

GLOBAL WARMING, POVERTY, AND ETHICAL ISSUES

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Summary

The major ethical issue of the global warming debate revolves around the issue of justice regarding the distribution of costs and benefits of greenhouse gas emissions. The requirements of justice are determined by ethical debate, which is shaped and reshaped by the politics of the environment. The debate involves three major questions: Who is responsible for the global warming problem? Who bears the burden of the consequences of global warming? Who should pay or sacrifice to ameliorate global warming?

The phenomenon of global warming, around which there is significant scientific consensus, is caused by human action. Because the actions by some parties may directly hurt others, without provocation or expectation of offsetting gains, the evaluation of global warming impacts is fundamentally ethical in nature. This fact has been explicitly recognized in the body of international law that has emerged since the early 1970s.

The ethics of global warming involves both human–human relationships and human–nature relationships. A great deal has been written about the duties of humanity to the natural environment and the evolving consciousness about the rights of nature. Much of Western ethics has been anthropocentric: that is, the only interests that are assumed to deserve to be taken seriously are those of human beings. In many developing and non-Western traditions, however, there is a greater sense of respect for the “rights” of nature. One could say, therefore, that to the extent that the international political debate is dominated by anthropocentric thought, the cultural rights of the poor and less powerful are being infringed upon. However, this ethical concern is marginal to the

concerns of this article, which is situated in the circumstances of poverty and relations between industrialized and non-industrialized nations, where the major justice issues of global warming reside. In fact, on a global scale, climate change is likely to be the biggest environmental justice issue we will ever face. The reason is simple: the poor are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

For the same reason, concerns about intergenerational equity (while very likely a more important concern for some non-Western societies with traditions of ancestor worship, etc.) will not be taken up here because they have little direct relevance to the poverty factor. Furthermore, while intergenerational equity is an important and complex philosophical and economic issue, in practice it has little bearing upon the major international debates.

1. Who Bears the Burden of Global Warming?

1.1. Facts

Global mean sea-level rise by the 2050s is predicted to be 21 cm. If coastal protection evolves only according to gross domestic product (GDP), as in the past, then over 20 million extra people each year will be at risk of flooding due to sea level rise. The coasts of the southern Mediterranean, West and East Africa, East Asia, and, most particularly, South and Southeast Asia are most vulnerable in absolute terms. The islands of the Caribbean and the small islands of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean are also vulnerable in terms of large relative increases in flood risk.

Food supply is another area where the poor countries will feel the impact of global warming more intensely. According to one report:

Due to changes in climate and CO₂, crop yields are expected to increase in high- and mid-latitude countries, but decrease in lower latitudes. Although globally the food system will accommodate regional variations in yields, some regions, particularly in the Tropics, will experience marked reductions in yield, lower production and higher risk of hunger. Africa will be worst affected, with 28% more people at risk of hunger due to climate change alone.

Similarly Rosenzweig et al., found that, although global food production can be maintained and perhaps enhanced under climate change, its distribution will shift and it will be the poor countries who experience a relative decline of 10% or more.

Beyond unlucky geographic circumstances, all of the effects of global warming will hit the poor countries, which lack the resources and infrastructure to protect themselves adequately, the hardest and earliest. Their buildings are flimsier and their foundations are less secure. Technology to track storms is lacking, as are communications to issue warnings. Medical and rescue services are slower. There is no air-conditioning during heat waves, and a small diminution of crop yields can tip a family into starvation.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) summarizes the situation in the following way:

The predicted impacts of climate change would probably exacerbate hunger and poverty around the world . . . People who are highly dependent on farming, fishing or forestry may well see their livelihoods destroyed . . . The poor would suffer the most because they have fewer options for responding to climate change.

UNEP goes on to note that the likely impacts of climate change may lead to mass migrations, which themselves lead to social and political conflict, and loss of cultural identity. Small island states in the Pacific and Caribbean, along with South Asia where life is dependent on monsoon patterns, are likely to be the hardest hit.

Because of the massive debt poor countries owe to rich countries, poor countries are invariably hamstrung in their ability to invest in preventing disaster or to recover from it. Within the global warming debate, however, many argue that the tables are turned: the debt of the rich countries, in terms of their emissions of greenhouse gases and consequent destruction of the environment, is greater than the debt of poor countries. On these grounds alone, many argue, the rich countries should pay.

1.2. Impacts on Rich Countries

While in aggregate the effects of global warming on developing countries will be the greatest, there will also be people, especially the poor, in rich countries who are affected. Within those countries, low-income people by definition have fewer resources to move, to rebuild, to find new jobs, and to protect their health. While the climate itself does not discriminate according to race, as with other environmental issues, rich and influential people will hardly feel the effects of climate change, while poor minority communities are likely to have to fight harder for a fair share of resources and protections. (Look at the work of Redefining Progress on this subject.) Exacerbating the injustice of the situation is the fact that the poorest people—in the developed and in the developing world—have neither contributed to the problem to a substantial degree nor benefited financially from the fossil-fuel industry. With climate change, it's the poor who pay, not the polluter.

In terms of health, both developed and developing countries will feel the effects. According to the 1998 David Suzuki Foundation report *Taking Our Breath Away*:

Globally, it is estimated that, by 2020, 700 000 premature deaths a year from particulate exposure could be prevented if moderate greenhouse gas emission reduction policies were implemented. The majority, 563 000, of prevented deaths would be in developing countries, while the other 140 000 would be in developed nations such as Canada. A 1997 World Bank report concluded that in China alone, if there is no change in fossil fuel consumption rates, related health care costs are expected to leap from \$32 billion to \$390 billion in the next 22 years. That includes 600,000 premature deaths, 5.5 million cases of chronic bronchitis, 5 billion restricted activity days and 20 million cases of respiratory illness annually.

As global warming intensifies, air pollution is likely to worsen because heat and sunlight are critical factors in the production of smog and these effects are indiscriminate. In 1998, greater weather extremes, particularly excessively hot weather, led to thousands of deaths, as well as numerous fires and destruction of property, as

unprecedented heat waves struck not only India and China but also Europe and North America.

Given the impacts on weather patterns and conditions in developed countries, some will argue that pollution in poor countries is harming or will harm people living in developed countries. That is true. However, in contrast to the developed world, people in the developing world frequently must choose between doing little or no harm to the environment, on the one hand, and death or a life of squalor on the other. Thus, it can be argued that their harm is less (unjust) than ours, almost always less easily avoidable.

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Biographical Sketch

Joanne Bauer is a specialist in environmental issues, human rights, international policy and Asia. From 1994 to 2005 she was Director of Studies at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs (New York), where she founded their human rights program and environmental values program. She was the Council’s Director of Japan Programs from 1991 to 1994 and before that held positions in banking, government affairs, and broadcast media.

Joanne has organised, led and spoken at workshops, panel discussions, and seminars in the US and abroad. At the Carnegie Council she developed and directed the fellows program, which attracted each year over 350 applications for five to nine fellowships designed for early career scholars and mid-career professionals.

Joanne was founder and editor of *Human Rights Dialogue*, a magazine published by the Carnegie Council from 1993-2005 that featured the perspectives of scholars, activists and other policy makers from around the globe working to put human rights theory into practice. She edited *Forging Environmentalism: Justice, Livelihood and Contested Environments*, published by ME Sharpe in 2006, that presents new case material on environmental politics researched and written by leading Japanese, American, Chinese and Indian scholars. She co-edited *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights* published by Cambridge University Press in 1999. Joanne served as a contributing editor to the journal *Ethics & International Affairs*, editor of *Dialogue OnLine*, the on-line companion to *Human Rights Dialogue*, and has authored numerous articles, reviews and conference reports.

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Joanne earned her BA from Colgate University and her MA in International Affairs from Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs.

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