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Narrative Review

The debate on climate change and health in the context of ecological public health: a necessary corrective to Costello et al.'s 'biggest global health threat', or co-opted apologists for the neoliberal hegemony?



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ABSTRACT

The threat posed to global health by climate change has been widely discussed internationally. The United Kingdom public health community seem to have accepted this as fact and have called for urgent action on climate change, often through state interventionist mitigation strategies and the adoption of a risk discourse. Putting aside the climate change deniers' arguments, there are critics of this position who seem to accept climate change as a fact but argue that the market and/or economic development should address the issue. Their view is that carbon reduction (mitigation) is a distraction, may be costly and is ineffective. They argue that what is required is *more* economic development and progress even if that means a warmer world. Both positions however accept the fact of growth based capitalism and thus fail to critique neoliberal market driven capitalism or posit an alternative political economy that eschews growth. Ecological public health, however, appears to be a way forward in addressing not only social determinants of health but also the political and ecological determinants. This might allow us to consider not just public health but also planetary health and health threats that arise from growth based capitalism.

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Introduction

The health impacts of climate change have been much discussed internationally^{1–4} however there is some disagreement about the magnitude of those effects, when they will occur and what the right course of action is. Underpinning

those disagreements is a tacit and sometimes uncritical acceptance of the fundamental structure of the political economy of growth capitalism – neoliberalism,⁵ with the differences being around whether climate change requires *more* immediate public policy and health professional intervention⁶ or whether capitalism will address the health issues through economic development. In other words, both use the

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frame of reference of capitalism to argue for either more market freedom or statist intervention based in a risk discourse. This paper seeks to outline the arguments over the health effects of climate change while rooting that discourse within wider often background taken for granted political economy. Two writers, Indur Goklany and Daniel Ben Ami will be used to represent the critical camp in riposte to Costello et al.'s 2009 UCL-Lancet paper on climate change and health. While the focus is on climate change, other factors such as biodiversity loss, chemical pollution, ozone depletion, ocean acidification, all threaten the ecological systems we depend on.⁷ These issues are also associated with our current growth based economic structures. The ecological public health discourse will not be discussed at length here, but might provide a newer perspective linking global political structures, critiques of growth based capitalism and public health.

The climate change 'debate'

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 5th Assessment Report (AR5)⁸ argues that scientists are 95% certain that humans are the 'dominant cause' of global warming since the 1950's.^{9,10} Despite this, there is continuing doubt, denial and a focus on uncertainty^{11–15} that Climate Change is human induced and that it requires radical shifts in public policy.

This doubt sits in opposition to many in the medical¹⁶ and public health domain.¹⁷ The World Health Organisation^{1,2} accepts IPCC assessments and considers climate change to be a 'significant and emerging threat' to public health while previously ranking it very low down in a table of health threats.^{18,19} In the United Kingdom, Costello²⁰ et al. argue that climate change is a major potential public health threat that does require major changes such as action on carbon emissions. In addition, Barton and Grant's health map²¹ has in its outer ring 'Climate Stability, Biodiversity and Global Ecosystems' as key determinants of health and supports the WHO view that alongside the social determinants of health, health threats arise from large scale environmental hazards such as climate change, stratospheric ozone depletion, biodiversity losses, changes in water systems, land degradation, urbanisation and pressures on food production. WHO²² argues:

Appreciation of this scale and type of influence on human health requires a new perspective which focuses on ecosystems and on the recognition that the foundations of long-term good health in populations rely in great part on the continued stability and functioning of the biosphere's life-supporting systems.

It is this call for a 'new perspective on ecosystems' that indicates why there is a backlash, one that underpins critiques of the link between climate change, environmental issues and human health. Many of those critical are libertarian, anti-state conservatives defending the neoliberal hegemony of free market dogma which 'new perspectives' may threaten. For example, Stakaityte²³ argues:

Free market proponents are quick to point out that the whole climate change issue has been used to stifle freedom and to expand the nanny state – and they are right. If the climate is

changing, and if humans really are responsible, the market will adapt.

The WHO call for a 'new perspective' however is not a radical critique of neoliberal capitalism or a call for its replacement by other political economies. It sits within an overarching acceptance that growth²³ capitalism is the only economic model, and that only its particular current form requires changing, for example by investments in green technologies.

Critical discourse over such an important issue is crucial. Argument should proceed over matters of empirical facts, within discourses of risk and an understanding of scientific uncertainty.¹² Attention also should turn to philosophical positions on political economy in which the dominant neoliberal hegemony^{5,25} attempts to build and maintain a sceptical view^{26,27} in the media on climate change and on alternative, including no growth, economic models^{24,28,29} because neoliberalism is antithetical to 'nanny state' intervention implicit in public health 'upstream' analysis.

Health impacts of climate change and the policy response

Indur Goklany and Daniel Ben Ami respectively are noted writers on the topic and both are in the sceptical camp regarding what to do about climate change. Both however appear to accept the fact of climate change, they just don't agree with the focus on carbon reduction targets.

For the health community that makes decisions on what the main threats to health are, there is a need to carefully weigh up the evidence for threats to population health in the short, medium and long term, or what Goklany calls the 'foreseeable future' defined as 2085–2100. This means addressing Goklany's argument, especially, on the ranking of health threats and Ben Ami's argument on progress. For Goklany the health threats this century are not from climate change, nor will they be. For Ben Ami, the answer lies in any case of more progress based on economic growth and development.

In this there is some support from the latest IPCC report [30, p. 3] which states

the present worldwide burden of ill health from climate change is relatively small compared with other stressors and is not well quantified.

The report also states that rapid economic development will reduce health impacts on the poorest and least healthy groups, with further falls in mortality rates. In addition, they argue [30, p. 4], alongside poverty alleviation and disaster preparedness, the most effective adaptation measures are:

basic public health measures such as the provision of clean water, sanitation and essential healthcare.

A key point is that climate change and extreme weather events affects the poor disproportionately and that [30, p. 3]

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