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Poorest People Need Resources to Deal With Climate Change

As Congress undertakes the challenging task of approving climate change legislation, something rather important must not be left off the table:

The welfare of the poorest people in the poorest countries.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the leading body of climate science experts, global climate change is already having significant impacts. Glaciers are melting from Alaska to the Himalayas. Extended droughts are ravaging many African communities that depend on rain for irrigating crops and watering livestock and pose challenges to parts of the U.S. as well. Severe and unpredictable floods are challenging South Asia. Island nations are grappling with relocating their citizens as the sea level rises.

The IPCC estimates that if left unchecked, climate change may cause acute water shortages for up to three billion people, increase hunger for 30 million people, expand exposure to malaria for up to 60 million more Africans, and increase heat-related premature deaths even here in the US. Our staff and partners on the ground are witnesses to the beginnings of these trends.

Ninety-seven percent of all natural disaster-related deaths already occur in developing countries, and estimates of climate change's contributions to worsening conditions are disturbing.

The poorest 1 billion people are responsible for producing just three percent of green house gas emissions causing these shifts. Yet, they bear the brunt of global climate change's impact and have the fewest resources to deal with its consequences. This is the real inconvenient truth!

It is critical that we respond to the concerns and needs of these communities with bold and compassionate policy and legislation, living up to our responsibility as a country that has greatly contributed to the problem.

Final U.S. legislation must not only include significant cuts in dangerous greenhouse gas emissions -- and measures to help those who live in poverty in our own country -- but also provide substantial investments to support coping and adaptation strategies in poor communities around the world.

Building on the resiliency of communities to adapt to climate change — by planting drought resistant crops and by building homes and schools on raised foundations, for example — can reduce the damaging impact that climate change will have on lives and livelihoods.

Not only is this the right thing to do, but it also serves our national interest.

Over the years, the United States has provided billions in development assistance – to build schools, dig wells, provide health care for the poor, improve agricultural productivity. Climate change puts all these investments at risk and threatens countries' abilities to meet their development goals. Without effective adaptation, progress in overcoming poverty, such as by ensuring more girls receive basic education and stay in school longer, stands to be lost. These investments need to be "climate-proofed" in order to ensure their future effectiveness and viability.

Spending on adaptation now will also reduce future financial outlays for emergency responses assuming climate change exacerbates storms and other weather-related disasters as the IPCC predicts. And, as nations prepare to adapt to changes, some of the technology and equipment they need may come from the United States – bolstering employment and the U.S. economy.

The world is watching to see what the Obama Administration and Congress are likely to bring to the negotiating table this December in Copenhagen. Climate change legislation currently being crafted in the House could signal to the world that our nation is willing to be a global leader on this issue.

On May 21, the House Energy and Commerce Committee approved H.R. 2454, The American Clean Energy and Security Act. We commend the inclusion of important language on international adaptation. However, the money allocated for it is woefully inadequate. A conservative estimate of the U.S. fair share of annual adaptation funding is in the \$7 billion range, more than 7% of revenues if all emissions allowances were auctioned, using the EPA's latest projections on carbon prices. The Committee approved version of the bill gives away the majority of allowances and only allocates 1% of allowances for adaptation purposes.

At a bare minimum, adaptation funding should begin at \$3.5 billion and increase annually until it reaches at least \$7 billion in the early years. We must demonstrate to other nations that the U.S. is willing to contribute its fair share of global adaptation funding. Otherwise, the negotiations could well stall in Copenhagen. Given the gravity and timeliness of the situation, we cannot afford to fail there.

At a time when the U.S. needs to improve its standing abroad, set its economy on a positive future footing, and finally exercise leadership in solving the climate change problem, making sure climate change legislation includes strong international adaptation provisions is the best contribution we can make.

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