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PERSPECTIVE

The Data Behind Climate Investing: An Earth Day Q&A with Jack DeWaard

Scientific Director Jack DeWaard highlights what the Population Council is doing to help guide, inform, and improve climate-related investment strategies worldwide.



April 19, 2023

By: Jack DeWaard

With this year's [Earth Day theme](#) of investing as an engine for change, we want to highlight what the Population Council is doing to help guide, inform, and improve climate-related investment strategies worldwide.

Our specific focus is on the [Population, Environmental Risks, and the Climate Crisis \(PERCC\) Initiative](#), which looks at the interactions between changing natural systems and the structure of social groups. The PERCC team uses a sophisticated combination of statistical modeling, demographic research, and coordination with local youth-led and women-led groups to generate data, create [new analytical tools](#), and inform decision-making at every level.

Jack DeWaard, the Council's Scientific Director, provides an inside perspective on PERCC's ongoing work, major accomplishments, and contributions to our shared fight against climate and ecological change.

(The interview has been lightly edited for ease of reading.)

What is PERCC, and what makes it different from other groups working to address climate change?

PERCC is the acronym for Population, Environmental Risks and the Climate Crisis. It's a Council-wide initiative that generates ideas and conducts research on sustainable and equitable solutions for pursuing justice in the face of environmental change. One thing that makes PERCC unique is its approach, which prioritizes justice and equity, community participation and leadership, and open science and transparency. What does this mean in practice day-to-day? It means that, as we build out our work on climate change and population dynamics, we're taking a highly inclusive and collaborative approach, consulting and working with diverse individuals, groups, and institutions at all levels from local to global.

What are some important projects already in the works that you can share?

There are so many! One group of projects that I often share with others is PERCC's work on the implications of sea level rise and flooding on health outcomes in countries such as [Bangladesh](#) and [India](#). I like to share this work because it nicely demonstrates the power of using "big data" of different types and from various sources to capture the effects of climate and environmental stressors at multiple spatial scales simultaneously, ranging from global to very local.

Who is most affected by climate change?

For the most part, those who are most affected by the climate crisis are those people who've done the least to create it. Researchers often use the term "vulnerability" to refer to the fact that some people, populations, and places are in far more danger from climate and environmental hazards by virtue of historical and contemporary marginalization. For instance, Barcelona and Accra are both coastal metropolitan areas of some 5.5 million people, but the risks they face from any single storm, flood, fire, or drought are dramatically different thanks to a long history of systematic extraction and re-allocation of resources.

What are some under-appreciated or under-discussed impacts of climate change?

One thing that climate change will continue to do is amplify existing inequalities and inequities. What that means is that one way we can prepare for the negative impacts of future climate and environment stressors is to challenge and dismantle the sources of those inequalities today.

Why are gender and intersectionality so crucial for climate change research?

There is no single, monolithic effect of climate and environmental change. Instead, any given effect depends on the differential vulnerability of the people, populations, and places involved. That's why a gender lens—and an intersectional approach more broadly—are so critical in climate change research and for understanding the climate crisis. By virtue of their social roles and positions in families, communities, and society, women and girls will continue to be disproportionately impacted by climate change.

As Earth Day brings awareness to the climate crisis, how can we better involve governments and multilateral stakeholders to address these issues?

First, acting both as thought leaders and as partners, we can help to inclusively and collaboratively identify and analyze the most substantive questions and most pressing needs. Second, as a connector and facilitator, we can proactively bring multisectoral actors at all levels together for the

common good. And third, we can orient all of those efforts within a shared set of values. In the Council's case, those values include excellence and innovation; collaboration and partnership; diversity, equity, and inclusion; accountability; and ethics.

This year's Earth Day theme is "Invest in Our Planet." What areas of investment do you see as most important? (At the policy level and/or locally)

The Council's Vice President of International Programs, Dr. Harriet Burungi, regularly uses the phrase, "Locally rooted and globally connected." She is describing our efforts to prioritize local investments in research, evaluation, and capacity building while also acknowledging similarities, interconnections, and interdependencies between places. This Earth Day, I think the most critical investments are not in any one area, but are instead united by striking that fine balance between local and global. We need development that is locally sensitive and appropriate but also cognizant of the fact that we are all in this together as one population.

What are the immediate and long-term consequences of failing to make those investments?

What the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) calls our current "business-as-usual" approach is not sustainable and, quite simply, is already life-threatening. Both immediately and over the long-term, failing to make these sorts of investments undermines our individual and collective abilities to address the climate crisis in ways that bring people, populations, and places together for the common good.

What areas of climate research are you most excited about right now?

As a human migration researcher, I am particularly excited about the level of interest inside and outside of the Council in climate and environmental migration and displacement. Migration can function as a climate adaptation strategy, which is why I think there's such a strong and growing need for more work in this area.

What do we most need to better understand or further study about the climate crisis?

As the research evidence is abundantly clear that the climate is changing and will continue to change, more work is needed on how to actually address and solve the climate crisis. This will require an approach that is fundamentally multidisciplinary, multisectoral, and multilevel among a coalition of the willing who are content to neither drag their feet nor ignore altogether this crisis.

What part of the PERCC team's achievements are you most proud of?

I think that the PERCC team embodies the mission of the Council, which is to generate ideas, produce evidence, and design solutions to improve the lives of underserved populations around the world. What I'm most proud of is our shared intention and strategy around that mission. The quality and rigor of our work, our commitment to inclusively and collaboratively working toward a more equitable future.