

CLIMATE DEBT AND THE CALL FOR JUSTICE

Justice and equity must be at the heart of any agreement at the Copenhagen climate talks. An unfair climate change deal could be as great a threat to lives and livelihoods in poor and vulnerable communities as failing to deal with it at all.

Christian Aid's concern about climate change is not only to do with the impact of global warming on poor people but also with the potential impact of many of the proposed solutions. Not dealing with climate change threatens the lives and livelihoods of many poor people, but dealing with climate change in an inadequate or unfair way may present an equally significant challenge to poor and vulnerable communities.

An unfair agreement could deprive poor countries of their share of a resource, estimated to be worth more than a trillion dollars a year by 2030.

Christian Aid – together with agencies across Europe – has been running a Countdown to Copenhagen campaign calling for an ambitious and fair agreement in the global climate negotiations.

We have supported the development of the Greenhouse Development Rights¹ framework that quantifies what a fair deal would look like. At the centre should be the recognition that those most historically responsible for causing climate change and who have the greatest capacity to provide the solutions must take on the lion's share of responding to the crisis.

A fair deal?

If the Copenhagen climate talks are to succeed, **justice and fairness must be at the heart of any deal.**

Only a deal that is seen to be fair will be ambitious enough to tackle what we all face – an unprecedented global emergency which requires an unprecedented global transformation of our energy, transport and agriculture as well as our treatment of forests and wetlands. Only if enough

people around the world buy into a deal, can we maximise the chances of this transformation taking place.

All countries need to see others paying their fair share of the costs of climate change in order to be willing to participate themselves. Developing countries need to see real support in place to justify changing their development path.

In his recent book, *The Global Deal*, Nicholas Stern underlines the possible impact of the climate negotiations on carbon emissions, commenting that 'at US\$40 per tonne of CO₂ a total world allocation of rights of, say, 30 giga tonnes (roughly the required flows in 2030) would be worth US\$1.2tn per annum'.²

Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) talks have set out the yardsticks for fairness. The first principle the convention puts forward to guide climate action is that parties should act 'on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities'.³

Within the convention this is clearly defined to mean that developed countries should take the lead in combating climate change, that developing country actions will directly depend on the support of developed countries through finance and technology and 'that economic and social development and poverty eradication are the first and overriding priorities of the developing country Parties'.⁴

A deal at the global climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009 requires the buy-in of all parties, both rich and poor. Poor countries have been often told that signing up to new international agreements is in their interest, but the history of

POVERTY

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If poor countries and their populations are to sign up to and benefit from efforts to tackle climate change, then they will look for them to be demonstrably fair and ambitious. Without this guarantee, the climate negotiations may collapse.

Who is responsible?

Responsibility for climate change sits squarely with industrialised countries. These countries have emitted vastly more greenhouse gases than the planet can cope with, especially given their minority share of the global population.

Global warming has been driven by emissions of greenhouse gases over more than 150 years. Developed countries – home to less than a fifth of the world's population – have emitted almost three quarters of all historic, man-made greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.⁵ The lifetime of these gases in the atmosphere varies, but the most significant of them – carbon dioxide – has effects that persist to some degree for centuries.⁶

Developed countries' 'historic responsibility' for the lion's share of emissions has to be taken into account in any fair climate agreement. An agreement under which rich countries – which have achieved prosperity and built their economies through the burning of fossil fuels – deny the same opportunities to develop to poor countries, would clearly not be just. On this basis alone it is apparent the industrialised countries owe a vast 'climate debt' to the rest of the world. This debt has two distinct elements:

- for excessively high historic and current emissions per person – denying developing countries their fair share of atmospheric space – industrialised countries have run up an 'emissions debt' to developing countries
- for their disproportionate contribution to the effects of climate change – which is already having a devastating impact on many poor countries – industrialised countries have run up an 'adaptation debt' to developing countries.⁷

This is just one example of rich countries' larger ecological debt, reflecting their disproportionate use of natural resources. The United States' ecological footprint per person (measured as the productive land and sea required to provide resources and to absorb wastes) is more than four times the globally sustainable level, more than four times China's and more than nine times India's.⁸

Globally, our footprint exceeds our planet's

capacity to renew the resources we are using up by more than a quarter.⁹

Recommendations

We believe there are minimum standards – 'red lines' – that any agreement in Copenhagen must meet:

- **A fair climate change agreement at Copenhagen must acknowledge and reflect developed countries' greater historic responsibility for climate change**
- **Developed countries must repay their climate debt by delivering both dramatic and urgent emissions cuts at home and finance for clean development and adaptation in developing countries**

The capability to act

Historic responsibility is not the only key issue. The vast difference in capabilities of different countries is also important.

Rich countries have – partly through over consumption of the atmosphere – achieved a high level of economic wealth and power. The purchasing power adjusted average GDP per capita of high income countries is over \$36,000, more than three-and-a-half times the global average, and vastly more than the \$1,274 average of least developed countries.¹⁰

Eradicating poverty

In a world with 2.4 billion people without secure supplies of fuel for cooking or heating, and 1.6 billion people without access to electricity, we also need to respect the primacy of poverty eradication. People who have to deal with the day to day reality of crushing poverty cannot be expected to focus their efforts on climate change. Countries with significant populations of poor people must have poverty eradication as their top priority.

Global action on climate change will only take place if it allows for the rights of poor people to a better life, and, in turn, poverty can only be eradicated if climate change is tackled.

This gives another necessary element to deciding a fair basis for action on climate change.

Action on principle

International negotiations on climate change are bogged down in mistrust and a collective game of 'you go first'. To unlock the action required, clear, transparent and fair burden-sharing must be introduced.

Like other issues requiring global cooperation, the best result for all on climate change will be achieved when everyone acts. However, the best result for any one country could be when everyone else acts but they do not.

The aim of these international negotiations is to get around this 'free-rider' problem. But each country comes to the talks with its own conception of what is fair for them, and what is fair for others.

However, any analysis that takes the principles of the UN convention seriously sees that the blame for the current stagnation in the talks is almost entirely with developed countries. These countries have the historic responsibility for climate change, vastly greater capacity and far smaller burdens of poverty. Not only are they largely failing to deliver on their commitments but they are also now consistently tabling proposals that would shift the burden of acting on to developing countries.

Based on the Greenhouse Development Rights framework – which quantifies each country's responsibility, capacity and the right to development so as to define the level of action that every state should undertake – the industrialised (Annex 1) countries should shoulder more than three quarters of the cost of current global climate action.¹¹

What's on the table?

Developed country proposals on the table are inadequate in three ways – they aspire to an inadequate overall goal, they promise domestic cuts that are too little, too late, and they ignore developed countries' greater share of global responsibility for climate change.

Currently, for instance, the G8 countries have proposed that global emissions should be halved by 2050. This global target is very likely to be inadequate to the task of avoiding global climate catastrophe, yet the details of the proposal carry dire implications for developing countries.

The G8 has indicated developed countries might cut their emissions by 80 per cent in the same timescale.¹² But these cuts mean that developing countries will also have to cut their carbon emissions.

This reduction in developing country emissions has to be looked at in context of the growth in their populations and economies that will take place over coming decades. One set of calculations, based on a predicted doubling of developing countries' population, shows that developing countries' per capita emissions would be limited by these targets to an average of two tonnes of greenhouse gases – a 60 per cent cut from the current per capita level.¹³

The key issue here is that developing countries would have to deliver this dramatic reduction at the same time as they struggle with poverty eradication.

Recommendation

- A fair climate change agreement at Copenhagen will need to acknowledge and reflect the different capacities of different countries and the primacy of development for poor countries.
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Rewarding excess

In these proposals, rich countries are basing their future emissions on their past excessive levels – this rewards their overuse of the atmosphere and denies the opportunity to developing countries to develop in the same way.

Many developing countries are understandably angry about this. Angelica Navarro, Bolivia's lead climate negotiator, told a meeting in London: 'Bolivia has 0.27 per cent of carbon emissions. Developed countries, with less than 20 per cent of the world's population, put up three quarters of the historical emissions in the atmosphere. We did not cause this. We cannot stop this. I want my atmosphere back. I want it the way it was. How you do it, developed countries, is your problem.'

The only way that the world can exist within the tight global carbon budget suggested by the latest science is if development can be uncoupled from carbon emissions, so poverty eradication can continue while carbon emissions are bought down. It is the responsibility of rich countries to support developing countries to do this.

However, this area has seen the most marked lack of constructive engagement from rich countries. With the very notable exception of recent announcements by the UK and the Netherlands in support of a US\$100bn a year fund for action on climate change in developing countries, rich countries have been all but silent on how they will meet these obligations.

Significantly almost all developed country proposals to finance mitigation in developing countries rely on the carbon market, through which polluters can 'offset' their polluting activities against emissions reductions in developing countries. This represents no real additional effort, as it is only a double-counting of developed country emissions reductions.

Instead of ignoring their debt, rich countries need to take on a fair share of the global burden.

This will mean delivering deep emissions cuts at home and financing similarly

Developed countries' 'historic responsibility' for the lion's share of emissions has to be taken into account in any fair climate agreement.

Global action on climate change will only take place if it allows for the rights of poor people to a better life, and, in turn, poverty can only be eradicated if climate change is tackled.

'I want my atmosphere back. I want it the way it was. How you do it, developed countries, is your problem.'

Angelica Navarro, Bolivia's lead climate negotiator



COUNTDOWN TO
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significant emissions cuts and adaptation in developing countries.

Recommendation

Developed countries must commit to dramatic emissions cuts of at least 40 per cent on 1990 levels by 2020, as well as significant additional and predictable public finance to support adaptation and a similar level of cuts in developing countries.

Building trust

Rich countries should take a lead by committing to meet their obligations under a **fair principle-based method of burden-sharing climate action** such as Greenhouse Development Rights.

The necessary condition of an agreement in Copenhagen is real leadership by developed countries, so as to rebuild trust between them and developing countries. This will require a dramatic gear shift.

Were rich countries to deliver the greater action that is required, then in some developing countries with declining poverty, along with growing capacity and responsibility for climate change, would have to take their share of the response to climate change. In this case wealthy people in developing countries would also be required to shoulder some of the burden.

However, this cannot happen without rich countries making up their leadership deficit, and it must not happen on the basis of bullying and 'hardball' negotiations.

Rich countries should face up to the reality of climate change and set out how they will meet obligations that are in line with their greater capacity and historical responsibility.

If this can be achieved, then the negotiations could move forward to develop a clear and transparent framework of burden sharing – a framework in which developing countries could be sure that their actions reflected their real levels of responsibility, capacity and the primacy of their development, and not just the power imbalance in negotiations.

Recommendation

- **Rich countries must put in place the significant cuts and finance required by their greater responsibility. Should this be achieved, then negotiations should start in a post-Copenhagen phase on a new, principle-based burden sharing arrangement with historical responsibility, the right to development and differences in capacity at its heart.**

Endnotes

1 Paul Baer, Tom Athanasiou, Sivan Kartha et al, *The Right to Development in a Climate Constrained World: the Greenhouse Development Rights Framework*, Second Edition, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Christian Aid, EcoEquity and the Stockholm Environment Institute, 2008.

2 Nicholas Stern, *The Global Deal*, page 154, Public Affairs, 2009 as cited in Stilwell.

3 Article 3.1 UNFCCC text, http://unfccc.int/essential_background/convention/

background/items/2853.php

4 Article 4.7, *ibid*.

5 Matthew Stilwell, *Climate Debt: A Primer*, Third World Network, 2009.

6 'About 50% of a CO2 increase will be removed from the atmosphere within 30 years, and a further 30% will be removed within a few centuries. The remaining 20% may stay in the atmosphere for many thousands of years.' IPCC assessment report 4, Working group 1, Chapter 7.

7 See endnote 5.

8 See the ecological footprints of different nations as summarised in the *WWF Living Planet Report*, 2008, page 14-15.

9 *Ibid*.

10 See endnote 1.

11 According to GDRs Annex 1 countries have 77 per cent of the global climate burden in 2010. As countries economies and carbon emissions grow this burden is likely to shift to developing countries but the majority of the burden will remain with Annex 1 for decades in recognition of their vastly greater capacity and

responsibility. *Ibid*.

12 See paragraph 65 of the 2009 G8 Communiqué as at www.g8italia2009.it/static/G8_Allegato/G8_Declaration_08_07_09_final,0.pdf

13 Presentation on historical responsibility for climate change as a guide for future action, given by Martin Khor, executive director of the South Centre, UNFCCC technical briefing, 4 June 2009, www.southcentre.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1014&Itemid=1

Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope, of power over their own lives.

Christian Aid has a vision – an end to poverty – and we believe that vision can become a reality. We urge you to join us.

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