

OPINION

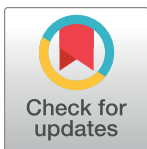
Climate obstruction in the Global South: Future research trajectories

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Abstract

“Climate Obstruction” broadly refers to campaigns and other policy actions led by well-organized and financed networks of corporate and other actors who have actively sought to prevent global and/or national action on climate change over the past four decades. In turn, these campaigns often shape public debates, which can affect political support and collective mobilization to mitigate climate change. However, to date, most of the research on climate obstruction has focused on countries in the Global North, especially the United States. Given considerable gaps in research and knowledge, this opinion paper presents a future research agenda needs to shine greater light on if and in what form climate obstruction in the Global South appears.

1. Introduction

“Climate Obstruction” broadly refers to campaigns and other policy actions led by well-organized and financed networks of corporate and other actors who have actively sought to prevent global and/or national action on climate change over the past four decades [1]. Their efforts have delayed ambitious climate action using organized mainstream and social media campaigns, lobbying, funding politicians and political campaigns, and disseminating climate-delaying discourses and practices [2]. In turn, these campaigns often shape public debates, which can affect political support and collective mobilization to mitigate climate change. However, to date, most of the research on climate obstruction has focused on countries in the Global North, especially the United States. Given considerable gaps in research and knowledge, a future research agenda needs to shine greater light on if and in what form climate obstruction in the Global South appears.

2. Locating climate obstruction in domestic policy and politics

Domestic policy options and politics in the Global South are often distinct from those in the Global North. In the Global South, climate delay is a frequently deployed tactic of climate obstruction and is often linked to a justification for expanded economic growth or the need to address energy poverty. Underpinned by claims of improving well-being and economic growth, approaches to domestic energy and environmental policy reinforce trajectories that include and, in some cases expand, the use of fossil fuel-based resources, particularly where alternative energy sources are limited, and cheaper (often subsidized) fossil fuels are promoted [3]. In turn, these resources are often supplied by powerful state and non-state actors that can dictate the terms of debate. As an example, in Vietnam, strong ties between Vinacomin, a state-owned mining company, Electricity of Vietnam, the state-owned power company, and the Ministry of Industry and Transportation have allowed these three entities to slow progress towards renewable energy development [4].

Claims of improving well-being through fossil-fuel-powered economic growth often disguise the fact that benefits are often captured exclusively by economic and political elites, both nationally and transnationally [5]; a similar feature to climate obstruction in the Global North. For instance, recent research shows that despite its progress in generating electricity from renewable energy, India has also increased coal use in its overall energy mix to enhance its economic growth. Meanwhile, India's delegation at the United Nations Climate Conference in Paris in 2015 argued that poor countries like India should be allowed to continue with carbon emissions to grow their economies, characterizing its position as championing 'climate justice' for poor countries [6]. Yet in-depth research on Indian government's actions suggests a dismal record of prioritizing the needs of economically poor and socially marginalized communities, whose lives, in over a quarter century of steady economic growth, has increased domestic economic inequalities [7]. Similar impacts can be found in Vietnam, where the state focus on expanding coal-fired power plants with little consultation has resulted in environmental justice harms to local communities from pollution and loss of land [8].

3. Locating climate obstruction in global and transnational networks

The international political economy and the nation-state are critical in creating the conditions and the arenas, which have shaped the emergence of climate obstruction in the Global North. Therefore, research is needed on how in-country or domestic actors (including the state, and corporations) respond to the global and transnational networks, are funded by them, and begin implementing activities related to lobbying, disinformation, and dissemination of non-scientific views on climate change. For example, the fossil fuel industry is the leading purveyor of climate obstruction in the US, the agribusiness sector, one of the fastest-growing contributors to emissions (now recognized in the Global North too), is more prominent in climate obstruction activities in Latin America [9]. Identifying and examining actors who have benefited from the current economic *status quo* and have heavily contributed to the rise in greenhouse gas emissions in the Global South is thus a complex task.

Within the complex relations of the international political economy, transnational links may then impact climate obstruction in the Global South. For instance, there is growing evidence of the documented and considerable ties between, for example, USA, Japanese, and European financial and private sector institutions, with high-carbon/dirty sectors in the Global South [10]. China and other (re)emerging powers also have a role in framing and practicing development, through South-South cooperation programs, with China rising as the favored source of development financing. While some climate activist NGOs in the Global South have

been able to network and connect to counter these powerful industry and other lobby groups, the constricted space for civil society groups in many global South countries and lack of financing for their activities has prevented them from having stronger impacts [11], and in some cases they have been specifically targeted for repression. For example, in Vietnam, several prominent anti-coal activists were recently prosecuted on trumped-up tax evasion charges and jailed [12].

4. Theorizing climate obstruction in the global South

The Global South is not a homogenous group, with variations in structural position, geographical size and latitude, political systems, economies, industries, demography, and exposure to climate changes, among others, calling for a look at these similarities and differences among these countries as well. A particular complication arises because considerations of theory to understand climate obstruction are generally situated in knowledge based on US experiences and scholarly articles. As such, conceptual and theoretical understandings of climate obstruction in the Global South are under development. The conceptual and theoretical orientation adopted must also reflect on how this is related to historic emissions. We argue that the idea of common but differentiated responsibility must actively shape our understanding and examination of climate obstruction in Global South nations. Notably, one argument that has been advanced is that many climate-vulnerable countries in the Global South bear little or no responsibility to address carbon emissions because of their historically lower contribution to global warming than advanced industrial countries. Contradictions between climate justice and obstruction must be at the centre of our analyses. The response to the structural conditions imposed by the Global North, states and corporations, can often be understood theoretically as ecologically unequal exchange and climate injustice [13]. Hence, in response to the systematic inequalities rooted in and shaped by the damage of colonial and imperialist histories, *some* countries in the Global South have prioritized highly centralized models of economic development often leading to the sidelining of climate and other environmental policies. In other instances, domestic political and economic elites have centralized policymaking on both environment and development questions, which allows these domestic elites to cynically exploit domestic policymaking processes for maintaining the status quo [14]. Moreover, exacerbated by the Global North's lack of confirmed financial and technological support for mitigation, adaptation and compensation for loss and damages, understanding climate obstruction in Global South nations must be understood with this historic, political, and economic context in mind while also acknowledging if and how these arguments are used as legitimations for further higher unequal development.

5. Conclusion

COP26 and COP27 revealed an apparent resurgence and series of commitments to tackling the climate emergency, where world leaders verbally agreed to implement strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate changes. However, climate obstruction movements, including institutional and non-state actors, corporations and conservative think tanks who consistently delayed commitments in the past, appear to have increased their influence on climate discourse, especially in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and pro-growth post-pandemic packages wherein gas and coal have reemerged as important energy sources. In the Global South, climate obstruction is especially fraught due to historical and contemporary structures of inequality bolstering justifications for various forms of delay. As such, [Table 1](#) incorporates urgent future research directions include the role of *developmentalism discourses, negotiating blocs at the negotiations, political leaders and their coalitions, transnational links,*

Table 1. Research topics and questions.

Topic	Potential Question(s)
Developmentalism discourses	What role does developmental discourse play in justifying the expansion of unsustainable developments? What role does developmental discourse play in justifying the delay of low carbon development path?
Negotiating blocs	What role do negotiating blocs play in stalling in-country efforts to reduce GHG emissions in countries in the Global South?
Political leaders and their coalitions	What political regimes and leadership types lead to different climate obstruction modalities and trajectories?
Transnational links	What role do different types of economies such as extractive, industrial and agro-industrial, service, tourism-dependent etcetera, play in different types of climate obstruction strategies, discourses, influence over governments and legislative bodies, and organizational structures?
Sovereignty claims	Does colonial history, land/resource ownership, and sovereignty help us understand energy transitions in the Global South? How do discourses of sovereignty and energy independence impact the construction of climate related legislation and policy?
Domestic energy industry	How does obstruction relate to the state's role (or state-market relations) and other actors like civil society organizations (or state-society relations) in the Global South? How are domestic policies in the Global South influenced by technical assistance projects implemented by their development partners (donors)? How do international partnerships affect climate policies in the Global South? What tensions exist between the requirements of current domestic energy consumers and the impacts of delayed energy transitions and how do these manifest in political discourse?
Religion and ethics	What role do religions, religious beliefs and religious organizations play in influencing the nature of civil society and state and legal structures related to climate change?
Media	How are media outlets connected to obstruction actors in Global South nations? If and how do states and private media companies influence broadcast, print, and social media content in-country on the issue of climate change?
Impacts of green technology	What role does technical assistance and development partnerships play in transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy and other mitigation actions in expanding or reducing climate obstruction?
Cooptation of scientific expertise	To what degree does the cooptation of educational institutions and their associates and expertise enable climate obstruction in the Global South?

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sovereignty claims, climate nationalism, and domestic energy industries and their influence as part of obstruction efforts that appear to emerge in the Global South. This is not an exhaustive list with research gaps that merit investigation.

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Writing – review & editing: Guy Edwards, Paul K. Gellert, Omar Faruque, Kathryn Hochstetler, Pamela D. McElwee, Prakash Kaswhan, Ruth E. McKie, Carlos Milani, Timmons Roberts, Jonathan Walz.

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