

Environmental Justice and Climate Change – Priorities for Copenhagen 2009 Overview: A fair, just and equitable deal at the UN Climate Summit

The Issue

Global warming is contributing to global poverty, exacerbating conflict and leading to injustice and the violation of fundamental human rights. World leaders will be attending the United Nations Climate Summit in Copenhagen in December of 2009 to establish legally-binding commitments to address climate change. Equity and justice must be at the heart of any agreement on climate change.

Key Messages

1. The UN Climate Summit must ensure that justice and equity are at the core of a legally-binding agreement. Developed countries, and the large corporations based there, are responsible for the majority of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. These actors bear a greater responsibility to reduce their emissions at home and help finance the costs of adaptation and economic transitions to greener economies in developing countries. This is basic climate justice.
2. Climate change poses a profound threat to development in states that currently lack the resources to fulfill basic human rights. A global response to climate change must not undermine the human rights of women, men and children affected by climate change. A global response should also promote human rights principles such as participation, accountability and a focus on the most vulnerable. The human rights of the world's poorest must not be traded-off against the financial costs of cutting emissions in the richest countries.
3. Canada's financial support for adaptation and mitigation in developing countries cannot replace our obligation to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions as part of a comprehensive, just, and equitable post-2012 climate change agreement. Specifically, Canada and other wealthy countries must agree to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of 25-40% below the 1990 level by 2020, and 80-95% below the 1990 level by 2050.
4. A comprehensive climate change agenda for Canada must also include action for:
 - New rules for international trade and investment to help build a greener and more equitable global economy;

- The establishment of a just and equitable financial architecture to support developing countries in adapting to climate change and undertaking green economic transitions;
- The development of climate change adaptation strategies that consider conflict sensitivity and include humanitarian response activities.

Background

The UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen will be one of the great tests of our generation as pressure builds to reach an ambitious, just and equitable post-2012 agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The agreement is crucial given the mounting evidence that climate change is already taking a toll worldwide, and its impacts are expected to get worse. As the Earth warms, a variety of extreme events are foreseen: rising sea levels, floods, storm surges, droughts, looming water crises, and higher rates of tropical diseases. Poor and vulnerable people, who have least contributed to the problem, will be the hardest hit. Yet their perspectives are virtually absent from the negotiations. For example, the interests of women, who have to carry most of the burden of the changing climate are rarely considered negotiations. When mentioned in the negotiating documents, women are described mainly as victims. But women are powerful agents of change, whose sustainable practices should be seen as offering the real solutions to climate change.

At the centre of the climate crisis are violations of human rights on a massive scale. From the right to food, health and water, to employment, housing, security and cultural integrity, climate change deprives billions of women, men and children of human dignity, and threatens the rights of future generations. It is unacceptable to suggest that billions of people should forego their rights and pay the price for climatic conditions for which they bear no responsibility. Many Southern groups and movements have called for “climate justice” demanding an end to over-consumption in the North and the provision of adaptation funding as payment for an ecological debt – not charity. Article 3 of the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change upholds that: “in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities... the developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof.”

The vulnerability of poor nations to climate change is partly driven by their geography in drought-prone or flood-prone areas and compounded by limited financial resources, high levels of poverty, limited access to skills and technologies and a heavy reliance on climate-sensitive economic sectors such as agriculture and fishing. These countries and communities need support in adapting to climate change. Adaptation responses must be coordinated with the work of humanitarian agencies in order to place greater emphasis on disaster risk reduction by increasing the resilience of communities. Funding for climate change adaptation should ensure that programs explicitly consider local conflict dynamics and the peace-building capacities of the state and local communities.

Global policy regimes to protect and advance human rights and environmental obligations are weak. This weakness derives in great part from the marginal position of UN treaties relative to the power of trade and investment regimes that have evolved over the last twenty years. Governments must constantly weigh new environmental measures against the possibility of trade sanctions or large financial claims brought by investors through international arbitration panels for breaches of broadly-worded investment protections.

The WTO's deadlocked Doha Agenda offers little prospect for change. Leadership is urgently needed for consensus on trade policy initiatives that will curb climate damaging activities (like industrial agriculture, fishing and logging, or land conversion for large-scale agro-fuels), while encouraging technology transfer, and investment in renewable energy and "climate-friendly" productive economic activities that address poverty and support sustainable livelihoods at the local level. Unilateral trade measures, such as the imposition of tariffs or taxes on the products of developing countries, on the grounds of combating climate change are unjust and arguably contravene the UN Convention.

Recommendations

1. Canada must meet its legally-binding obligations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol and other environmental treaties.
2. In Copenhagen, Canada must play a leadership role that ensures a legally binding post-2012 framework for addressing global climate change that keeps global temperature rise as far below 2°C as possible, and that takes into account the interests, knowledge and capacities of poor and marginalized people in developing countries.
3. Canada must ensure that an agreement in Copenhagen puts human rights first. A framework that encourages mitigation and adaptation policies must be in line with human rights principles. For example, they must guarantee a basic standard of rights for all, focus on vulnerable groups whose rights are most at risk, ensure participation of those whose rights have been violated and provide accountability and remedies for violations.
4. Canada must support an agreement in Copenhagen that commits rich countries to science-based emissions reductions of at least 25-40% below the 1990 level by 2020 and at least 80-95% below the 1990 level by 2050. To support these emissions reductions, Canada can support the adoption of Bill C-311, the Climate Change Accountability Act, which sets out deep greenhouse-gas reduction targets for Canada.
5. Canada must be part of the global effort to support developing countries in their adaptation efforts and avoiding a carbon-intensive development model. Financing for adaptation and mitigation requires binding commitments from developed countries to deliver adequate, predictable and stable resources that effectively address the needs of vulnerable people. These contributions may be complementary to aid but should be counted as additional.

6. Any agreement in Copenhagen on adaptation and adaptation finance must consider conflict sensitivity and include provisions to fund humanitarian response activities.
7. A comprehensive global climate agenda must encompass new rules for international trade and investment to help build a greener and more equitable global economy. Governments should build a new framework that considers how we can transform markets and regulate corporate activity such that human rights and environmental considerations are at the forefront of economic decision-making.

Terms

Adaptation is the changes and adjustments that need to be made in order to increase resilience to the adverse social and economic impacts in vulnerable countries and sectors as a result of human-induced climate change.

Common but differentiated responsibilities is a principle of the UNFCCC that recognizes historical differences in the contributions of developed and developing States to global environmental problems, and differences in their respective economic and technical capacity to tackle those problems. The legally-binding Convention states that parties should act to protect the climate system “on the basis of equality and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.”

Disaster Risk Reduction is a framework intended to minimize vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout a society to avoid (prevention) or to limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards, within the broad context of sustainable development.

A Greenhouse Gas Emission is the release of substances (greenhouse gases) into the atmosphere. Greenhouse gases are naturally occurring and manmade gases in the Earth’s atmosphere that absorb heat or any gas that contributes to the "greenhouse effect."

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and the UN Environment Programme. The IPCC is responsible for providing the scientific and technical foundation for the UNFCCC.

The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement linked to the UNFCCC that commits 37 industrialized countries and the European community to legally binding targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Mitigation is the measurable, reportable and verifiable reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases.

Technology transfer is the development and deployment of technologies that will help put country economies on clean development paths through increased energy efficiency and clean technologies. Technology development and deployment can be considered a mitigation measure.

The UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009 is intended to be the conclusion of two years of negotiations leading to an agreement on a new multilateral framework that would ensure that all major economies contribute equitably to the global climate effort. The agreement should establish the basic legal and institutional architecture of a post-2012 framework that includes both an agreement on a second phase of the Kyoto Protocol and an agreement on Long Term Cooperation Action.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the treaty signed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro that calls for the “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”

The World Trade Organization is the global international organization, formed in 1995, dealing with the rules of trade between nations. The Doha round of negotiations were launched in 2001 to enhance the participation of poorer countries which represent a majority of the world's population. The Doha round has been stalled over significant disagreements on trade in agriculture and other areas.

Find Out More

- Environmental Justice and Climate Change – Priorities for Copenhagen 2009: Humanitarian Response, Conflict-Sensitivity and Climate Change
- Environmental Justice and Climate Change – Priorities for Copenhagen 2009: Financing for Developing Countries
- Environmental Justice and Climate Change – Priorities for Copenhagen 2009: Global Economic Justice and Climate Change