

EQUITY AFTER PARIS

Introduction

Dangerous climate change is occurring now and hitting poorer people and countries first and worst. Poor people, who have emitted the least greenhouse gases, are through no fault of their own already suffering the worsening consequences of a disrupted climate, such as devastating tropical storms, destructive floods and crippling droughts, wildfires, and falling crop yields. There is no doubt, moreover, that all this is feeding back on itself, and multiplying vulnerabilities and inequalities, for the poor in all countries have the least ability to bounce back from climate disaster. Droughts and floods wreak havoc on the already precarious livelihoods of smallholder farmers, who live without any real social safety net. From Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, to drought in East Africa, to seawater encroachment in Bangladesh and glacial melt in Bolivia, the poorest are most at risk, and least able to respond and recover. Even in the wealthy United States, marginalized communities are left, often with astonishing levels of cynicism, to fend for themselves. Witness the abandonment and impoverishment that defined the aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, or the more recent, and even more cynical, abandonment of Puerto Rico.

Even though, after the Paris Agreement, all countries are clearly expected to act, (even those who opt out cannot step away from this reality), Paris is clearly failing to deliver the necessary ambition. Its first-round NDCs put us on track for a planetary warming of more than 3°C,¹ an unimaginable threat to nature as we know it and indeed to our entire civilization. Nor will an exclusive focus on implementation and an insistence that “we all have to do more” bridge the gap to 2°C, let alone 1.5°C. Nor does it help us face today’s deadly adaptation and loss & damage deficits.

Indeed, this misleading – or at best incomplete – framing of the situation is part of the problem. It sidesteps the fact that it is *specific* countries – overwhelmingly wealthy industrialized countries – which are failing to do their “fair share” of the global effort. And this carries profound political implications.

This is true despite the fact that current political trends make discussing such difficult matters extremely challenging. But the fact is that Paris’s bottom-up approach makes the equity and fair shares debate critical. Equity is not a moral or academic nicety, but a practical necessity in meeting the Paris goals. Yet, the Talanoa Dialogue – a key step in the Paris Agreement’s intended process of increasing ambition – has sidestepped any discussion of equity, how we got here, how countries’ efforts compare to what’s required, and what can reasonably be expected of countries, that is, their fair shares. And, unsurprisingly, it has so far proved ineffective at ratcheting up countries’ targets.

Our *Civil Society Equity Review* coalition has shown how a transparent articulation of the UNFCCC’s core equity principles – even within a general framework that encompasses a broad range of perspectives – can help us to understand the fairness, or unfairness, of individual national pledges. The point here is not “finger pointing,” nor is it to let any country off the hook. It is rather that no country can be inactive when it comes to climate action. This is why this *Civil Society Equity Review* coalition initiated this science- and equity-based assessment of the Paris NDCs – to help countries ratchet up their ambition. We believe that without equity an effective global response is impossible,

and we flatly reject claims that equity is “too political” and “too dangerous,” and that it risks the hard-won balance that gave us the Paris Agreement.

Indeed, this balance is worth little if it leaves us without a path to the Paris goals.

Equity and Ambition

Why is equity necessary?

It’s long been said that “equity is the pathway to ambition.” That is because the urgency of the climate crisis demands coordinated global action and international cooperation at an unprecedented scale. No single country can solve “its own” climate problem, even if it rapidly drives its own emissions to zero. Countries must act together to protect our shared climate. And for any country to take the truly ambitious steps that are now necessary, it must know that it is not acting pointlessly alone. Action on the necessary scale will only come when, everywhere, the opponents of action are confronted with the visible fact that other countries are also prepared to do their fair shares.

It is not enough for national pledges to be science-based; they must also be fair. They must take account of the irreducible fact that high-consuming individuals – most of them in wealthy countries – have disproportionately contributed to the global emissions burden. Even more importantly, national pledges must take account of the fact that wealthy countries have greater economic and institutional capacity to act than other countries, and that their obligations are naturally greater than that of countries that have little emissions or capacity, and still face developmental challenges. Only when countries recognize these disparities, and then act in line with them, can we hope to meet the Paris Agreement goals. These realities, of course, have always been recognized in the climate negotiations – and are known by the name “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” – but we have determinedly shied away from facing up to what this principle actually *means* in today’s dynamic and discordant world.

Equity among nations and among individuals

This fact that “equity is the gateway to ambition” goes beyond the UNFCCC and the rules of a global climate regime. What can be said about *inequity among countries* at the international level can just as surely be said about *inequality among individuals* at the national level. To undertake deeper national climate efforts, a broader consensus within national populations is absolutely necessary. The international “fair shares” challenge is thus, inevitably, a national debate as well, one which will occur everywhere where populations suffer stark economic inequality.

Obviously, this inequality within nations raises issues that sprawl far beyond the ambit of the climate negotiations, where equity among nations is the primary point of contention. But looking at equity among individuals when considering equity among nations can clarify the stakes, at both at the national the global levels.

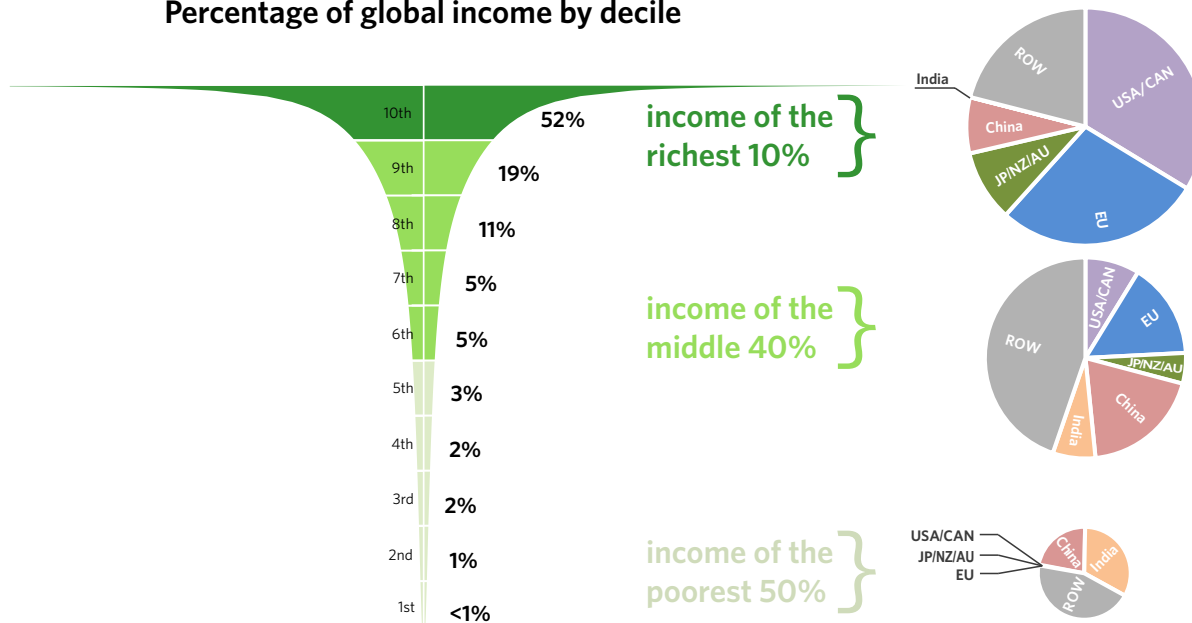
The injustices here are striking. The diagram below² is the well-known “champagne glass,” showing the obscene disparities in global income distribution. The richest 10% of the global population commands *more than half* of global income (the dark green bar). And that income is earned

overwhelmingly in the wealthy countries, primarily in US and EU (see the pie charts to the right of the diagram).

In contrast, the poorest half of the world earns less than one-tenth of the global total income (see the 5 light green sections). The wealthiest people in every country live starkly different lives from the poor, many of who survive on less than \$2 per day and generate almost no emissions.

Between them, with 40% of the global income, is the group that many are tempted to call the global middle class, though the term, with its connotations of comfort and security, is hardly appropriate. (Most all the income earned in poorer countries, such as India, is distributed sparsely among the members of its global lower- and middle-income groups.) In fact, most of the people in the “global middle class” are actually quite poor. Consider, for example, an income threshold of \$20 per day – ten times higher than the abject poverty threshold of \$2 per day – and the eminently defensible claim that income below that \$20 threshold is entirely spoken for, as a matter of basic needs and the struggle to establish some modicum of economic security. Fully two-thirds of the human population falls below this \$20 threshold!

Percentage of global income by decile



The “champagne glass” on the left represents the share of global income received by each decile (i.e., one tenth) of the world’s population, from the wealthiest (the top decline, receiving more than half of the world’s income) to the poorest (the bottom decline, receiving less than 1% of the world’s income). The three pie charts to the right represent, by their sizes, the share of global income that goes to the top 10%, the middle 40%, and the bottom 50% (top, middle, and bottom pie charts, respectively). The pie charts are divided into segments that show the countries where that income is received. ROW= Rest of the World; JP/NZ/AU=Japan, New Zealand and Australia; USA/CAN= United States and Canada

These disparities are extremely closely paralleled by disparities in emissions. The richest 10% of the world’s population, for example, is responsible for about 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions.³ And, again, these people overwhelmingly reside, and consume, within the world’s wealthy countries. Their emissions support lifestyles that simply cannot, on a finite planet, be shared by all. Clearly, in any fair approach to international cooperation, these high emitting, high

wealth countries (along with their consumption patterns and their “luxury” emissions), must be treated very differently from poor countries with their minimal emissions.

The widely differing capacities of countries are directly linked to real, human development outcomes such as infant mortality, malnutrition rates, and life expectancy. And widely differing levels of national historical emissions are directly linked to differing levels of travel, fuel consumption, food consumption, access to electricity, and so on. Given this, it’s no surprise that the wealthy countries were committed in the UNFCCC agreement to “take the lead in combating climate change”.

So while we must all take responsibility for the climate mobilization, the rich must take responsibility in very different ways than the poor, or even the 40% of the human population that is in the global “middle class.” They must take responsibility for their consumption, their emissions, and the environmental impacts they impose on the planet. They can far more easily afford to lessen their footprint than those whose impacts are already minimal.

It follows that the economies where the wealth of the rich is now concentrated must allocate the necessary resources to support a global transformation, one that goes beyond the reconstruction of their own new energy systems, and also provides meaningful financial and technological resources to enable poorer countries to transition to low-emission paths as well. In our world of extreme disparities, the claim that human society “can’t afford” an urgent climate mobilization is a malign fiction. Only by discarding it can we hope to close the very real, and frankly terrifying, gigaton gap.

The climate response that we need is of course far greater than decarbonization alone. The three other great challenges – adaptation and loss & damage on one side and just transition on the other – are no less important. And while the cost of solar electricity is falling fast, the same cannot be said about the cost of adaptation, or the costs of loss and damage, or the costs of just transition assistance, which will be great in every country of the world, and which only grow with delay. The economies of the wealthy must invest to help make communities everywhere resilient against the growing threats posed by climate impacts.

A recent opinion piece in the *New York Times* put with the situation with admirable simplicity, arguing that “there are no technological limits” to supporting “eight billion, or even to 11 billion, people, with far less harm than we’re currently causing to the one planet all of us must live on.” To be sure there is a problem, but it’s not an insoluble one. The problem is that:

“To do so is merely costly. Extremely costly, because rebuilding energy systems to make them carbon neutral, ensuring that land, water and other resources are used sustainably, adapting to climate change and cleaning up pollution don’t come cheap. But there is one hard limit. No better future will be possible if those most able to bear the costs — those who’ve benefited the most, the wealthy and the vested interests of this world — don’t step up to pay for it.”⁴

Implications and Recommendations for the Talanoa Dialogue

Any climate response that abandons the demands of international equity – that does not recognize the stark income disparities among countries and then differentiate expectations accordingly – will

only exacerbate inequalities, both among countries and within them. Any approach that does not recognize that the overriding priority for many countries remains poverty eradication and economic and social development will only further impoverish the poor. Any approach that does not require the wealthy to contribute to an extremely rapid climate transition, supporting poor people and poor countries as they seek to develop along low-carbon paths while at the same time adapting to the worsening impacts of climate change, is doomed to fail.

We need dramatically more ambitious NDCs... from all countries. No country's current pledge even remotely reflects a

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future consistent with a 1.5°C pathway. We need fair-share pledges that are explicitly designed to support a rapid phase out of fossil fuel consumption and production, an equally rapid transition to 100% renewables, and concerted efforts to anticipate and prepare for impending climate impacts. We need strong pledges that launch the immediate transformation needed to prevent warming rising above 1.5°C, not weak pledges that have us vastly overshooting 1.5°C while hand-waving about future negative emissions.

Further, the wealthy countries must provide the financial and technological support that will make it possible for developing countries to follow through with sufficiently ambitious pledges. Though they are morally and legally obliged to provide such support, the wealthy countries have sought to weaken their obligations under the climate regime and to shift the focus of UNFCCC processes to each countries' own domestic mitigation. International support has been increasingly side-lined, with the bulk of the “cooperative implementation” efforts aimed at promoting carbon markets and offsets systems, which have simply not proven effective at mobilizing resources or reducing emissions.⁵

The elements of a fair and effective approach could include:

- Commitment to domestic mitigation pledges in line with fair shares and a 1.5°C pathway.
- Adoption by wealthy countries of explicit quantified commitments to support mitigation and adaptation in developing countries.
- More clearly specified developing country support needs, relative to conditional or more ambitious targets, either as part of NDCs or as supplemental information;
- Creation of a mechanism under the UNFCCC for matching offers of support with needs and requests.
- Arrangements under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement that go beyond emissions trading to effective non-market approaches to facilitate scaled up cooperation, which could involve support for projects, policies, and programs that result in concrete and quantified emissions reductions and enhanced climate resilience.

A rapid climate transition is of course essential, but there is also the overarching imperative of ensuring that it is a just transition, an imperative that begins with support for the most vulnerable, and includes fossil-dependent workers and communities. In this context, implementation in all countries must be premised on bold and visionary plans for social protection, and must set the course toward more just and inclusive societies. And this must be done in ways that not only

protect but indeed strengthen impacted and vulnerable communities. A politically viable transition will be based on democratic dialogs at all levels, in which all can envision themselves thriving.⁶

Conclusion

The challenge now is to mobilize within the bottom-up Paris architecture. This means a transformative global regime that is driven by transformative national action, and this means equity at all levels. There is no trade off here. Unless the transition is broadly experienced – by countries and by the communities within them – as being fair, there is not going to be a transition at all. An effective climate response can only be one that recognizes the lived reality of a twice-divided world in which inequality within countries and inequity between them are really two sides of one coin.

Given this, the costs of the climate transition are ultimately going to have to be borne by the people who have the money, and this is going to have to be true both within countries and between them. Whatever international support the wealthy countries provide to the poorer ones must, by necessity, be provided by wealthy people. This is, obviously, not going to happen if the wealthy people who reside within, or who have hidden their wealth within, poorer countries somehow manage to get a pass. That wealth helps constitute the capacities of the nations within which they reside. Nor is it going to happen if the poor people of the wealthy world, who are already feeling angry and begrieved, are somehow stuck with the bill.

To be sure, climate equity — among countries and within them — may well be shunted aside in favor of the interests of the elites. After all, inequalities in wealth are directly paralleled by inequalities in power. Elites are able not only to set frames and agendas, but also to overbear our fragile democracies with their preferences, to engineer trade relations that undermine community resilience around the world, to spread disinformation at will, and to sabotage all efforts to mobilize at the needed scale. This, indeed, quite explains how we've arrived at our current state.

Societies, particularly when they're under environmental pressure, stumble toward collapse when their elites, those who set collective priorities and allocate resources, distance themselves from the realities and afflictions of the population as a whole, and come to act so single-mindedly, so much by the logic of narrow self-interest, that they become blind to the larger predicament.⁷ And the same can be said, it seems, of a world in which rich countries let poor countries fall to famine and rising seas, blind to the inevitable fact that their fate will ultimately be the same.

1 Climate Interactive (<https://www.climateinteractive.org>)

2 Source: Climate Equity Reference Calculator (<https://www.climateequityreference.org/calculator>) based on data from IPCC AR5 Scenario Database, IMF World Economic Outlook, UNU-WIDER World Income Inequality Database

3 See, for example, "Extreme Carbon Inequality," a widely cited Oxfam International report (<https://oxf.am/2FMYtY2>)

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/11/opinion/sunday/science-people-environment-earth.html>

5 <https://unfccc.int/process/the-paris-agreement/cooperative-implementation>

6 Much more could be said about the details of a just transition, but excellent resources are to be found at <https://ituc-csi.org/climate-change>; <https://ituc-csi.org/just-transition-where-are-we-now>

7 This point was put forward by anthropologist Jared Diamond in his 2005 bestseller, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*.