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Climate justice is not just ice

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Abstract

Discussions about climate change and justice frequently employ dichotomies of procedural and distributive justice, and inter- and intra-generational justice. These distinctions, however, often fail to acknowledge the diverse experience of climate risks, or the contested nature of many proposed solutions. This paper argues for a reassessment of debates about climate justice based upon a greater diversity of risks and solutions such as integrating the reduction of social vulnerability simultaneously with mitigation. In effect, this implies reassessing the implicit use of Rawls' model of justice as fair allocation of predefined risks and solutions, and instead considering Sen's understanding of justice as inclusive debate about which risks require which solutions.

Keywords: climate change, justice, development

Highlights

- The paper analyzes implicit assumptions made in many debates about climate change and justice, and distinguishes the common frames of procedural and distributive justice; and inter- and intra-generational justice.
- It argues that the analysis of justice needs to be applied to implicit assumptions about how climate change poses risks, and in turn how these create apparent solutions; and how far these are shared between more and less vulnerable people and countries.
- Models of just allocations of supposedly ‘global’ risks and solutions therefore need to be reassessed according to how far they reflect these diverse experiences.
- In turn, this analysis implies reassessing implicit Rawlsian approaches to justice based on fair allocation, and exploring a more Senian approach of inclusive deliberation about which risks require which solutions. In climate change policy this implies reducing social vulnerability and building adaptive capacity in ways that are complementary to mitigation.

Climate justice is not just ice

Environmental politics too often conflates what is urgent and distressing with what is just. In January 2011, newspapers reported how a female polar bear in the Arctic Ocean had swum continuously for an unprecedented nine days, losing her cub. Many commentators linked this event to how anthropogenic climate change is melting sea ice. ‘Polar bears ...only occur in the Arctic where sea ice is found,’ said biologist George Durner, who conducted the survey. ‘By reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we can save sea ice habitat for polar bears.’¹

At the same time, environmental activists in the USA were suing their government on behalf of polar bears. The government had, in late 2010, refused to amend the US Endangered Species Act in order to re-classify polar bears as ‘endangered’ rather than the less serious ‘threatened.’ One litigant declared: ‘The Obama administration delivered a lump of coal to the polar bear for Christmas. Ultimately, we are confident the court will ...give polar bears the legal protection to which they are entitled.’²

Asking law courts to issue rights on behalf of polar bears is one example of how climate change and justice are now being linked. Yet, while the concerns about polar bears and many other aspects of climate change are indeed distressing and need attention, it does not always follow that imposing fast solutions is necessarily just.

¹ <http://www.onearth.org/article/polar-bears-nine-day-swim> Accessed November 2012.

² http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press_releases/2010/polar-bear-12-23-2010.html This statement is by the Center for Biological Diversity; other litigants include Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Accessed November 2012.

Political processes need to pay more attention to how environmental problems – and solutions – are identified and seen as just.

What's wrong with justice?

Environmental debates frequently use two main dichotomies to define justice. Yet, both overlap more than commonly thought. Both need to be rethought.

The first dichotomy distinguishes distributive and procedural justice (Okereke, 2010a, b; Schlosberg, 2007; Sowers, 2007). Rawls' (1971) classic discussion is most associated with distributive justice because it seeks a fair allocation to all parties if they adopt a procedure – called the 'veil of ignorance' – that asks them to imagine a fair allocation if no party can control the process of distribution. Sen's (2009) positive critique of Rawls accepts this concept of justice, but also emphasizes procedure by arguing that rights of participation and inclusion are still evolving.

The second common dichotomy is between intra-generational justice and inter-generational justice. The first protects the rights of future generations. The second seeks equality between current generations. Usually, these positions are linked to more developed societies and currently poorer countries (Redclift, 1987; Shue, 1992).

Both of these dichotomies, however, fall down under two questions: who has defined ecological risks? What procedures can allow new participants to redefine risks? Rawls' distributive approach is based on a procedure that does not question environmental goods and bads. And the distinction between inter- and intra-

generational justice is false because inter-generational justice is seeking the same rights to protect poorer societies' future generations through securing access to development, with all its capacity to withstand environmental and other risks, today.

Applying justice to environmental problems therefore is not simply based on allocating currently perceived risks and solutions, but on expanding how risks and solutions are defined. This is not a new activity. For years, much social science has emphasized the need to distinguish between protecting ecosystems as underlying entities, and in seeing the limitations in ecological concepts that have emerged to describe them. Problems emerge when these concepts and explanations are applied out of context (Forsyth, 2003, p. 6).

Al Gore's book, *Earth in the Balance* (1992, pp. 246-247) famously stated: 'as it happens, the idea of social justice is inextricably linked in the Scriptures with ecology.' This statement clearly justifies norms of social behaviour on the basis of fixed and unchanging 'ecology.' But Gore's assertion does imply how social norms have defined 'ecology.' There is much in Gore's vision of ecology that is a metaphor for acting responsibly within limits. Indeed, ecologists in the 1960s dubbed ecology 'the subversive science' because it represented a communal response to individualism. Eugene Odum (1964, p. 15) wrote '[ecology] deals with the structure and function of levels of organization beyond that of the individual,' and Paul Sears (1964, p. 12) 'by its very nature, ecology affords a continuing critique of man's operations.' Some people therefore use ecology as a framework for social justice. But the social influences on ecology – as a series of explanations of biophysical processes of cause-and-effect – are often only partially explored.

One example concerned how questions of including poorer countries were addressed under the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group III. Some members were criticised in the 1990s for calculating the ‘value of life’ in accordance with national GDP – a procedure caricatured as valuing ‘one European as equal to ten Chinamen’ (Grubb, 1995, p. 471) (see also Vanderheiden, 2005). Yet, while policy analysts such as Michael Grubb sought to restore public trust in the IPCC by saying ‘there is a danger that economic evaluations... seek to enshrine in apparent objectivity the current value system of the practitioner’ (p. 472), other apparently objective claims go unexamined. Grubb, for example, starts his paper by focusing on ‘the increasingly pressing need for humanity to face the finite nature of the planet, and in doing so address the distributional issues relating to coping with the impacts of climate change’ (p. 463). In other words, Grubb wishes to assess the implicit assumptions in economic analysis of different nations’ vulnerability to climate change. But he does not consider how projections of climate change impacts themselves might also contain assumptions when applied to ‘humanity.’ How might the identification of impacts be based on equitable principles? And how does this affect the justice of proposed solutions?

Rethinking distributive and procedural environmental justice

Both the fixed basis of climate change impacts and the categories used to evaluate inclusiveness in climate change policy need to be rethought to achieve a fairer form of climate justice. The distribution of climate change solutions need to be defined in

ways that do not delegitimize appropriate economic growth; or which create additional risks from imposed policies.

For example, in a recent World Bank publication, experts in the Environment Section called for a greater restoration of natural ecosystems as a way to enhance poorer people's ability to cope with climate change impacts – an approach called 'Ecosystem-based Approaches to Adaptation' (World Bank, 2009). This report states: 'natural ecosystems are resistant and resilient and provide a full range of goods and ecosystem services...' (p. 47), but then claims 'agriculture is already one of the greatest threats to natural ecosystems worldwide' (p. 63). This statement does not acknowledge that successful agriculture feeds people, provides livelihoods, and can contribute to national GDP. Many richer countries better able to cope with climate change have partly grown their economies through agriculture.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has also framed policies in terms of fast and low-cost mitigation of greenhouse gas concentrations rather than combining these actions with building social and economic resilience. 'Adaptation' to climate change has been seen mainly as reducing impacts of physical events such as floods and storms, rather than more development-oriented approaches such as diversifying livelihood options in affected regions (Burton, 2009). These approaches seek to address climate-change risk in terms of the additional biophysical events that can be linked to greater greenhouse-gas concentrations, rather than understand what social, economic, and political lack of capacity might make these physical changes problematic among poorer societies. Indeed, mitigation,

crudely and cheaply done, can enhance social vulnerability and hence incur additional social injustices (Marino and Ribot, 2012).

Accordingly, as things stand, the UNFCCC Adaptation Fund is partly funded through a two percent levy on proceeds of certified emissions reduction units coming from the UNFCCC's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Yet, critics from developing countries have often complained that the CDM has not delivered its original intention to enhance 'sustainable development' in accordance with the objectives of the UNFCCC because it has largely focused on fast mitigation projects such as greenhouse gas destruction, rather than building livelihoods or local technological capacities in poorer countries (Boyd et al., 2009). Related projects that encourage fast-mitigation through carbon-offset forestry have also been claimed to lock up land with little immediate developmental benefit. The assumption is that fast mitigation or carbon sequestration will benefit all. But, mitigating global greenhouse gas concentrations with no attention to local social vulnerability to climate change or climate change policies might create additional risks for local people. According to (Kjellén, 2006, p. ix) 'there is a risk that present adaptation strategies may reinforce vulnerability, if not properly conceived and legitimately implemented.'

An alternative approach is seeking solutions that mitigate climate change without compressing the rights to growth or the protection of vulnerable people. These kinds of options incorporate the essence of Rawls' search for inclusive benefits, but require us to reconsider what benefits are being distributed. One possible example is the proposed AdMit financial instrument, which seeks investors for projects that can

combine mitigation and adaptation.³ These projects can reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as contribute to poverty reduction, development, and the sustainable use of resources. For example, urban waste management can mitigate climate change through methane capture and recycling, but also provide livelihoods if they employ local waste sorters (Forsyth, 2007). Indeed, new initiatives to integrate climate change policy, agriculture and food security⁴ offer more possibilities for development dividends than sequestration alone. These kinds of activities do not just slow down physical rates of environmental change – that is to say, keep ice frozen. Instead, they also address additional facets of climate risk such as reducing the vulnerability of poorer societies in dealing with climate events. They do not assume common benefits from a single goal of mitigation alone.

Conclusion

Debates about climate justice need to acknowledge the limitations of commonplace uses of phrases such as distributive and procedural justice. Distributive justice is only possible when there is something to distribute. Procedural justice includes how we define, as well as distribute, these objectives fairly. Climate change policy is not simply allocating solutions to melting ice. And an inclusive process is not just diversifying discussion of how to do this.

So far, environmental politics does not consider deeply enough how, or with whose concerns, justice might be applied. Paavola et al. (2006, p. 267) wrote: ‘distributive

³ <http://www.iied.org/climate-change/key-issues/economics-and-equity-adaptation/admit#about> Accessed November 2012.

⁴ <http://ccaafs.cgiar.org/> Accessed November 2012.

justice is unlikely to be able to provide a sufficient foundation for climate justice because of the heterogeneity of involved parties. Therefore, procedural justice is needed to underpin the legitimacy of climate change regime.’ But this statement does not acknowledge the heterogeneity of risks – from both climate change and proposed solutions – as well as heterogeneity of parties.

Plus, Page (2006) and Schlosberg (2007) write positively about a Senian capability approach to environmental justice. Page (2006, p. 70) claims it can ‘preserve an environment that enables future persons to retain the same substantive freedoms to be healthy, well fed, and well clothed that their ancestors possessed.’ This statement shows that inter-generational justice is also intra-generational. But this assertion does not engage with how environmental limits to this process are defined, or how the potential benefits and disadvantages of proposed solutions are identified.

Environmental justice therefore needs to consider which risks are to be addressed, and to engage with a policy process that is not simply framed by what appear to be urgent solutions to problems that are currently seen as distressing. In Rawlsian terms, an ideal solution should allow climate policies to address all concerns. But there is a need to look beyond commonplace discussions of distribution and procedure, and instead see how including more diverse values and priorities of affected people might influence what is seen as urgent. An ideal solution does not overlook some people’s concerns, or make their problems worse.

‘Justice’ is not simply a quick reference to acting ethically, but rather a source of reasoning for what is considered legitimate. At worst, it can become ‘a mere cover

for self-interested bargaining' (Okereke, 2010, p. 463). The Rawlsian model of distributive justice should not be applied without reconsidering what it assumes are the risks to be distributed. We should not let an epistemological, 'veil of ignorance' deceive us that what we think are natural limits or appropriate solutions are universally applicable or without potential negative impacts on others.

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