Climate justice is social justice in the Global South

Charles Adedayo Ogunbode
School of Psychology, University of Nottingham
University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK
Correspondence to: charles.ogunbode@nottingham.ac.uk

To the editor –

Climate justice has become prominent in academia, policy circles, and among climate activists. Yet, the notion of justice is highly subjective and climate justice is often invoked without a clear definition of the concept. To achieve climate justice, it is necessary to clarify what it means in specific contexts. The problem of climate (in)justice in the Global South arises from a broader story of social injustices. In this context, I argue that climate justice means social justice.

Social justice is a situation in which (1) burdens and benefits in society are distributed according to a consensual allocation principle, (2) basic human rights and freedoms are upheld by political and decision-making structures, and (3) people are treated with respect and dignity by the authorities and fellow citizens[1]. Climate justice links climate change and social justice by highlighting the unequal burden placed on different groups by climate change, and emphasizing the need to work toward fair and equitable solutions[2]. Importantly, climate justice is a critical lens for evaluating mitigation and adaptation efforts. It can help us identify and avoid climate solutions that exacerbate social inequalities or create new forms of disadvantage.

Climate justice is most commonly used to describe the unequal distribution of climate change impacts. However, Prakash Kashwan[3] outlined three dimensions of climate justice in the Global North using a framework informed by social justice theory. I will briefly describe these dimensions and provide examples of their manifestation in the Global South.

The first dimension is the distributional inequality of the costs of climate change. It reflects the experience of simultaneously facing greater exposure to environmental risks whilst being systematically denied the means to mitigate and adapt to these risks. Due to historical and ongoing exploitation and marginalisation, the costs of climate change weigh disproportionately on countries in the Global South[4]. For example, Mozambique is highly vulnerable to climate change and has suffered catastrophic impacts from extreme weather events in recent years. Through illegal loans made to companies owned by the Mozambican state[5], the people of Mozambique were manipulated by European financial institutions into spending an inordinate proportion of their national wealth on servicing unjust foreign debts – further depleting funds that could have been invested in enhancing the country's climate change resilience. The distributional inequalities of climate change contribute to widening the wealth gap between the Global North and South as vulnerable Global South countries are subjected to further disadvantage by the high relative costs of mitigation and adaptation.

The second dimension relates to procedural rights. This refers to the opportunities afforded to the people who are most affected by climate change to participate meaningfully in the development and implementation of responses to the climate crisis. Global climate governance, policy and scientific activity typically feature a rhetoric of international cooperation and equal partnership, but in practice, the interests of powerful actors situated in the Global North tend to dominate[6]. This dynamic manifests in local contexts where, for example, white men have been shown to disproportionately dominate climate change decision-making processes in the United Kingdom, compared with women and people of colour[7]. It also manifests in the way colonial powers in the Global North continue to impose their hegemonic influence on Global South countries by posing as de facto climate leaders[4]. Even the delivery of solutions like climate financing reflects procedural injustices as they are often executed in ways that frame Global South countries as incompetent or unaccountable actors[8].

The third dimension of climate justice concerns recognitional (in)equalities. This means failure to recognise some groups or individuals as legitimate actors who can contribute meaningfully to the climate change discourse, or as stakeholders whose needs and interests should be accorded priority in responses to climate change[3]. This form of climate injustice is typically visited on socioeconomically marginalised groups and those without a political voice[9]. For example, lack of recognition is implicated in the violent eviction of poor fishing communities from a coastal area in Lagos, Nigeria, to create a defence against rising sea-levels that also doubles as a luxury housing development for the city's wealthiest residents[10]. Inattention to recognitional inequalities often reinforces distributional and procedural injustices by exacerbating vulnerability among marginal groups and reducing their willingness to participate in formal adaptation processes[3].

Corresponding to these dimensions, climate justice in the Global South means redistributing the costs of climate change fairly (e.g., through debt cancellation, payments for loss and damage or climate reparations to Global South countries by Global North countries with historically high greenhouse gas emissions), upholding the rights of Global South countries to ensure the survival of their citizens, and dignifying communities at the climate change frontline with a deciding vote on what constitutes an acceptable course of action and timeframe for putting a stop to the activities and environmental changes that threaten the planet with climate catastrophe.

References

1. Jost, J. T. & Kay, A. C. Social justice: history, theory, and research. in Handbook of Social Psychology (2010). https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470561119.socpsy002030
2. Sultana, F. (2022). Critical climate justice. The Geographical Journal, 188(1), 118–124. https://doi.org/10.1111/GEOJ.12417
3. Kashwan, P. (2021). Climate justice in the global North: An introduction. Case Studies in the Environment, 5(1). https://doi.org/10.1525/CSE.2021.1125003/116311
4. Abimbola, O., Aikins, J. K., Makhesi-Wilkinson, T. & Roberts, E. *Racism and Climate (In) Justice*. (2021). https://us.boell.org/en/2021/03/19/racism-and-climate-injustice-0
5. Ballad, B. (2018, July 11). Mozambique's dramatic economic reversal. World Finance. https://www.worldfinance.com/special-reports/the-mozambique-debt-crisis
6. Blicharska, M., Smithers, R. J., Kuchler, M., Agrawal, G. K., Gutiérrez, J. M., Hassanali, A., Huq, S., Koller, S. H., Marjit, S., Mshinda, H. M., Masjuki, H. H., Solomons, N. W., Staden, J. Van, & Mikusiński, G. (2017). Steps to overcome the North–South divide in research relevant to climate change policy and practice. Nature Climate Change, 7(1), 21–27. https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate3163
7. De La Mare, T. (2021, October 8). Climate change debate dominated by white men, research finds. The Independent. https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/climate-change-debate-white-men-research-b1933894.html
8. Anantharajah, K. (2021). Racial formation, coloniality, and climate finance organizations: Implications for emergent data projects in the Pacific. Big Data and Society, 8(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517211027600
9. Chu, E., & Michael, K. (2018). Recognition in urban climate justice: marginality and exclusion of migrants in Indian cities. Environment and Urbanization, 31(1), 139–156. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247818814449
10. Ajibade, I. (2017). Can a future city enhance urban resilience and sustainability? A political ecology analysis of Eko Atlantic city, Nigeria. International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 26, 85–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJDRR.2017.09.029

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.