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Costs of climate adaptation greatly underestimated

Scientists led by a former co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have warned that the UN negotiations aimed at tackling climate change are based on substantial under-estimates of what it will cost to adapt to its impacts.

The real costs of adaptation will likely be two to three times greater than estimates made by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), say Professor Martin Parry and colleagues in a report published by the International Institute for Environment and Development and the Grantham Institute for Climate Change at Imperial College London, UK.

The researchers warn that this underestimate of the cost of adaptation threatens to weaken the outcome of UNFCCC negotiations.

The UNFCCC has estimated annual global costs of adapting to climate change to be US\$40–170 billion, or the cost of about three Olympic Games per year. But the report's authors warn that these estimates were produced too quickly and did not include key sectors such as energy, manufacturing, retailing, mining, tourism and ecosystems.

The new report's key findings include:

Water: The UNFCCC estimate excluded costs of adapting to floods and assumed no costs for transferring water within nations from areas of surplus to areas of deficit.

Health: The UNFCCC estimate excluded developed nations, and assessed only malaria, diarrhoea and malnutrition – perhaps only 30–50% of the global total disease burden.

Coastal zones: Costs associated with increased storm intensity and sea-level rise could be about three times greater than predicted by the UNFCCC.

The new report was reviewed by seven of the world's foremost adaptation scientists, including the lead authors of the original UNFCCC study.

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