

What if climate justice means climate delay?



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From United Nations declarations to corporate sustainability reports, respect for the goal of ‘climate justice’ is everywhere. The moral rationale is clear. Climate change is full of inequities: the mismatch between those who did most to cause it and those who it will most affect; the financial costs that both transition and adaptation impose on those who can least afford it; the winners and losers within and between countries as we transition the world economy.

But what are the practical implications? Can we fix these inequities? And what does embracing climate justice mean for our collective fight against climate change? Does it unlock new collaborations, or put up new barriers? If we find climate justice considerations that are slowing the world’s climate action, what would be the moral case then?

These are uncomfortable questions that are rarely publicly asked. But they are part of an inquiry that we need. Activists for climate justice are the last people to think of themselves as climate delayers – but what if that is their unintended effect?

In this paper, we begin that inquiry with a review of the geopolitical context: where the ideas of climate justice came from, how climate action took on its social agenda, and the risks and challenges this presents in today’s world.

I have previously argued for radical realism to unlock climate action at pace and scale.¹ An openness about the role and focus of climate justice is part of that realism.

It all starts in Rio

The year is 1992. The Cold War is over, thanks to the dissolution of the Soviet Union – quickly, quietly and unexpectedly – at the end of the previous year. Francis Fukuyama publishes *The End of History and the Last Man*, celebrating the world's convergence on liberal democracy: not just as a victory in a historical sequence of events, but as the natural endpoint for humanity to achieve.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela has been released from prison and is in the negotiations that will lead shortly to all-race elections. In China, Jiang Zemin introduces the 'socialist market economy' as the pragmatic system that will drive the country's dramatic economic development. In the US and UK, the socially disruptive, ideological transition to neoliberalism of the Reagan-Thatcher years has mellowed into a more business-as-usual operation, run by successors from the same political parties. The 'greed is good' 1980s have given way to the caring, sharing '90s. Interest in the environment, which grew rapidly through the 1970s in the English-speaking world, but plateaued through the 1980s, is now at its peak.²

In this uniquely benign moment of togetherness, the nations of the world assemble in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for an Earth Summit. This is the gathering that, among other things, will establish the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the system of governance for how the world will collaborate on its climate action.

Environmental interest is not the only phenomenon to peak at this time. Economic inequality among nations is also at its all-time peak. The 'G7' is the so-called Group of Seven leading industrialized countries, comprising the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Canada. Around the time of the Rio summit, this group of developed countries, making up just 12% of the world's population, accounts for two-thirds (67%) of the world's total GDP.³ And this inequality is very much on the mind of the host nation for the summit.

Rio is the world's second attempt at an Earth Summit. The first was in Stockholm twenty years previously, in 1972. The tensions of the Cold War at that time limited what the meeting could achieve. There was no mention of climate change or global warming in its Declaration. But it did establish the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), together with an agreed set of management principles 'for the preservation and improvement of the human environment, for the benefit of all the people and for their posterity.'⁴ Its formal name ('Earth Summit' is a shorthand label) was 'The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment'.

This time, the name and focus for the conference are different. Brazil may have been chosen in part for its pivotal environmental role as custodian of the world's largest and most ecologically diverse rainforest, but for Brazil itself, its role as a leading developing country is just as important. So this conference purposefully melds together two core issues – environmental protection and economic development – in an integrated approach to sustainable development. This is the 'United Nations Conference on Environment and Development'.

The Brazilian Delegation is clear and open about its interest in this conflation:

"The definition of the very title of the conference – Environment and Development – met the interests of Brazil and other developing countries. Developed countries would have preferred to exclude the issue of development from the title, to allow the conference to concentrate on strictly environmental aspects based on scientific data and conclusions. For us, it was always a good idea to combine environmental problems with economic and social issues."⁵

To achieve this goal, Brazil has worked with the UN over multiple preparatory meetings in a two-year build-up to Rio, to make sure that the development side of the agenda, and particularly the interests of developing countries, will be central. Along the way, the definition of environmental issues has

stretched significantly since Stockholm, to include eradication of poverty, improvement of living and working conditions, and protection of health. And the governance has changed too; it has been intentionally politicized, as the Brazilian delegation describes:

‘Working initially from an almost isolated position, Brazil ended up getting the negotiations to be conducted under the aegis of the United Nations General Assembly, with its own Secretariat. The initial path was going to put the negotiations under the World Meteorological Office and UNEP. This would lead to a “depoliticization” of the negotiation, putting the emphasis on scientific and technical aspects. For a conference addressing the interests of developing countries, it was fundamental that economic issues were at the core of the negotiation. So getting the decision of the General Assembly was crucial to achieving a result that would be balanced, broad, and favourable to our interests.’⁶

Sustainability now means redistribution

What is the relevance today of all this manoeuvring from thirty years ago?

The Rio conference set both the formal governance and the tone for the world’s collaborative climate action ever since. And the developing country agenda, led by Brazil, was hugely successful in shaping both. Whereas Stockholm had focused on environmental protection, Rio shifted the agenda to sustainable development. In the discussions in the run-up to Rio, this had meant recognizing the interdependency between environmental protection and economic development, and between the interests of developed and developing countries. Developed countries would acknowledge that the approach to environmental protection would have to allow for developing countries’ economic growth, and developing countries would acknowledge that their economic growth would need to accommodate environmental protection. But the shift coming out of Rio went much further.

First, it blended environmental issues into a broader sustainability agenda, which puts goals of social improvement and environmental protection side by side, as parts of one whole. This is the framework that we have since become familiar with, first in the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (set in 2000 with targets for 2015) and now in the Sustainable Development Goals (set in 2015 with targets for 2030). For example, ‘Ensure environmental sustainability’ was just one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, alongside others such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and achieving universal primary education. And the specific targets within the goal for environmental sustainability included achieving ‘a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.’⁷ This target was met through ‘access to improved water sources, improved sanitation facilities, or durable or less crowded housing’ – effective solutions in pursuit of this goal, but a broad interpretation of ‘environmental sustainability’. The Sustainable Development Goals similarly conflate social and environmental issues.

Secondly, Rio established a principle that continues to guide how we approach climate justice. The first Principle in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – the key document agreed in Rio – 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*. Accordingly, the developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof.⁸ [*Emphasis added*]

The italicized phrase above sums up three complementary considerations for what is expected from different countries. ‘Common’ refers to the moral responsibility to act, which all countries share. ‘Differentiated responsibilities’ says their share is not equal, primarily allowing for different countries’ historic contribution to the prob-

lem (their ‘culpability’). ‘Respective capabilities’ says their share should also reflect what each can bring to the effort, which depends on their capacity as a state (e.g. technology, skills, financial resources) and their natural environmental endowment (e.g. forests and other carbon sinks, terrain and sun/wind for renewables, mineral resources).

Recognizing countries’ ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’, sometimes abbreviated as CBDR, means formalizing a redistributive agenda in the way the world acts on climate change. Even if intuitively fair as a principle, it has proved problematic in practice, creating a disincentive for developed countries to lead and to commit. ‘Depoliticization’ has indeed been avoided, just as the Brazilian delegation to Rio intended. The cost of this is that the climate agenda has been politicized, making consensual action harder.

The historic responsibility has proved the most challenging part of the principle, particularly because today’s emissions are so high (and still growing) that, even for cumulative emissions, the picture can change substantially over a short time. In fact, the world has already emitted more carbon since the Rio conference than it did in all the time (since the Industrial Revolution) leading up to it. Over the 250 years before Rio, the G7 countries were responsible for 56% of cumulative emissions, and China only 6%. But over the thirty years since Rio, the two have been more similar: 31% from the G7 and 23% from China.⁹ So developed countries understandably question a system that locks in historical responsibility but discounts future responsibility. If we want to be fair, we need to recognize, as one analyst puts it, that ‘the significantly increasing emission of major [emerging] economies today would retrospectively be their historical responsibilities in the future.’¹⁰

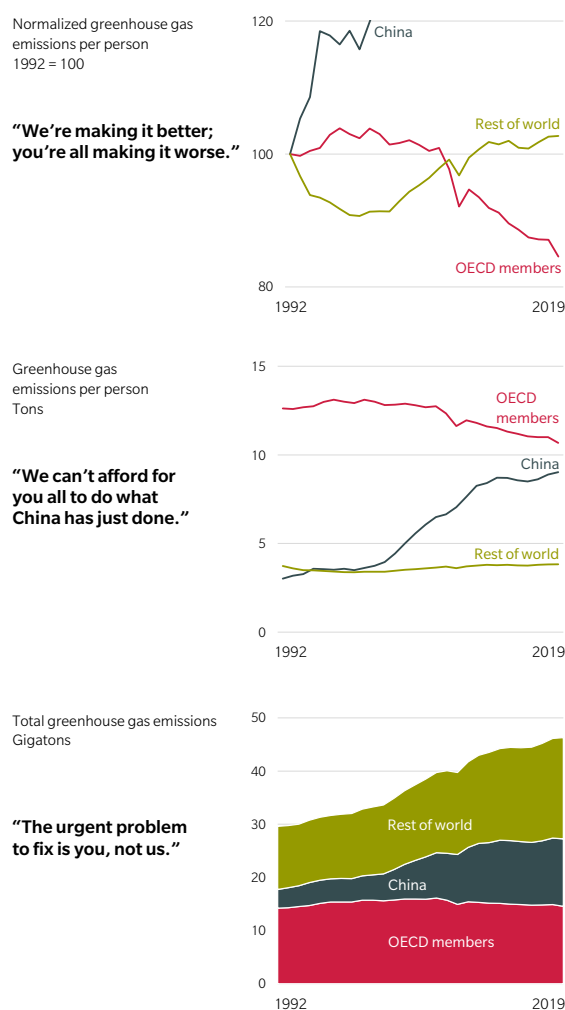
Whichever way you cut the emissions data for the thirty years since Rio, there’s an easy narrative for people in developed countries to shift the responsibility away from themselves (see Figure 1). Of course, this may not

be a fair interpretation; but it is a political reality, and climate action has become, by design, a political issue.

In this situation, getting the world’s great powers to take on special responsibilities may depend on there being either compensating privileges and rights to attract their self-interest, or a good supply of empathy and goodwill. A recent global analysis highlights that, unlike in many diplomatic contexts, ‘the current international climate regime offers great powers few privileges and rights that would balance their special responsibilities.’¹¹ Without that quid pro quo, we are relying heavily on world-scale empathy. And here, too, the trend since Rio is not encouraging.

Figure 1: Shifting the responsibility

Whichever way you cut the emissions data, there is an easy narrative for developed countries to shift the responsibility:



Source: The World Bank, Zero Ideas analysis

A less empathetic world

That Rio made the progress it did, and set the climate justice foundations it did, reflects the unique moment in 1992 when the world was simultaneously at its most together politically and most polarized financially. Today the world is more fragmented politically and more equal financially, putting a strain on the approach that Rio started.

The political fragmentation is hard to quantify, but clearest to see – and most relevant to the argument here – as a shift in mindset. Professor Markus Kornprobst, Political Science and International Relations Chair at the Vienna School of International Studies, writing for Chatham House, sums up the current state of deglobalization: ‘It is fair to say that in the West today, unlike the 1990s, the scales have tipped towards greater suspicion of globalized approaches.’¹² Tangible examples include ‘Brexit, Trumpism, the Ukraine war, problems with supply chains, the global energy crisis and the past decade’s decline in foreign direct investment.’

The financial equalization of the world may be harder to accept, because the popular narrative suggests the opposite, but it can be measured. Global income inequality at the individual level is estimated to have been falling slightly recently, as a combination of two opposing effects: income inequality *between* countries has been declining, while inequality *within* countries has been increasing (though not everywhere). This is a tough combination for the politics of climate justice. It means that for most of the electorate in developed countries, the increasing income gap in-country makes them feel poorer, while the decreasing gap vs. developing countries makes them feel that the beneficiaries are less in

need. The issue is particularly acute regarding China, which is currently still classified as a developing country by the World Trade Organization, despite its upper-middle income status.

Or take the metric used earlier, that in 1992 the G7 countries comprised only 12% of the world’s population but accounted for 67% of its GDP. Today the same countries comprise 10% of the population, and less than half (44%) of GDP.¹³ Of course, that still makes the G7 disproportionately rich. (For comparison, China accounts for 18% of the world’s population and of its GDP.) But the fall from 67 to 44% of world GDP in less than thirty years is something the G7 populations can feel. It is harder to accept sharing wealth voluntarily through redistributive policies when you are already sharing so much involuntarily.

When COP27 announced its ground-breaking agreement on loss and damage, the *Wall Street Journal* led with: ‘Biden Signs Up for Climate Reparations... The use of climate policy to soak Americans keeps getting worse... Welcome to the latest climate shakedown.’¹⁴

Putting the political and financial pictures together, it seems that since Rio, human empathy at a global scale has peaked. To be effective, any approach to climate justice needs to accommodate that shift.

The tension is not between societal and environmental priorities; it is between ideals and realities. The danger is that the ideals of climate justice may be unachievable in practice – and that in pursuing them, we risk failing to achieve both those societal goals and our climate goals. This is why we must be prepared to question our assumptions about climate justice.

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Zero Ideas is challenging business thinking on climate change. We seek to accelerate and deepen the approaches that businesses take to tackling climate change by stimulating a curious and visionary mindset among business leaders, encouraging them to go beyond today's focus on carbon accounting and reporting.

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¹ Simon Glynn, *Radical Realism: Climate action that is fast, feasible and universal*, Zero Ideas, December 2022

² Based on Google Ngram as an indicator. The prevalence of the word 'environment' in English-speaking books rose rapidly from the mid 1950s to the early 1970s; stabilized for a decade; climbed to a new peak 1992-96; then declined, returning to its early 1980s level by 2018. In part this reflects a growth of more specialized words, such as 'climate change', which have grown in prevalence since the 1980s; but even the aggregate of these words peaked in the early 1990s.

³ The G7 share reached its 67% peak in 1987 and sustained it through 1994. Calculated with data from The World Bank at data.worldbank.org.

⁴ *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment – Stockholm 5-16 June 1972*, United Nations, New York, 1973, p4

⁵ Celso Lafer, Environment Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Conferência das Nações Unidas sobre Meio Ambiente e Desenvolvimento, Relatório da Delegação Brasileira 1992*, FUNAG and IPRI, Brasília, 1993, p16 (translated from Portuguese)

⁶ As above, p25

⁷ United Nations, un.org/millenniumgoals

⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Article 3 (p4), 1992

⁹ Calculated with data from Our World in Data, comparing 1750-1992 with 1993-2021

¹⁰ Yanzhu Zhang and Chao Zhang, *Thirty years with common but differentiated responsibility, why do we need it ever more today?*, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, 4 May 2022

¹¹ Robert Falkner and Barry Buzan, *Great powers, climate change, and global environmental responsibilities*, Oxford University Press, 2022, p11

¹² Professor Markus Kornprobst, *What is deglobalization?*, Chatham House, 18 October 2021

¹³ Data for 2021. Calculated with data from The World Bank at data.worldbank.org.

¹⁴ *Biden signs up for climate reparations*, Wall Street Journal, 20 November 2022