

UNFCCC Debate on Historical Responsibility

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An Explosive Concept, Being Cautious about the “Right for Equal Per Capita Emissions”

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The technical briefing organised by the Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action under the UNFCCC on historical responsibility left me voiceless. Mistakenly, I was expecting sound presentations and debate on the basics of the historical responsibility of countries for climate change, on key concepts lying behind, challenged by philosophical, legal or other thought-provoking considerations. I ended up stricken by the muted and unquestioned postulate by almost all the panel experts that a fair international system should build on the idea that every individual on earth has the right to access an equal “atmospheric space”.

Undoubtedly, the prevarications of the developed countries, the rare and yet tremendously inadequate figures put on the table as mitigation targets and the fading break-through on mechanisms to finance climate change adaptation and mitigation are irritating and highly concerning for the developing countries. The countdown keeps ticking to Copenhagen, which is prone to fuel more extremist stances and arguments. Calling for serenity on the sensitive and almost visceral question of equity and responsibility in front of climate change seems to be highly unrealistic, but serious cautiousness should be guiding the Parties when handling concepts that basically found and secure the international order.

Should we legally consider that each person on Earth has a right to equal per capita emissions of greenhouse gases? As Dr Henri Shue stressed, we can consider a right for an absolute minimum, and a commitment to avoid widening inequality. But today, they seemed to be a broad consensus among the experts who were given the floor at the UNFCCC briefing that the right for equal “per capita emissions” can be a good starting point for building an international system of compensation and commitment. The postulate is simply explosive. The problem lays on the fact that no country among the G77+China seems likely to put the question of demographic control on the table at an international level. Demography is considered to be a national, fully-internal matter of Parties. That’s historical and understandable fact. But leaving the question of demography control at national level – and holding up the threat of demographic expansion – while claiming a per-capita emission right at the international level just cannot work.

There are plenty of arguments to highlight such inappropriateness. For instance, relying on such a reference indicator to negotiate Parties liabilities, responsibilities and rights is the best way to postpone national regulations and to incentivise demographic growth. Global demography has skyrocketed at a historical and unprecedented pace for the last centuries, and is currently rather part of the problem than part of the solution to the global ecological crises like climate change. Building historical responsibility on such an indicator is also highly controversial as far as the reference period is concerned: what year should be taken as a baseline, considering the very various demography patterns among countries? Furthermore, the question of equity still remains unsolved considering national circumstances, which can be different according to climatic or geophysical conditions, to national renewable sources of energy, to natural resources, available technology and capital. The necessary GHG emissions can vary widely from a country to another in the process of securing the same level of service or well-being. Actually, some of the major per-capita emitters are members of the AOSIS: should they be stigmatised as outrageous contributors to climate change for all that?

Most importantly, beyond those “technical” constraints that make the concept simply inappropriate, the postulate of “the right of individuals to access an equal atmospheric space” is simply explosive from a geopolitical point of view. Considering together that “nations have the right to handle their demography with no restriction” and that “nations have the right to claim for atmospheric space on the basis of an international per capita equality”, would create a devastating case for international relations. Just remove “atmospheric” from the sentence above and everyone will feel the danger. Mixing individual rights and nation-level rights in an inappropriate manner had proved to open the gate to the darkest pages of History. What would prevent applying such postulates to other fields of international relations? Similarly, a nation that considers its people within too narrow borders would start claiming for an “equal access” to resources, and for a “fairer terrestrial space share”. This opens the way to imperialism, colonialism and wars, and quite ironically the countries that advocate referring to such an explosive “individual right to atmospheric space” are not always the most appropriate example of countries carrying for the individual rights “at home”.

Excessive? Nonsense? Face it. How many wars have been fuelled – and are still based – on the idea that the historically-available space is inequitably shared? The “claim for a fair share of space and resources” is an important piece of the Middle East jigsaw puzzle. A crowded China sends its farmers on the other side of the border, in a demographically shrinking Russia, to exploit natural and fertile unoccupied lands. This trend – and the forces lying behind – can lead to a thrilling international cooperation as well as a terrible nightmare according to the international system of regulation. In Madagascar, a South-Korean company trying to buy huge national territory to sustain the food needs of its motherland population basically triggered off the riots that led to overthrowing a democratically-elected government. Some will argue this is only sane, contractual and negotiated matter between sovereign Parties? Let’s hope so! But historically biased and asymmetrical balance of power warns to avoid too simple answers. Let’s not give a helping hand to nationalisms and fascisms that lies dormant in each of our countries.

Obviously, the international community needs to build its system to combat climate change on concepts that are clear and easy to grasp. But within countries, a farmer will always need more space than a computer engineer. Between countries, a small island with no resources will always require more energy to sustain its population than a temperate state. Translating a so-claimed “right of individuals to an equal per capita GHG emission” into a politically endorsed international mechanism and system is a dangerous short-cut. It’s an easy way to avoid inconvenient questions, like the philosophical and ethical debate over demographic control, the nation responsibility in managing demographic transitions, or like the vision over shapes and limits of “development” at a time when consumerism became the common God of – almost – every people on earth.

Ironically and for such reasons, the debate over historical responsibility is turning detrimental to the least developed and most vulnerable countries. The most precious target to fight for is consensus and agreement. Bringing sharp and striking illustration to confront Annex I Parties with their responsibilities can be useful to a certain extent, at a relevant time, but maintaining explosive and incoherent concepts as cornerstone of a system that need to be shaped urgently plays against the objective. The large autism shown by most of the industrialised and polluting countries in the face of their respective responsibility and their dramatic consequences for the most vulnerable ones is unbearable, but confrontation is not the solution six-month away from Copenhagen. Reversely, the full national sovereignty on demography management and control must be reaffirmed, and included in the national climate strategy of pioneer countries as a lever to secure sustainable development. The Annex I Parties historical responsibility for climate disaster shows no debate. Their duty in financing climate adaptation and incremental costs for mitigation in developing countries is agreed and written in black and white in the Bali roadmap. Least developed countries have true reasons to be critical, exasperated and demanding. It’s uneasy to admit being ill-equipped to press the most powerful countries to assume their responsibility. But proposing constructive plans may be more efficient than brandishing paper weapons. Integrating demography management and a realistic vision of “growth” in a sound sustainable development strategy may be an effective contribution from developing countries to the negotiations, and their best trump in the race to secure adequate and sufficient financial support.

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