

# Masked power play

Climate Conferences of the Parties (CoPs) never fail to amuse, but inane statements by global leaders and grandstanding by activists mask a power play that seeks to defend an extractive economic system that is essential to the survival of the current world order and the contingent balance of power.

Carbonisation is driven by consumption. The more we consume, the more carbon is generated. There are two ways to tackle this problem. The first is to cap aggregate consumption at a level compatible with a maximal carbon budget. The other is to use technology to produce less carbon per unit of consumption such that the maximal carbon budget is not breached.

Carbonisation, since the Industrial Revolution, has been driven by huge inequities in consumption, leading to overproduction and depredation of the commons. This remains so even today. People go hungry, homeless and without lifeline energy although there is enough food, means of shelter and energy for no one to be deprived of these essentials. The problem is one of inequitable distribution. Rich geographies and rich people everywhere consume to obesity, live in extravagant built environments and enjoy a heated and air-conditioned lifestyle while the poor go hungry, live in slums and hovels and lack basic fuel and light.

The solution to the problem, therefore, must be to reduce those inequities in consumption. But this is not the solution that the CoP process or indeed, most work on climate change has any interest in. There is therefore almost zero interest in funding research into this problem. This is so because this is not the problem of rich geographies or of rich people in poorer geographies. The path the rich world has chosen and has forced the poor world to submit to and is at the core of discussions on climate change, climate finance, and climate almost everything is (1) ignore consump-

tion (2) zero in on technically less carbon-intensive ways to consume energy, and do not debate consumption (3) do not discuss the equity and extractive implications of the supply chains that provide renewable energy. Hence, do not ask what the energy is to be used for or how it is produced.

This means that at CoP and in the climate ecosystem there is great noise about things that support this pathway and a deafening silence about things that do not. Indian researchers T Jayaraman, Tejal Kanitkar and Akhil Mythri (<https://climateequity.in>) carried out an equity assessment of the majority of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change future scenarios that would achieve the temperature

goals of the Paris Agreement. They found that all the scenarios projected (1) rising inequality and (2) declines or very small increases in energy consumption in poor geographies but much higher consumption and levels of per capita income in rich geographies. Rich countries at net zero will continue to appropriate a disproportionate share of the global carbon budget. Rich countries will break all promises and all pledges when the trade-off is discomfort to rich countries. Thus, Europe's response to the Ukraine crisis is

emphatically not net-zero compatible. It is to burn more coal. The UK and Germany have just massively increased fossil fuel subsidies.

Almost all research that uses the word "climate" and "equity" together is conducted in developing countries, because the global balance of power is upset if consumption, rather than technology, is at the centre of the analytical framework. Hence, most funding on climate change research goes to institutions in rich geographies. Some \$454 million was spent on researching climate change in Africa between 1990 and 2020. Of this 14 per cent was spent in Africa, the rest in the US and Europe ( Overlan, I *et al* (2022) "Funding flows for Climate Change Research on

Africa" *Climate and Development*). In research blogs and think pieces from rich country think tanks on climate change, the word "equity" is rarely mentioned. Terms like "climate justice" or "just transition," much bandied about in rich countries, only refer to assisting people and geographies affected by technology switching or, at best, by the "loss and damage" caused by the consequences of climate change. They do not refer to the unequalising nature of future net-zero pathways. The plea that the poor suffer most from climate change is based on the assumption that the poor will stay so in perpetuity. Ending poverty would be equalising and, therefore, an effective adaptation to climate change, but that is not on the table. In fact, global poverty rose substantially last year for the first time in my adult life.

From this, many things follow. The bean counting of "fossil fuel subsidies", the lecturing about coal, the entire focus on instruments, profitability and volume in the climate finance space with no regard to its unequalising impact, the marked preference for discussion about mitigation (which is all about energy) and net zero and not adaptation (where the "who consumes" question is inescapable), the muting of voices that ask why cobalt and lithium are extracted from poor geographies but batteries that power electric cars for the rich are made in rich countries, and what the sustainability implications are of such extraction, which will only multiply as net-zero cars and ski resorts proliferate?

CoPs, by design, are consumption blind. Hence they are equity blind as is most of the research and convening that happens there, because the climate crisis presents uncomfortable questions about resource capture and power balance, which the rich and powerful do not wish to raise. Until this changes, CoPs will continue to be places for grandstanding and inane statements by global "leaders". History will perhaps record this trivialisation as the biggest tragedy of our lifetimes.



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