



How to Break the Climate Stalemate Between the Global South and the North

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Rich and poor countries are in this together. If either fails to step up, the planet is in trouble. A climate deal must take into account the Global North's responsibility for nearly 70 percent of greenhouse pollution and the Global South's need to move out of poverty. The North must cut back sharply on emissions while the South leapfrogs over the industrial age to clean-energy prosperity.

To stop the climate crisis, we're going to have to build a fairer world.

Any solution to climate change will require all nations to act together to reduce global emissions. But the fact is, countries around the world are not entering a "post-carbon future" on a level playing field. Poor countries have had the smallest role in creating the climate crisis, and they have fewest resources available to change and adapt.

The climate policies we pursue will have to support poor communities and developing nations. Everyone, whether they live in industrial or developing countries, has fundamental rights to decent levels of food, housing, health, and clothing, and many nations in the Global South will not get behind a climate solution that doesn't allow their citizens these rights.

In the United States, we need to push for solutions that equitably distribute the burdens of the coming transition between rich and poor nations. If residents of industrialized nations don't pressure their governments to share wealth and technological capacities with the Global South, extreme poverty will inevitably aggravate the planet's ecological stress. Poor communities that are left out of the post-carbon economy and robbed of resources by corporations will be forced to strip the diminishing amounts of clean water, forests, and land just to survive.

So what does an equitable approach look like? There is a growing international consensus around a core set of principles called "climate justice."



*Share the responsibility
for emissions reductions fairly.*

A fair and workable international approach must be based on the historical responsibility wealthy industrial countries bear for causing climate change as well as the capacity of these countries to finance

the necessary transition.

Over the past 100 years, the United States has been the largest cumulative emitter of greenhouse gases, according to data from the World Resources Institute. Together, the United States, the European Union, Japan, and Russia account for nearly 70 percent of the global build-up of atmospheric CO₂ between 1850 and 2004. In the past two years, China has surpassed the United States as the largest CO₂ emitter, but China's population is four and a half times larger. U.S. per capita emissions are still much higher.

CLIMATE HERO



Indigenous people around the world are among those most affected by fossil-fuel development, and [Clayton Thomas-Müller](#) is organizing those communities to make sure they have a voice in the United Nations climate negotiations in Copenhagen this December.

[Meet all YES! Magazine Climate Heroes](#)

Industrialized nations became rich at the expense of the Global South. The development and industrialization of the North has come about through the continual, and often forced, extraction of minerals, plants, fossil fuels, food, and human labor from the Global South, and through corporate globalization. Oil, extracted primarily from the Global South, has been the life-blood of globalization. Along with its sister coal, it has made industrial capitalism hum at a feverish pace for the past 200 years. By exhausting the capacity of the atmosphere, land, and ocean to absorb carbon, industrialized nations have left countries like India, China, and Brazil little room to create industrial economies that establish decent standards of living for their populations.

The prevailing proposals for financing the transition to a low-carbon economy involve distributing funds from North to South through entities like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. While financing from the North is needed, these institutions are the wrong choice. Both have track records of saddling poor countries with debt, requiring government spending cuts that undermine national economies, and handing lucrative contracts to transnational corporations.

The mechanisms set up to distribute and allocate these funds should be transparent, democratic, and accountable to civil society in the Global South. People's movements around the world and a growing number of countries—including Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, and the entire African Union—have proposed requiring industrialized nations to pay their “ecological debt” through a United Nations entity. Wealthy countries would pay into the fund according to their level of responsibility for climate change, and the money would be used to finance clean technologies and adaptation strategies in poor countries.

Recently, India and China jointly called on the Global North to take the lead in reducing emissions and providing money and green technology to developing countries. And Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva recently told the press that at Copenhagen he will urge the Global North to “pay for the damage that they have already caused to the planet.”

The only way for an international climate agreement to become politically, economically, and ecologically feasible is for rich countries to resolve their ecological debt.



*End overconsumption
and resource depletion.*

Climate change is merely one of the most obvious symptoms of a consumer economy that is pushing our ecological and human systems to the brink. “Global economic growth is the major cause of rising emissions,” writes British journalist George Monbiot. “Even deforestation in poor countries is driven mostly by commercial operations delivering timber, meat, and animal feed to rich consumers.”

If rich communities move toward a “clean energy” paradigm but continue to depend on the natural resources and cheap labor of the Global South to feed their huge appetite for stuff (even “green” stuff), the climate crisis will only worsen.

In China, for example, “green industry” is displacing rural farming villages. A new industrial zone west of Shanghai will span 98 square kilometers and include a “Solar Valley” to produce photovoltaics and other green technologies for export. Ironically, this development zone’s energy needs will be fed by multiple coal power plants.

Reaching the aggressive carbon reductions demanded by science will require ramping down overproduction for overconsumption by the United States, Canada, and Europe.



*Give communities control
over their food, land, and energy.*

Place-based, democratically run communities that have a reflective and responsive relationship with their ecosystem are more capable of adapting to ecological transition.

Supporting local control, among other things, means standing with communities that are resisting fossil-fuel extraction. These communities are bearing the worst brunt of our pollution-based economy and articulating one of the simplest solutions to the climate crisis: Keep fossil fuels in the ground.

Homegrown Solutions



In Copenhagen, the question of climate equity will be contentious. But communities in the Global South aren’t waiting for an international agreement. They are turning to sustainable, climate-friendly solutions to address a problem they did little to create, but must nonetheless help to solve.

[Read more.](#)

Two years ago, the indigenous Huaorani people of Ecuador won the provisional [support of the Ecuadorian government](#) in their campaign to keep the oil in the rainforests of Yasuní National Park untouched. Rainforests store carbon and prevent it from entering the atmosphere, so the move is a big win for our planet. It’s also an expensive option for the Ecuadorian government—Yasuní’s estimated 850 million oil barrels constitute 20 percent of Ecuador’s proven oil reserves. Yet Ecuador is willing to abandon the development of an oil field in Yasuní if other countries help it recover \$350 million annually—50 percent of the income it would have obtained from extracting crude oil. As of this writing, the government of Germany has committed an initial \$50 million a year, and the leaders of France and Spain are considering a pledge. If successful, this initiative will be a watershed moment in the struggle for climate justice—the first time that a community on the front lines has succeeded in keeping fossil fuels in the ground, and one of the first times a developing nation has negotiated compensation for ecological service it’s providing to the world.

Here in North America, there are also inspiring struggles resisting fossil fuel extraction that merit our immediate attention and support, like the campaigns to [end mountaintop removal in Appalachia](#), [stop](#)

[tar sands extraction](#) in Alberta, Canada, and halt Chevron's heavy crude oil refinement in Richmond, California. A win on any of these fronts would build momentum for a "leave it in the ground" movement in industrial countries and tell the world that the people of the United States care deeply about climate justice.

Creating a Green Economy for Everyone

It is exciting to see a multiracial movement within the United States calling for a just climate transition that helps save the planet while producing jobs, wealth, and economic stability for marginalized communities. We need to seek the same kinds of solutions internationally.

We can learn a great deal from inspiring international networks such as Oilwatch International and Via Campesina, the international organization of rural farmers and peasants. The false dichotomies of economy versus environment or race versus environment don't exist for many of the vibrant and sophisticated movements in the Global South. Indigenous and land-based peoples' movements understand that our collective survival is deeply dependent on our relationship to the Earth.

Communities throughout the South are resisting resource exploitation and creating their own solutions, from the indigenous U'wa people in Colombia who are campaigning against oil development on their land to Indian farmers who are organizing seed banks to protect the cultural and biological diversity that has enabled them to weather drought and flood for thousands of years.

Groups like these have an integrated vision for how food, land, and energy sovereignty will help create a resilient society.

"A global economy that takes ecological limits into account must necessarily localize production to reduce wasting both natural resources and people," says Vandana Shiva, the celebrated Indian author and activist. "Reclaiming democratic control over our food and water and our ecological survival is the necessary project for our freedom."

Restoring our planet's health will require a lasting redistribution of power and resources. Recognizing our common heritage of water, food, and energy should be at the heart of a new framework for global resource management. Natural resources need to be conserved for the common good, not privatized and unsustainably exploited. We must plan and execute a just transition to a sustainable, low-carbon, resource-balanced society that promotes people's rights, honors their work, and protects the well-being and integrity of all life on the planet.

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