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COMMENTARY

Intergenerational Inequality From Climate Inaction

FATEMA TASNIM
THOMPSON RIVERS UNIVERSITY

Introduction

Climate change is not only an environmental problem, but also a serious economic and social problem that affects generations in significant and inequitable ways. When governments delay climate action, they shift the cost of climate damage onto young people and future generations. Older generations benefited from fossil fuel-driven growth through higher incomes, jobs, and development. In contrast future generations will face extreme heat, natural disasters, health problems, lower productivity and weaker economic opportunities (IPCC, 2023). This unfair shifting of costs is known as intergenerational inequality from climate inaction.

Climate Damages Grow Over Time

Climate damages become much worse as global temperatures increase. Even small increases in warming harm human health, reduce work productivity, damage homes and roads, and reduces crop production (IPCC, 2023). As temperatures continue to rise, these damages

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grow faster and more severe. Many climate impacts happen slowly over time, older generations will not live long enough to face the worst effects of climate change, but young people will experience these losses across their entire lives. This means today's emissions are locking future generations into long-term economic and environmental harm.

Unequal Lifetime Burdens on Youth

A major study by Thiery et al. (2021) shows that children born in 2020 will experience two to seven more extreme climate events, especially heatwaves, compared to people born in 1960. Even if global warming is limited to 1.5 degrees, young people will still face far greater exposure than older generations. This shows that climate inequality is already locked in due to past and present emissions. Recent research also shows that climate change will lower life expectancy and income, reduce productivity, and weaken long-term economic growth for younger generations much more than for older generations, especially because heat stress and climate disasters harm workers and businesses (Thiery et al, 2021; IPCC, 2023). These losses will follow young people throughout their lives and limit future opportunities.

Figure 1. Climate justice now protests sign. Youth-led climate justice protest highlighting demands for immediate climate action to protect future generations. (Markus Spiske/Unsplash) Unsplash License

Discounting and Future costs

Another major reason intergenerational inequality continues is the use of discount rates in climate policy. Discounting means future damage is treated as less important than present

costs. This leads governments to delay action because they focus on today's economic comfort instead of tomorrow's harm (IPCC, 2014). As a result, young people inherit a polluted planet, expensive adaptation costs, and a weaker economy. Economic studies also show that when climate costs are not shared fairly, future generations end up paying a much larger share of the burden (Fries and Quante, 2023; Dao, 2021). Without fair financing systems, climate policy itself can deepen inequality instead of reducing it.

Global and Legal Inequality

Climate inequality also has a strong global dimension. Children and youth in low- and middle-income countries suffer the most, even though they contributed the least to climate change (Sanson and Burke, 2019; Parsons et al, 2024). These regions often lack the money and infrastructure needed to adapt to floods, droughts, heatwaves, and food shortages. This creates a double burden of climate risk and poverty. Because of this injustice, climate change is being debated in courts and international law. Many scholars argue that governments have a legal and moral duty to protect future generations (Lawrence, 2023; Steinkamp, 2023). However, current law remains weak, and many countries continue to delay strong climate action.

Figure 2 illustrates how climate change affects generations unevenly over time. Individuals born in the mid-20th century experienced most of their lives under comparatively stable climatic conditions. However, those born more recently, especially those born around 2020, are projected to live most of their lives in a significantly warmer world with severe damages if current inaction continues . The widening divergence of temperature pathways after 2020 highlights that the magnitude of climate impacts faced by future generations depends critically on current mitigation choices, emphasizing the intergenerational equity dimension of climate policy.

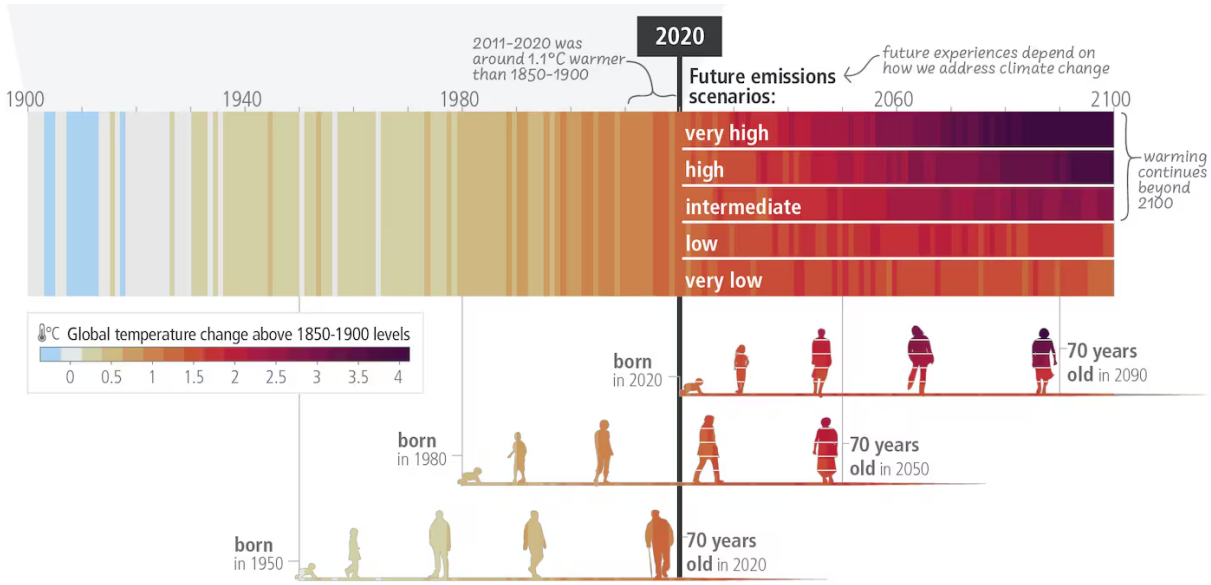

Figure 2. Intergenerational exposure to climate change under alternative emissions pathways. Global mean temperature change relative to 1850–1900, showing observed warming to 2020 and projected future warming under different emissions scenarios, alongside the lifetimes of people born in different years. Source. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023, Figure SPM.1c).

Conclusion

Climate inaction creates deep economic and social inequality between generations. While older generations gained from carbon-based growth, young people and future generations are left with rising disaster risk, lower incomes and high adaptation costs. Scientific and economic evidence clearly shows that young people will suffer far more over their lifetimes than those before them. To fix this unfair system, governments must take strong climate action now, use fair financing policies, and protect the rights of future generations. Acting today is not only good for the planet but also necessary for economic fairness across generations.

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Authors

Fatema Tasnim is an undergraduate student at Thompson Rivers University pursuing a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Economics and Political Science. Originally from Bangladesh, she is interested in examining global issues through the intersecting lenses of economics, environmental policy, and international governance. Her academic work focuses on how economic systems, public policy, and global institutions shape development, sustainability, and international cooperation. Growing up in Bangladesh sparked her interest in challenges related to climate policy, sustainable development, and international trade. Through her studies, she aims to better understand how policy decisions can balance economic growth with environmental protection and long-term sustainability.