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# Towards climate justice: How do the most vulnerable weigh environment–economy trade-offs?



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## ABSTRACT

The world's poor are especially vulnerable to environmental disasters, including the adverse consequences of climate change. This creates a challenge for climate justice advocates who seek to ensure that those least responsible for causing climate change do not bear unwanted burdens of mitigation. One way to promote climate justice could be to pay particular attention to the environmental policy preferences of citizens from poorer, lower-emitting countries. This paper examines opinions on environment–economy trade-offs and willingness to make personal financial contributions to protect the environment among residents of 42 developed and developing countries using data from the 2005–2008 World Values Survey, the 2010 Climate Risk Index, and World Bank development indicators. Results reveal that individuals in developing countries are less likely to support policies to prioritize environmental protection over economic growth but are more willing to donate personal income for pro-environmental efforts compared to citizens of more developed nations.

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## 1. Introduction

International surveys show that the vast majority of the world's citizens are worried about climate change ([World Values Survey, 2009](#), [World Development Report 2010](#)). Climate scientists are especially worried. About 97% of climate researchers agree that if climate change is allowed to proceed unchecked it will cause serious and harmful disruptions to human life ([Anderegg et al., 2010](#)). The recently released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change mitigation report ([IPCC, 2014](#)) outlined a number of scenarios under which warming of more than two degrees Celsius could be prevented but cautioned that doing so would require substantial investments in energy, transportation, and agricultural sectors as well as immediate international cooperation. Despite these increasingly urgent recommendations, however, international negotiations for the purpose of stabilizing the global climate have failed to produce a cooperative action plan.

Probably the thorniest issue of international climate policy proposals is that many strategies to address global warming require restrictions on certain economic activities. This is a particular concern for less industrialized countries where many residents still struggle to achieve basic material security. Less industrialized countries are historically responsible for a much smaller share of the cumulative greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions causing global warming. At the same time, these countries bear a larger proportion of climate change's most immediately harmful consequences ([IPCC, 2007](#); [Norgaard, 2012](#); [Parks and Timmons Roberts, 2006](#); [Roberts and Parks, 2007](#)). On an international level, these inequalities are one of the primary reasons consensus about proposed changes in economic activity to mitigate climate change is elusive even though concern is widespread; disparate economic conditions lead nations to differently prioritize the trade-offs between promoting economic

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growth and curbing emissions (Parks and Timmons Roberts, 2010). This inequality also leads to a lack of trust between wealthy, carbon-emitting countries and poorer countries with less developed economies – a problem of particular significance for climate negotiations as research has shown trust is especially important under conditions of uncertainty (Kollock, 1994; Macy and Skvoretz, 1998; Roberts and Parks, 2007; Yamagishi et al., 1998). And in the case of climate change, there is much uncertainty to consider. While the reality that the global climate is warming is well-documented, it is difficult to precisely predict how a warmer climate will affect mutually dependent ecosystems and economies.

Deciding whether to promote climate policies that place limits on economic activity is also related to realizing climate justice, a concept that is attracting attention (Harris, 2010; Harris and Symons, 2010; Hayward, 2007; Parks and Timmons Roberts, 2010; Penetrante, 2011; Roberts and Parks, 2007, 2009). Climate justice highlights the ways in which climate change is an ethical issue, and how the causes and effects of climate change relate to both environmental and social justice. Achieving climate justice would require taking into account who is immediately affected by climate-related problems as well as who bears primary responsibility when designing climate-related policies. For example, there may be a baseline amount of per capita GHG emissions that are necessary for a minimum standard of living in the modern world and that many residents of the world's poorest countries – where per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are very low – have not yet reached. Climate justice advocates contend that it is unfair to restrict these people's economic pursuits because, as Hayward (2007) argues, "what the worst off have a right to is secure access to the means to a decent life" (431).

Thus, one way to better incorporate justice into negotiations is to enhance our understanding of how citizens with high climate vulnerability but low climate responsibility view environmental protection in relation to other policy priorities. The underlying logic of such a strategy rests on the idea of enhanced democratic participation – one of the foundational aims of the new economic movement promoting socially and environmentally sustainable economics (Alperovitz, 2013; Schor, 2010). For example, how supportive are particularly vulnerable people of policies that would prioritize the environment over the economy? Do differences exist between individuals residing in countries at different levels of economic development? Some research has found that people in less industrialized countries consider environmental and economic issues connected, making the trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection less distinguishable than it has traditionally been viewed in wealthier, industrialized countries (Guha, 2000; Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997). This also suggests that questions about environment–economy trade-offs may be poor indicators of overall environmental concern among residents of developing countries. Thus, a more general measure of commitment to environmental protection that does not require large-scale changes in economic policy – how willing individuals are to make personal financial sacrifices to address environmental problems – will also be analyzed.

To answer these questions I use responses from individuals in 42 countries to the 2005–2008 wave of the World Values Survey (WVS), along with country-level measures of climate risk from the 2010 Climate Risk Index (CRI) and economic and human development measures from the World Bank and the United Nations Development data. My primary focus is to understand how vulnerability to climate change, including environmental, economic, and social dimensions of vulnerability, may affect attitudes toward environment–economy trade-offs and a sense of urgency to tackle environmental problems. I divide my sample into industrialized and less industrialized countries and use multilevel models in which individuals are nested within countries to both assess the relative effects of different types of vulnerabilities as well as compare responses among people living in different economic conditions. The methodological decision to split my sample into industrialized and less industrialized countries is to highlight differential climate responsibility based on the conceptual divisions made during the 1997 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) Kyoto meeting (where they referred to more industrialized countries with historically higher levels of GHG emissions plus countries with transitioning economies as Annex I nations and less industrialized countries with smaller, less technologized economies that have emitted fewer cumulative GHG emissions and do not have emissions reductions commitments under the Kyoto Protocol as Non-Annex I nations). I focus my analysis on the residents of these more economically vulnerable, lower-emitting, and less industrialized countries.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Environment–economy linkages North and South

Historically, one of the biggest differences in how citizens of developed and developing countries (also referred to as the Global North and South) think about environmentalism is that people in the Global North are more likely to view environmental issues as separate from economic issues (and sometimes even in conflict with them), while people in the Global South frequently consider environmental and economic issues as related (Guha, 2000; Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997). As Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) explain, in the Global South "issues of ecology are often interlinked with questions of human rights, ethnicity and distributive justice (18)." A well-known example of this overlap in the Global South is the Brazilian Rubber Tappers movement. In this case, the rubber tappers – most of whom were long-standing residents of the Amazon – sought to prevent the clear-cutting of rubber trees not just to reduce the environmental impact to their communities but also because the trees were economically valuable and many residents made their livings by extracting and selling rubber.

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