



Equity: the next Frontier in Climate Talks

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In 1992, when the world met to discuss an agreement on climate change, equity was a simple concept: sharing the global commons—the atmosphere in this case—equally among all. It did not provoke much anxiety, for there were no real claimants. However, this does not mean the concept was readily accepted. A small group of industrialised countries had burnt fossil fuels for 100 years and built up enormous wealth. This club had to decide what to do to cut emissions, and it claimed all countries were equally responsible for the problem. In 1991, just as the climate convention was being finalised, a report, released by an influential Washington think tank, broke the news that its analysis showed India, China and other developing countries were equally responsible for greenhouse gases. Sunita Narain (director, Centre of Science and Environment) rebutted this and brought in the issue of equitable access to the global commons. We also showed, beyond doubt, that the industrialised countries were singularly responsible for the increased greenhouse gases.

In 1992, it was accepted that the occupied atmospheric space would need to be vacated to make room for the emerging world to grow because emissions are an outcome of economic growth. This acceptance recognised the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in reducing emissions. A firewall was built to separate those countries that had to reduce emissions to make space for the rest of the world to grow. That year in Rio de Janeiro, the world was talking about drastic cuts of 20 per cent below the 1990 levels to provide for growth as well as climate security. Even in that age of innocence, the negotiations were difficult and nasty. The US argued its lifestyle was non-negotiable and refused to accept any agreement specifying deep reductions. In 1998, the Kyoto Protocol set the first legal target for these countries much below what the world knew it needed to do.

Two decades later, the idea of equity has become an even more inconvenient truth. By now there are more claimants for atmospheric space. Emerging countries have emerged. China, which in 1990, with over a quarter of the world's population, was responsible for only 10 per cent of annual emissions, contributed 27 per cent by 2010. So, the fight over atmospheric space is now real. While the rich countries have not reduced emissions, the new growth countries have started emitting more. In 1990, the industrialised countries accounted for 70 per cent of the global annual emissions. In 2010, they accounted for 43 per cent but this is not because they have vacated space. The new growth countries—China in particular—have only occupied what was available. Emission reductions proposed 20 years ago have still not been committed or adhered to. In fact, in most already industrialised countries emissions have either stabilised or increased. In coal and extractive economies, like Canada and Australia, emissions have risen by 20 per cent and 46 per cent respectively.

The world has run out of atmospheric space and certainly of time. Will the rich, who contributed to emissions in the past and still take up an unfair share of this space based on their populations, reduce emissions? Or will the emerging countries be told to take over the burden? This is the big question, and an inconvenient one at that.

And mind you climate change is not the problem of the present but past contributions. The stock of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has a long life. This means that any discussion on how the carbon cake will be divided, must take into account those gases emitted in the past and still present. So while China accounts for 27 per cent of the annual emissions, in cumulative terms (since 1950) it still accounts for only 11 per cent. Similarly, India contributes 6 per cent to the annual global emissions, but is only responsible for 3 per cent of the stock. The rich countries, with less than a quarter of the world's population, are responsible for some 70 per cent of this historical burden. This stock of gases is responsible for an average global temperature rise of 0.8°C and another 0.8°C in future, which is inevitable. To keep temperature rise below 2°C, the world needs to cut emissions by 50-80 per cent below the 2000 levels by 2050. Now equity is no longer a moral idea, but a tough challenge. It is for this

reason that global climate negotiations reached their nadir in Durban. It is for this reason that the US and its coalition are hell bent on erasing any mention of historical emissions from all texts. It is for this reason that the rich world is pointing to the emission growth in China and India, and dismissing their need for development as their obdurate right to pollute.

It is also an idea that is difficult to sell in a world distrustful of idealism and any talk of distributive justice. Even climate change negotiators do not really believe this form of climate-socialism can happen. They will tell you that the world is never going to give up space, that the world is too mean to give money or technology to poor nations for transition to low-carbon growth.

But this is because they forget that climate change is the market's biggest failure. We cannot use the market for its repair. To avoid catastrophic changes it is essential to reach a collaborative agreement, which will be effective. And cooperation is not possible without fairness and equity. This is the prerequisite. Take it because we must.