](#).

And there is no doubt that we are indeed facing a new world.

Not moving fast enough

Decades of scientific research have shown that [increasingly devastating and rapid climatic changes](#) are ahead of us, including more intense hurricanes, droughts and floods.

Our recent levels of resource consumptionâ€"particularly in the Global North and countries with large developing economiesâ€"[are untenable](#). To be clear, the world *is* responding to these risks with the U.S. alone achieving a [13 percent decrease in annual greenhouse gas emissions between 2005 and 2019](#), but these responses are not good enough.

It is the purview of social scientistsâ€"the scientists tasked with studying human society and social relationships in all of their complexityâ€"to ask why.

What is it about the ethics, cultures, economies, and symbols at play in the world that have made it so difficult to turn the tide and make change? Why do weâ€"individuals, societies, cultures, and nationsâ€"mostly seem unable to curb emissions at the rates necessary to save ourselves and our planet?

These are questions that can only partially be answered by new information and technologies developed by physical scientists and engineers. We also need an understanding of how humans behave. Having new technology matters for little if you do not also understand how social, economic and [political decisions](#) are madeâ€"and how certain groups are [able to develop habits around lower rates of emissions and consumption](#).

We know that inequitable systems create [unevenly distributed risk](#) and capacities to respond. For example, a hurricane's intensity scale is less

predictive of its [mortality rates](#) than the [socio-economic conditions within the nation where the storm makes landfall](#). Understanding these dynamics is the only way to respond to climate change in a way that does not entrench deep tendencies towards racist, sexist and classist landscapes of vulnerability.

Empowering real change

Recognizing that disasters and climate disruptions have the potential to make inequality worse also means that we have the opportunity to do better.

There are a range of outcomes that may stem from climate related disasters with a vast inventory of what is possible. There are also hopeful examples that point the way to rich collaborations and problem solving. For example, [Tulsa, Okla.](#) was the most frequently flooded city in the U.S. from the 1960s into the 1980s, but a coalition of concerned citizens came together with the city government to create a floodplain management plan that serves as [a model](#) for other cities.

In another example, Indigenous communities around the U.S. have some of the most [proactive planning](#) in place for adapting to climate change, despite histories of persecution, theft and violent exploitation.

There is an adage that says in order to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. Make no mistake, [climate change](#) is the most urgent issue of our time. However, moving quickly and carelessly will serve only to re-entrench existing social, economic, political and environmental inequalities.

Instead, we must look at other ways of being in the world. We can repair and recreate our relationships with the Earth and the consumption that has gotten us to this point. We can pay attention and listen to global

Indigenous peoples and others who have cared for this earth for millennia.

We must be more creative with our solutions and committed to ensuring that all, and not just a privileged few, are able to live in a better world than the one in which they were born into. Technological approaches alone will not achieve this goal. To build a better world we need the social sciences.

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