



December 2014

Climate Crossroads: Toward a Just Deal in Paris

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The 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit was a failure, but it did serve as a wake-up call. The global governance system currently in place has not been capable of making the momentous “top-down” decisions that are necessary to limit aggregate emissions, let alone to do so in an acceptably fair manner. As we approach the critically important 2015 Paris Summit, negotiations are taking a more realist course, with national pledges of action understood as the best foundation for international mobilization. Making this work will take a “pledge and review” agreement with an extremely robust review in which national commitments are evaluated collectively for compatibility with climate science and comparatively for compatibility with concerns of justice. Equity reference frameworks can help us achieve this crucial task of justice, which now threatens to fall through the cracks. Such frameworks have already been developed to address distributional justice both within and between nations and to identify both leaders and laggards. They can offer a way forward consonant with the core equity principles embodied in the United Nations climate convention. Paris can propel this agenda, but will it?

The Stakes

On September 21, an estimated 400,000 people gathered in New York City for the People's Climate March. The energy was palpable, and many saw the march as a turning point in the emergence of a diverse climate justice movement that has finally realized its power and promise. The march coincided with a UN climate summit, which was itself designed to set the stage for the major negotiations in Paris next year at the 21st Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (COP 21). If we are lucky, there will be even more than 400,000 people outside the Paris conference hall. If we are even luckier, there will be another turning point, this time on the inside.

Back in September, within the UN building, world leaders spoke earnestly about the urgent need for international action, but the boldness of their words was not matched by bold new initiatives. The dream of multilateral governance seemed all but dead. However, less than two months later, the US and China announced a joint climate agreement. Though their pledges are incomplete and ambiguous, they augur well for a wider agreement in Paris. This is very good news, because while climate negotiations will not save us, we cannot save ourselves without them.

Although Copenhagen was certainly a failure, it was also a kind of awful liberation.

The last climate meeting as important as Paris was the 2009 Copenhagen Summit, which included the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 5th Meeting of the Parties (MOP 5) to the Kyoto Protocol. The Copenhagen Summit, according to the "Bali Action Plan" to which countries agreed two years prior, was to produce a binding international agreement to sharply reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Against such a standard, Copenhagen was certainly a failure, if not a catastrophe. At the same time, however, it was a kind of awful liberation: it freed us from the illusion that the world's governments were ever going to rise decisively to the occasion. In particular, it swept away any residual expectation that a top-down global climate accord, crisply dispatched from the diplomatic high table, could, in effect, allocate emissions rights to the global atmospheric commons and, by so doing, catalyze a rapid global climate transition.

With Paris on the horizon, it is critical to understand the stakes. To stabilize the global climate system, we must achieve a more or less complete phase-out of fossil energy. Further, we must do so on a divided planet where economic classes are hardening into economic castes, in which inequality is becoming the defining fact of human life. And we must do so within the next fifty years.

Accomplishing this would be no small feat. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the carbon budget associated with a "likely" (66%) chance of holding total planetary warming to 2°C line (still the best estimate of the maximum manageable degree of warming) is now well below 1,000 gigatonnes of CO₂. Even if global emissions immediately flatlined at current rates, this budget would

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be exhausted before 2040. If emissions do not flatline (and they are projected to rise by 2.5% in 2014), imagining a rate of reduction high enough to avoid an altogether unmanageable world becomes that much harder.¹

The climate crisis comes to us as a two-sided reckoning: a physical crisis on one side and a political-economic crisis on the other. Many of us hesitate to trace its deeper implications, a reticence that is not hard to understand. Governments have been paralyzed, if not captured, by market fundamentalists and enshrouded in the ideology of “economic freedom.” In this atmosphere, where planning and regulation are anathema, what sense is there in pointing out that global greenhouse gas emissions must be brought quickly to near-zero levels, or that such a goal is unreachable unless we simultaneously foreground the imperative of economic justice? The response will only be that such a justice is out of reach, at least in the short term—that if any strong sort of equity is necessary to save our civilization, then we are doomed.

Yet there is little evidence that we can achieve climate stabilization through an incremental strategy requiring us to downplay the science or its implications. These implications are very real and extremely threatening, particularly for poor communities and developing countries. If we want to understand the deadlock in the international negotiations, we must understand the fear—widespread in the developing world—that has nurtured that deadlock. Simply put, many people in the Global South fear that an accelerated phase out of carbon-based energy will bring the end not only of “development,” but of any meaningful prospect for global economic justice. Under the current circumstances, this is an entirely rational fear.

Developmental Justice in a Carbon-Constrained World

Given that carbon emissions have not been delinked from energy production, any ambitious mitigation program appears as a threat to development. The threat could be managed—the greentech revolution shows that there are promising paths forward—but there is little evidence to suggest that elites are either willing or able to take decisive action on the necessary scale. To preserve developmental justice while rapidly cutting over from fossil to renewable energy, we need effective government, visionary planning, and progressive taxation on a grand scale, none of which is particularly compatible with neoliberal ideology.

The good news is that the future remains in play. The cost of renewable energy is plummeting, and all sorts of encouraging new technologies are coming online. The pace and promise of solar, in particular, indicates that a rapid global transition from fossils to renewables is both technically and economically feasible. The bad news is that the normal dynamics of market commercialization—progress as usual—will not suffice. All major energy forecasts, even the most technologically optimistic, agree that techno-economic dynamics alone will not deliver the extremely high rate of carbon-intensity reduction that is needed.² We must augment those dynamics with bold policy and intelligent cooperation. If we do not, then we are either going to

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overshoot the 2°C threshold (which would be extremely dangerous), or we are going to stumble, and probably not peacefully, into some sort of unplanned “degrowth” with declining per-capita energy consumption. There are no other possibilities.

The necessary rates of global decarbonization will be difficult to achieve under any circumstance, and nearly impossible without policies designed to moderate and reduce the consumption of the rich. Whenever we can buy time with technology, we should. But even spectacular techno-economic success would not resolve the core distributional questions raised by the climate transition, questions that are challenging even in wealthy countries and overwhelming in developing countries with much higher rates of extreme poverty.

Still, it is too late to pretend that any country can get much of a delay while it “catches up” with the developed world. Wealthy countries must reduce their emissions as soon and as sharply as possible, but even poor countries like India must follow suit in only a few years. This will only be possible with large amounts of international finance and technology support, but even then, the challenge will be great. Rapid global decarbonization on the scale and in the timeframe dictated by the science requires emissions to soon peak in almost all countries, even very poor ones where per-capita incomes remain very low. This will happen only if the climate transition offers at the same time a transition out of poverty.

No Easy Way, But a Way

Climate negotiations have long been split on North-South lines, but each country, whether developed or developing, is itself divided between its affluent and its impoverished classes. The resulting complexity—rich people in the poor world and poor people in the rich—radically complicates the global climate challenge. It is certainly a problem for the green movement, which has invested so much in local activism and so little in global solidarity, and has almost forgotten, or even repudiated, the language of redistribution.

Extreme economic inequality poses a potentially fatal obstacle to any rapid low-carbon transition, and thus to civilizational survival. More precisely, any effective climate-transition strategy must increase distributional justice even as it drives a global low-carbon revolution. We need a system of progressive effort sharing: a common understanding of national “fair shares” in the common global effort, and a set of mechanisms by which countries can reach beyond their borders to work off some of their share by providing financial, technological, and capacity-building support in countries that must develop, even as they rapidly decarbonize.³

Climate stabilization is, fundamentally, a global commons problem. As such, it can only be solved if each nation sees the others doing their best to do their fair share in the common effort to rise to the climate challenge.⁴ The wealthy (high capacity and, usually, high responsibility) nations have large fair shares when calculated in a manner

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consistent with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its core equity principles of *differentiated responsibilities, respective capabilities, and development need*. These are well-founded principles, and cannot be easily set aside.

How best to move forward? Part of the answer lies in the new area of international “equity reference frameworks.”⁵ But the equity we need goes beyond that between nations. Global and domestic justice are linked challenges, and the financial mechanisms of the climate transition must be progressive within countries as well as between countries. Poor people within rich countries can suffer quite as much as very poor people in the developing world.⁶ The latter have moral priority, but any strategy that pits them against the former is doomed to failure. The United States, possessing enormous wealth and power, makes a fine case in point. Its “fair share” in the cost of any just global transition would be similarly enormous, a feature central to any proper story of the future. But it is not the whole of the story. The United States is also a nation in which the top tenth of the top 1% of the population owns as much wealth as the bottom 90%.⁷ Unless this reality is addressed within the framework through which we understand fair shares, why would the American people accept such a framework as fair?

Science-Based Equity Review

Although the Copenhagen Summit failed to produce a binding treaty, it did give us, or so we thought, a “pledge and review” system that respected the realities of sovereign national governance. Each country would pledge a level of mitigation, and these pledges would be collectively reviewed against the science and comparatively reviewed against each other. Laggards would be identified and thus opened to pressure and discipline. All told, the process would be practical and realistic, yet yield both accord and ambition. The question now, as we approach Paris, is whether we are even going to get “pledge and review,” or if—as Harald Winkler recently put it—we are going to have to accept “pledge and chat.”

In the next year, the nations of the world will table their climate action pledges, now called “indicative nationally determined contributions.” Then what? The US has made its views known, arguing against any “highly structured or engineered” review process.⁸ It is an understandable position, particularly given American political gridlock, but it is not a position that either civil activists or climate realists should accept. In fact, the NGO coalitions engaged in the negotiations are demanding a science-based equity review in which, first, the collective inadequacy of the pledges is judged against the remaining global carbon budget, and then, second, the individual national pledges are evaluated for fairness.

This will not happen before Paris, at least not formally. But civil society research teams are gearing up to do such reviews informally, and progressive forces within the negotiations—nations as well as civil society organizations—may yet win a Paris agreement that formally initiates a high-level debate on the problem of national fair

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shares. The aim must be to review the adequacy and fairness of national pledges and then to ratchet up the overall effort, with particular focus on laggard countries and free riders. If there is not some kind of meaningful review and ratcheting mechanism, in which inadequate national pledges are identified and then strengthened, then after Paris, we will face another failed treaty.

Again, a global commons problem can be addressed only if each actor sees the others doing their best to achieve their fair shares of emission reductions. But before such mutual recognition is possible, there must be a means for comparing one country's effort to another's. But how? By what norms and indicators shall we judge individual contributions? How will we discriminate between the leader and laggard nations? What can we do when we fall collectively short? And how can any of this knowledge be used to push forward into a new regime where an effective majority of the world's states moves to act, decisively, on a global scale? If, after the last late night of the upcoming Paris negotiations, befuddled by an agreement that will certainly fall far short of any ideal, we want to know if the effort was nevertheless a success, these are the questions that we will have to ask.

Endnotes

1. Center for International Climate and Environmental Research in Oslo (CICERO), "Global Warming: Dwindling Chances to Stay Below 2°C Warming," *Science Daily*, September 21, 2014, available at <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/09/140921145005.htm>.
2. For example, in the recent *World Energy Outlook*, both the "current policies" and "new policies" scenarios have global CO₂ emissions rising steadily through 2035. International Energy Agency and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *World Energy Outlook* (Paris: IEA/OECD, 2013), 57, Fig 2.1, available at <http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/publications/weo-2013/>.
3. For much more on this, see Tom Athanasiou, Sivan Kartha, and Paul Baer, *National Fair Shares: The Mitigation Gap—Domestic Action and International Support* (Berkeley, CA: EcoEquity, 2014), available at <http://www.ecoequity.org/2014/11/national-fair-shares-the-mitigation-gap-domestic-action-and-international-support/>.
4. For an excellent entry into the literature on global commons problems, see Oran Young, "Does Fairness Matter in International Environmental Governance? Creating an Effective and Equitable Climate Regime," in *Toward a New Climate Agreement: Conflict, Resolution and Governance*, eds. Todd Cherry, Jon Hovi, and David McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2013): 16-28.
5. On equity reference frameworks, see the Climate Equity Reference Calculator at <http://www.gdrights.org/calculator/> and also Athanasiou, Kartha, and Baer, op. cit. For a different (but complementary) approach, see Xolisa Ngwadla and Lavanya Rajamani, *Operationalising an Equity Reference Framework in the Climate Change Regime: Legal and Technical Perspectives* (Cape Town, South Africa: MAPS Programme, 2014), available at https://seors.unfccc.int/seors/attachments/get_attachment?code=O4GIH08W77HVU8Y006EH7OFWHQP8GMV2.
6. See, particularly, Chapter 7: "Whose poor? / Who's poor?: Deprivation Within and Across Borders," in Judith Lichtenberg, *Distant Strangers: Ethics, Psychology, and Global Poverty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
7. Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *Wealth Inequality in the United States since 1913: Evidence from Capitalized Income Tax Data* (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2014), available at www.nber.org/papers/w20625.
8. See "U.S. Submission fall 2014 FINAL," to the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action, Sept 16, 2014, available at http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/Lists/OSPSubmissionUpload/106_99_130574173391309924-US%20submission%20fall%202014%20FINAL.pdf.

About the Author



Tom Athanasiou is the co-director of the Climate Equity Reference Project, a long-term initiative to provide scholarship, tools, and analysis to advance equity as a practical means to achieve an ambitious global climate regime. His principal interests are distributional justice and cooperation in the context of the global climate emergency. He is active in the international climate negotiations and is the co-coordinator of the International Climate Action Network's Equity and Effort Sharing working group. He is the author of *Divided Planet: the Ecology of Rich and Poor* and *Dead Heat: Global Justice and Global Warming*, as well as the co-author of *Greenhouse Development Rights: The Right to Development in a Climate Constrained World*.

About the Publication

Published as a Viewpoint by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

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Cite as Tom Athanasiou, "Climate Crossroads: Toward a Just Deal in Paris," *Great Transition Initiative* (December 2014).

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