

Squaring the Climate Circle A New Politics of Solidarity Can Heal a Divided Planet

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The science is in, the debates are over: we face a true climate emergency, and we must set out immediately on a path of dramatic global carbon emissions reductions. We must do so, moreover, despite all the other emergencies now competing for our attention. Further delay will only condemn us to a narrowing future in which worsening impacts fade towards critical tipping points.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in its recent Fourth Assessment Report, has given us the most authoritative and influential roundup of climate research yet published. It did so with a lagging and even conservative view of the scientific consensus. The latest science (ice melt and carbon cycle science¹ in particular) is more challenging than even the IPCC report would lead us to believe.

In response to that challenge, the scientific community is becoming increasingly forthright about the concentration targets, emission trajectories, and technology policies that we'll need if we're to rise to the occasion. We know now what we have to do. Our goal has to be the total decarbonization of the global economy, and as quickly as humanly possible.

A crucially important paper was recently published by a team led by NASA's noted climatologist Jim Hansen. It suggests that the continued growth of greenhouse gas emissions, for just another decade, will probably eliminate any remaining possibility of avoiding 'catastrophic effects', and that the challenge must therefore be seen in the very strongest terms:

The most difficult task, phase-out over the next 20-25 years of coal use that does not capture CO₂, is Herculean, yet feasible when compared with the efforts that went into World War II.

This, please note, is not merely a call for 'no new coal', or even a call for 'no new coal that doesn't capture CO₂.' It's a call to shut down all coal, everywhere, existing or new, that does not capture CO₂. And 25 years is not a long time. So: what would such an effort entail? Who would pay the cost? Who would pay the cost in the developing world? By what means and via what institutions? And if we were to set out on this path, how would we avoid empowering the nuclear lobby? Or facilitating the damming of every remaining valley and gorge, throughout the world, come what may?

Big questions, but there are more

Because the climate emergency comes to us on a sharply and bitterly divided planet in which the broad cooperation that's needed is in extremely short supply. In a nutshell: the wealthy and even the middle classes are – at least for now – largely insulated from the consequences of planetary despoliation, while, all around them, billions of impoverished people live out their lives in states of incessant, grinding, daily emergency.

In this context, the international climate negotiations have been able to make only the most achingly slow and inadequate progress. The impasse here bears lengthy analysis, but suffice it to say that, on the one side, the wealthy countries balk at making deep emissions cuts while the developing countries of the South are allowed to proceed without carbon caps of their own.

On the other side, southern decision makers feel entirely justified in refusing emissions reduction commitments that they fear will fatally undermine their access to development which, at least for the moment, is still strongly tied to increased carbon emissions. It's a classic deadlock, in which neither side is willing to make the difficult leap to a low-carbon future.

To break this impasse, large-scale technological progress on low-carbon energy is absolutely necessary. But the climate agenda must also be broadened to encompass the development crisis and, more particularly, the realities of the rich-poor divide. The extremely rapid global emissions reductions that we need are quite impossible without the South's earnest, fully-committed participation, but such a commitment will elude us as long as decarbonisation undermines, or even threatens to undermine, the southern development process.

In all this, of course, 'development' must be redefined. But even more importantly, any climate treaty that does not explicitly protect, and enable, the efforts of the poor and aspiring around the world to escape poverty and achieve a dignified level of material life is doomed to failure. There's no choice between climate protection and human development; we shall have both, or we shall have neither.

The situation is illustrated by Figure 1, which tells a story as simple as it is significant. Think of it as involving a bit of science, a bit of conjecture, and a bit of arithmetic.

The *top line is the science*. It represents the emergency emissions pathway needed to avoid a global climate catastrophe. The pathway drawn here gives us a reasonable likelihood of keeping total planetary warming below 2°C – the most widely cited threshold of 'dangerous climate change'. On this pathway – and there's no denying its ambition – global emissions peak by 2020 and then decline 80% by mid-century. Yet even so we would suffer considerable climate risks and a roughly 20-35% probability of overshooting the 2°C line.³ This trajectory cannot, by any means, be said to be 'safe'.

The *bottom line is conjecture*. It's not entirely far-fetched to suppose that the wealthy countries will make extremely ambitious domestic cuts. Thus, the bottom line supposes that all Annex 1 countries – chiefly the US, Canada, Europe, and Russia – manage to reduce their emissions as quickly and as deeply as Al Gore, for example, has called for in the US. It shows a 90% reduction in emissions (below 1990) by 2050 in all those countries, and by so doing it illustrates (as the area under the curve) the still-significant portion of the small remaining global carbon budget that the North would consume even if it were to follow this extremely ambitious course of emissions reductions.

If the North managed such a feat, what would it imply in the South? Here's where we come to the arithmetic, and thus to the middle line, which is produced by subtracting the bottom line from the top.

Thus, the *middle line shows how much emissions space would be left for the South*. And it's not much. In fact, to hold this line, the South would need to somehow develop along a path that peaks by 2020, and then begins to decline while its people, on average, are still quite poor. And this is precisely the challenge of climate stabilization in our very bitterly divided world. Because, as things stand today, nothing like this is likely to happen.

These three pathways, taken together, pose the central question of global climate politics: what sort of climate regime can enable this kind of future?

Squaring the circle

'It always seems impossible until it's done' – Nelson Mandela. The climate challenge demands that we find *transparently fair* ways of dividing the 'burdens' and 'efforts' of the global greenhouse transition, between nations and within them. To show how this could be done, EcoEquity and the Stockholm Environment Institute have developed the Greenhouse Development Rights (GDRs) framework,⁴ which is designed to support rapid global decarbonisation while, at the same time, safeguarding the right of all people everywhere to reach a reasonable, and sustainable, level of human development.

More particularly, the GDRs framework was developed under the premise that if the rich do not provide the technology and finance needed to drive an emergency program of clean energy development in the South, there's little hope of avoiding a global climate catastrophe.

Greenhouse Development Rights builds upon the official principles of the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change, according to which signatory states commit themselves to 'protect the climate system ... on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but

differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.’ On the basis, that is, of their historic and current *responsibility* for creating the problem and their *capacity* to pay for the solutions.

The GDRs framework combines the two into a single obligation indicator, which is used to determine both a nation’s obligations to reduce emissions and, critically, its obligations to pay for climate change adaptation efforts such as flood risk management and drought-resilient water systems.⁵

Within the GDRs framework, each nation is obligated to bear its ‘fair share’ of the global burden of climate stabilization, however large it turns out to be. If that burden turns out to be small (which is unlikely at this point), then even the US – a wealthy country with a large historical responsibility – will have a small obligation. But if it turns out to be large, then the transparency and fairness of the rules by which national obligations are determined will be absolutely critical. Under emergency conditions, obscure, ad hoc arrangements – products of closed-door horse-trading between government negotiators – simply will not do.

Such a principle-based approach solves a number of problems. For one thing, it means that a wealthy nation’s obligations can exceed the mitigation of its own emissions, as they must if we’re to support a sustainable emergency climate mobilization. Consider the US, which by dint of its outsized responsibility and capacity must inevitably bear a large fraction of any reasonably calculated global obligation.

Why then, as things stand today, do we speak only of the emissions cuts that it must make at home? True, those cuts must be large, but isn’t the real question how the US, through a mix of domestic and international efforts, can best fulfill its share of the necessary global effort?

Also, calculating national obligations as shares of a global effort opens the door to new ways to conceiving of those obligations, ways that actually make sense because they focus not on the confused distinction between the North and the South but rather on the more fundamental distinction between the rich and the poor. Is Saudi Arabia still a developing country? Is Singapore?

If so, does this mean that their elites, some of whom are extremely wealthy, should be exempt from all mandatory action under an emergency global climate transition? If so, then what about the US? Should it not also be exempt because so many of its citizens are both impoverished and powerless? If not, why not?

The truth is that no simple North-South model can yield a fair global burden-sharing system. In fact, to be defensibly fair, such a system must apportion obligations not between nations but between wealthy and developing *individuals*. Which is not to deny that this is a world of nations, or that, ultimately, nations and not individuals must accept and discharge the obligations of any climate treaty.

In the end, however, a nation’s obligations should come down to the obligations of its citizens. Only by looking at the problem in this way can we finally make sense of it. In practice, we have a choice. We can give up on the notion of a fair global climate transition, or we can take intranational inequality into proper account. GDRs chooses the latter path and proceeds pragmatically – it calculates national obligations in terms of a global ‘development threshold’ that divides the poor, their emissions, and their income from the emissions and economic activity of those above the threshold – not only the truly rich, but all members of the ‘global consuming class’.

GDRs builds upon older approaches to global climate justice, but rather than seeking to protect ‘survival emissions’ from the pressures of the climate regime, it sets the bar higher, and seeks to protect all economic activity below a ‘dignified level of human development’. The GDRs framework sets the ‘development threshold’ at \$9,000 per person per year (in purchasing power parity terms). This is a global threshold, and it is emphatically not an ‘extreme poverty’ line, which is typically defined to be so low (\$1 or \$2 a day) as to be more properly called a ‘destitution line’.

Rather, the GDRs development threshold is based on best-available notions of a ‘global poverty line’, and defined to reflect a level of welfare that’s beyond basic needs, but well short of today’s levels of ‘affluent’ consumption. People with incomes below the development

threshold have little responsibility for the climate problem and relatively little capacity to invest in solving it.

Here's the punch line: under a system like GDRs, even poor developing countries have obligations, but these are the obligations appropriate to their small wealthy, or relatively wealthy, sub-populations. And these sub-populations can be small indeed. In India's case, for example, less than 1% of the population has an income greater than the development threshold, and their combined income above the threshold – their capacity – is less than 1% of the aggregate national income.

Compare this to the US, where a much larger portion (nearly 90%) of the population has incomes above the threshold, and share an income above the threshold. Or China, which falls between India and the US with about 10% of its population in the global consuming class.

All of which is much easier to explain if you look at the GDRs' burden-sharing system as a global income tax, for then you see that the development threshold simply marks a '0% tax bracket', set so as to exempt the resources of those who've not yet reached it. This is why the US, with its large percentage of the world's rich population, has a lion's share of global capacity. It has a similarly disproportionate share of the global responsibility, and thus of the overall global obligation.

Indeed, the Greenhouse Development Rights system tells us that the US has about 36% of total global obligation, while China has about 3% and India has about one-tenth of one percent.⁶

These are striking numbers with extremely significant political implications. They mean, for example, that any parity implied by the innumerable press reports that Chinese emissions equal or will soon exceed US emissions is utter nonsense. For such 'parity' takes no account of developmental equity, historical emissions or capacity to pay. Even more significantly, the GDRs obligation numbers imply that the impasse between North and South, an impasse that threatens to condemn us to an emissions pathway that leads only to catastrophe, can actually be resolved.

This is because a global accord in which each nation pays its fair share is, finally, possible. Not that it would be easy to negotiate, or that it could be done without courage and leadership on all sides – in the North and the South, and among the NGOs as well. But legitimately defined, such an accord would neither endanger the development of the poor nor allow a free ride for the rich.

Transparent, well regulated systems are needed

Finally, two closely related points. First, the obligations calculated by Greenhouse Development Rights, or by any principle-based burden-sharing system, must be translated, at the end of the day, into (in the language of the declaration agreed at the 2007 UN climate talks in Bali) 'measurable, reportable, and verifiable' financial transfers from the rich world to the poor. In part these are obligations to pay for adaptation, but first they must support emissions reductions, because our overarching goal must be nothing less than the rapid and almost complete decarbonization of the *global* economy.

There's a lot to be said about these international financial transfers, but two points are critical – they will be large, and managing them properly is going to be a massive institutional challenge. What kind of institutions will we need to face that challenge? The only brief answer is 'all sorts of institutions', and all of them will have to be well designed and well regulated. This means that fund-based institutions will have to be effectively and democratically managed – easier said than done, as history has shown. And it means that market-based institutions will have to generate verifiable physical emissions reductions under a global cap, rather than continuing the tradition of fraud and cynicism so ably pioneered by the Clean Development Mechanism.

Second, it's no accident that Greenhouse Development Rights comes, in the end, to a progressive global tax. For while it's quite impossible to avoid the conclusion that, if we indeed wish to escape the climate trap, the wealthy must pay to make this possible, it's equally clear

that such payment cannot simply be seen as a subsidy paid by rich nations to developing ones. Even within the implacable logic of the North-South climate impasse, class differences within nations matter. Indeed, they are inescapable.

The US, for example, will never agree to pay its large fraction of the total global mitigation and adaptation 'bill' if the 'wealthy' people in the Indian and Chinese nations are not also paying their 'fair shares'.

In the end, only a few things matter. First, we are entirely justified in speaking of a global climate emergency. Secondly, even when resorting to such 'hot' language, we do nothing to cede our right to the language of hope. Which is why, among all the analogies now being invoked to speak of the necessary mobilization – an Apollo Project, a Marshall Plan, and so on – the best may well be the US World War II mobilization, and especially the 'New Deal' that made it possible.

It's particularly apt because that mobilization had a great deal to do with justice, with opportunity, with the solidarity of real as well as imaginary community. And if anything is clear about the climate mobilization, it's that solidarity will figure large this time around as well.

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Notes

1. Sutton, P. (2008) 'Climate Code Red: the case for a sustainability emergency,' at www.climatecodered.net, and, more formally, Lenton T.M. et al. (2008), 'Tipping elements in the Earth's climate system,' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 12 February.
2. Hansen, J. et. al., (2008) 'Target Atmospheric CO2: Where Should Humanity Aim?' www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/2008/TargetCO2_20080407.pdf
3. For details, see Baer, P. and Mastrandrea, M., 'High Stakes: Designing emissions pathways to reduce the risk of dangerous climate change,' London, 2006: Institute for Public Policy Research. www.ippr.org.
4. Baer, P., T. Athanasiou and S. Kartha, 2007. 'The Right to Development in a Climate Constrained World: The Greenhouse Development Rights Framework.' www.ecoequity.org/GDRs.
5. Although adaptation is often treated as secondary, it's anything but; a great deal of climate-related suffering is already 'locked into' our future, and it cannot be ignored. There are excellent reasons to doubt the viability of any climate stabilization framework that seeks to ignore or even minimize the need for global adaptation.
6. Greenhouse Development Rights is an open source policy framework. All data and calculations, for all countries and regions, are in the public domain, and alternative formulations are welcome. See www.ecoequity.org/GDRs.

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