



Powerlessness - at the top and the bottom of the pyramid: Part I



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Nautilus Peace and Security Weekly Report Contributor's blog entry for Energy Security.

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Washington, DC area had an extreme climatic event June 29th night. In the midst of a heat wave said to compose of the [hottest 11 days on record](#), it was hit by a [derecho](#), a word apparently few people had any idea of till then. The rain storm was brief, but wind chopped off some homes and downed a number of trees all around.

Heat waves have also hit many other parts of the US, which is also said to be suffering from exceptionally [severe drought](#), pushing up [crop prices](#).

On cue, reporters and editorials also began arguing whether this extreme climatic event was due to anthropogenic climate change. A [New York Times editorial](#) argued it was increasingly plausible to hold that view, citing IPCC. Was it [statistically unusual](#)? The [Washington Post opined](#), "Can you blame the scorching weather on climate change? Not really. Or at least not yet." The two views are not very different; they reflect the [uncertainties in the science of attribution](#). [Financial Times](#) included floods in the UK in its reportage, and a [New Yorker](#) piece by Elizabeth Kolbert reflected "It is now corn-sex season across the Midwest, and everything is not going well," and quoted Fred Below, a crop biologist that current conditions are "like farming in Hell". (Unlike the New York City blackout of 1965, I don't think Washington will see a rise in birth rates nine months after this outage, or a rise in abortions along the way. For most people, it was probably too sticky and dark for sex; besides, Washington is known for sex only in scandals.)

Kolbert says, "Up until fairly recently, it was possible—which, of course, is not the same as advisable—to see climate change as a phenomenon that was happening somewhere else." This doesn't quite ring true, since I have seen such debates prop up every time Washington has a heat wave or a snow blizzard.

But this reminded me of last year's [IPCC Special Report](#) on Extreme Events:

"Climate extremes, exposure, and vulnerability are influenced by a wide range of factors, including anthropogenic climate change, natural climate variability, and socioeconomic development," and "developed countries are often better equipped financially and institutionally to adopt explicit measures to effectively respond and adapt to projected changes in exposure, vulnerability, and climate extremes than are developing countries."

So the Washington heat wave and derecho could become a learning moment. Vulnerability is an inverse function of socioeconomic development and income levels. Perhaps it is time to recognize that:

- 1) It is better to get rich and be able to afford the losses, the restoration activities, the law-an-order machinery, emergency response facilities, than to obsess about CO2 footprints of any individual activity, small or large; and,
- 2) small battery backups for "basic electricity" (for lighting and communications) should be mandated in all new homes and key human/administrative service institutions or commercial facilities (and retrofits over the next ten years).

These are the lessons for the "Top of the Pyramid", the richest and the most prolific energy users whose most critical energy insecurities - power outages - in recent memory have been only from weather-related events.

On the other hand, some 3 billion people in the low-income countries have no grid electricity or suffer from frequent outages. Their surroundings - schools and hospitals, offices and shops, farms and streets - are also similarly deprived, constituting “ecosystems of energy poverty”, large and small, at the Bottom of the Pyramid.

The poor suffer the climate whether or not it is changing, and whether or not the change is human-induced. Their adaptive capacities for natural hazards as well as their opportunities for the development and utilization of human capital are also limited when they do not have electricity. That energy insecurity - and the poor response at the Rio+20 Conference concluded just a week before the Washington derecho (referred to in the news alert today) - will be covered in the second part of this blog in a few weeks’ time.

—[Nikhil Desai](#), NAPSNet Contributor

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