

Moving from the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ to ‘equitable access to sustainable development’ will aid international climate change negotiations.

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As part of our series on the Dahrendorf Symposium, [Marcus Hedahl](#) writes on international climate change negotiations. He notes that negotiations were initially carried out under the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’, in which the developed world should bear the bulk of the responsibility for tackling climate change due to its historic emissions and greater financial resources. He argues that a potential shift away from this focus toward a new principle of ‘equitable access to sustainable development’ may provide a better structure for both developed and developing world countries to deal with the issue.



During the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC) negotiations in 1992, both developed and developing countries had concerns about the allocation of future Green House Gas emissions and the distribution of the associated costs. Developed countries wanted an inclusive international agreement for maximum effect and legitimacy. Developing countries, on the other hand, hesitated to commit themselves to reduction targets given the past history of global emissions.

In order to reach a comprehensive international agreement that brought all the necessary players to the table, the first Conference of Parties used the principle of Common but Differentiated responsibility to strike a political compromise. The Frameworks [states](#): “The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.”

The principle of ‘Common but Differentiated Responsibilities’ involves three key features. First, it establishes the [common responsibility of all States](#) to protect the environment of the earth. Second, it [requires](#) states to pay “in accordance with their . . . differentiated responsibilities . . . [because] . . . the largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developed countries” Third, it requires states to pay “[in accordance with . . . their respective capabilities](#).” In sum, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities suggests that all states bear a responsibility for protecting climate-related rights, but how much each state should pay depends on two factors: [their historic emissions and their ability to pay](#).



Power station in Helsinki, Credit: Timo Newton-Syms (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Unfortunately, we find ourselves twenty-one years further on without reform, comprehensive collective agreement,

or climate justice. The current system lurches forward, as do the aggregate and devastating consequences of our greenhouse gas emissions. It would surely be folly to foist all the blame for insufficient international accord on the morally laudable ideal of common but differentiated responsibilities; for, as a theoretical matter, the concept is reducible to the three normative conclusions considered above.

However, focusing on differentiated responsibilities leads to questions about [how differentiated those responsibilities are and why](#). While those considerations are helpful, even necessary, they too often cause us to mistakenly label climate change mitigation and adaptation measures as static exercises with winners and losers. It is not surprising that focusing on questions of ‘how much each nation can emit?’ and ‘who should pay?’ leads us to representing the problems of climate change as a competitive, zero-sum game. Unfortunately, that approach has led to an international paralysis that is devastating for the planet.

It is encouraging therefore to see a potential shift in focus to considerations of “[Equitable Access to Sustainable Development](#),” a potentially useful way of reframing the moral issues surrounding climate change that may help bridge the gap between developed and developing countries. Of course, a mere change in language is no panacea. There is, in fact, a real risk that this new language will be regarded as [nothing more than a novel justification for familiar positions](#).

Nonetheless, the concept of ‘Equitable Access to Sustainable Development’ has the potential to provide a [more useful structure](#) in which to consider the moral issues surrounding anthropogenic climate change. By focusing on access and development, this framework can shift our attention to the potential for shared and recognisable mutual gain. It forces us to consider how developed and developing countries can together find an approach to stimulate development and reduce poverty that is [both effective and sustainable](#). It highlights novel opportunities for mutual gain, allowing us to view one another as potential collaborators rather than competitors.

Significantly, replacing ‘Common but Differentiated Responsibilities’ with ‘Equitable Access to Sustainable Development’ does not require a sacrifice of equal consideration in order to gain an aggregate benefit. On the contrary, considerations of climate justice are embedded within the idea of fostering a dynamic and just transition to a low-carbon economy. In fact, a framework of equitable access to sustainable development can highlight important issues of climate justice which are too often neglected in our moral thinking.

First, Equitable Access to Sustainable Development requires [empowering those in developing countries](#) to choose how they develop sustainably and how they manage climate change risks. Importantly, this empowerment is not driven by instrumental or epistemic considerations. In other words, it is not merely that locals are aware of the rich and lush particulars of how a given policy would impact a given region. Since these structures are impacting duties owed to them, locals have the authority to play some role in determining how those duties get crafted.

Second, equitable access to sustainable development can emphasise that the way in which we work to minimise the impacts of climate change is itself normatively significant. Many of the adaptation and even mitigation efforts will turn out to be local. In the developed world, they will be done as part of normal recapitalisation of infrastructure. In the developing world, they will often be done as part of a larger effort aimed at development and alleviation of poverty. Yet these adaptation efforts of developed nations ought to be understood through the lens of removing ourselves from (some of) the damaging effects of climate change without eliminating the activities that lead to those effects. We should, no doubt, adapt, but recognising the issues of ‘Equitable Access to Sustainable Development’ requires us [to link the adaptation efforts](#) in developed countries to the adaptation efforts in developing countries.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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