

Current Debates in Climate Justice

Block 1. Preparatory Session 04.03.2025 | Public Panel Discussion 18.03.2025

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Introduction

What do we mean when we talk about climate justice? Anthropogenic climate change is the change to global climate caused by human energy use - notably greenhouse gas emissions (GGEs). (Moellendorf, 2015, p. 173). While climate change affects everyone, it does not do so equally. Many people experiencing the harshest effects are not from countries producing the most GGEs. At its core, climate justice seeks to help those most vulnerable to climate change while holding those countries and corporations, which are mostly responsible for climate change, accountable. Those who are vulnerable have four claims to justice through mitigation, sharing the costs of this mitigation, investment in adaptation, and compensation. (Moellendorf, 2015, p. 173). The tools to justify and bring about climate justice include ethical considerations, litigation, policy, and activism.

There is lively debate about climate justice, because, as Moellendorf writes, justice must answer the question “who is owed what as well as who must perform or provide that which is owed”. (Moellendorf, 2015, p. 174). While climate change affects everyone, it does not do so equally. Wealthy, industrial countries in the Global North have historically been the major polluters and emitters of GGs, while people in poorer countries in the Global South are those most vulnerable to the harshest effects of climate change. Further, while climate change debate tends to frame it as something that will happen “someday”, climate change is happening everywhere right now. Tiger mosquitos in Switzerland, floods in Spain and wildfires in California are just a few examples from the Global North. Infrastructure, insurance, and national disaster relief agencies in wealthy countries mitigate the vulnerability of these disasters. Meanwhile in countries like Tuvalu,

people are being forced to relocate because sea-level rise is swallowing their islands.

Because of this inequality, we talk about climate justice as a way to help those most vulnerable while holding those countries and corporations, which are mostly responsible for climate change, accountable. Climate justice demands people have the right to vulnerability reduction and that the perpetrators of climate change be brought to task for their actions by answering claims to: mitigation, sharing the costs of this mitigation, investment in adaptation, and compensation (Moellendorf, 2015, p. 173 and 182). The tools to answer these claims include ethical considerations, litigation, activism, and policy. I will briefly discuss the four claims and give examples of the tools as discussed in the panel session on 18.March 2025.

The first claim of climate justice is a claim to mitigation, which simply means reducing the risk of something. In practical terms this means finding ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to stop global warming and thereby protect those most vulnerable from harm. Sharing the costs of mitigation is a second aim of climate justice because investing in alternative forms of energy and sustainable development costs money. The claim to investment in adaptation is a further way for those most vulnerable to receive funding and technological know-how to adapt their societies to climate change. While mitigation is a general protection strategy, adaptation is aimed at specific groups of people with specific measures like building stronger houses to withstand storms or floodwater levee systems to protect cities. The final claim that people can make in terms of climate justice is a claim to compensation for damages. As Moellendorf writes, it is sometimes difficult to blame damages from a specific storm on climate change. The forced

relocation of island residents who are losing their home to sea-level rise, however, is a clear example of climate change induced damages that demand compensation. (Moellendorf, 2015, p.180-181).

For all these claims, the challenge in finding justice lies in legally placing responsibility on corporations or countries for causing climate change and then holding them accountable for damages. This is where the tools of ethics, litigation, policy and activism come into play.

Ethical considerations provide a way to discuss why there is a right to claim vulnerability reduction, and helps define who is vulnerable. At the heart of the claim is the *prima facie* (self-evident) claim that someone who is vulnerable has the right to have that vulnerability reduced. Ethics opens up the debate on who is included in this claim, and this is where discussions of intergenerational justice and considerations of animal and other non-human justice arise. Do we have an obligation to future generations? (This is also where sustainability discussions comes in to play.) Do animals and other non-human life forms have the right to continue to thrive? (Palmer, 2011). Furthermore, while much Western philosophy and environmental ethics focuses on humans, many indigenous traditions take a different view and consider all of nature as being interconnected and having rights to survival and dignity while clearly holding humans responsible for caring for the Earth both now and for future generations (see for example *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Barbara Wall Kimmerer).

The second tool that can help us work towards climate justice is **litigation**. Both the reading by Foerster (2019) and the panel presenters present the strength and limitations of litigation to hold corporations or countries accountable for climate injustice. As Joie Chowdhury and Johannes Wendland mentioned in their talks, there are currently an estimated 3000 cases worldwide attempting to hold countries and corporations accountable. While some high profile cases have won in the courts, like the 2024 *Klimaseniorinnen Schweiz vs. Switzerland* case from the European Court of Human Rights, it is difficult to enforce policy change or monetary compensation after a ruling. What both the reading and the panelists all mentioned is the importance of litigation as a tool for

raising public awareness of the issue. Further, litigation provides representation, gives voice to the vulnerable and ideally brings about a just transformation and, based on the “polluter pays principle” would bring about real justice and reparations. The shortcoming of litigation is that it is a slow process and the climate crisis requires immediate action.

Policy is another tool that both governance and governing organizations can use to create climate justice. One important topic mentioned in the panel is the fact that the UN definition of refugee does not include climate induced forced displacement as a reason for seeking asylum. This is something that international policy should absolutely change.

Last but not least, **activism** plays a critical role in climate justice. Through their outspokenness and disruption, activists literally put their life on the front line to raise awareness of climate injustice. For climate activists, a core idea is solidarity and protecting the “commons” - shared land, water, resources - as something for current and future generations to use. Due to the urgency of the climate crisis, universities also have a responsibility to encourage climate academic activism and to protect their students and staff from repercussions. This cuts to the core mandate of universities as incubators of knowledge to be used for the public good (Gardner, C.J. et al, 2021, p. 4). Protecting activists is especially important as national and local laws become more restrictive, viewing protestors as threats to national security, or holding them personally responsible for financial costs associated with demonstrations. (Gordon, 2024, p. 1, and <https://www.svp-zuerich.ch/kategorie/anti-chaoten-initiative/>).

In conclusion, ethically there is agreement that vulnerable people have a right to protection from harm. Climate debate centers on the details: what form, who exactly is responsible and how to distribute the burden of cost. It is clear that climate justice is urgent and cooperation between diverse actors is critical. We all have a role to play in mitigating climate change. Social movements start small, and as the American anthropologist Margaret Mead’s quote “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

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