Righting Climate Wrongs by Empowering Vulnerable Communities

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**Introduction**

It is widely recognized that the poorest countries in the world are both the least responsible for and likely to be hardest hit by climate change. Also widely recognized is one obvious ethical implication of this fact: the rich countries that have contributed most to climate change have a duty to do what they can to help the global poor to adapt its effects. Evidently unnoticed hitherto, however, is that this fact has a further ethical implication, one about the *kinds* of adaptation and development projects in which rich countries ought to be engaged. In particular, I suggest in what follows, it entails that the so-called capabilities approach to development is especially appropriate in the context of climate adaptation projects.

**The Basic Idea**

We can best begin by considering what exactly it is that rankles in the fact that poor countries are currently being made to suffer the consequences of others’ actions. Obviously it is wrong of rich countries to make them do so, but *why* exactly is that so?

Consider the wide variety of negative impacts of climate change poor countries stand to suffer. These include resource scarcity and associated conflicts, increasingly frequent and severe storms, sea-level rise, increased exposure to disease, and refugee crises, impacts that threaten people’s livelihoods, security, health (both mental and physical), and in some cases even their ability to continue inhabiting the areas in which they now live.\(^1\) Each of these, notice, is a way in which climate change threatens the range of things people are able to do and be: their ability to live where and how they want; their ability to do whatever work they want; their ability to eat and drink as much as they need and, more generally, to be healthy; their abilities to be safe and to avoid the unrest that mass migration and resource scarcity inevitably draw in their wake; and, since all of this is forced on them without any regard to their preferences, their ability to participate in the political processes and decisions that affect them. In short, we can say, climate change threatens the freedom of the most vulnerable.

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\(^1\) *The Climate Institute | Righting Climate Wrongs by Empowering Vulnerable Communities*
Now this last point may help us answer to our question: perhaps, these considerations suggest, the most fundamental and the most important reason it is wrong of rich countries to force poor ones to suffer the consequences of their actions is not, as one might have thought, that rich countries are inflicting absolutely unwarranted harm on poor ones, but that they are thereby depriving the poor of the ability to have a say in how their lives go. By emitting greenhouse gases that change the climate and thereby forcing the poor to deal with all of the aforementioned difficulties, I submit, rich countries are interfering with people’s autonomy in a way that is akin (in this respect) to the kind of interference we see in certain other kinds of wrong, such as kidnapping. Lest this last suggestion seem more implausible than it is really is, let me be clear that I do not mean to deny that there are plenty of differences between the two cases. What I am saying is that there is an illuminating similarity, namely that in each case the wrong done involves one person or group interfering with another’s autonomy: just as kidnapping deprives a person of his freedom to go wherever and do whatever he wishes, forcing people without the resources to avoid associated disruptions to endure the effects of climate change compromises their ability to shape their own lives. And this, I am suggesting, is why this particular kind of climate injustice is so egregious.

Obviously the fact that their emissions interfere with others’ autonomy is a reason for rich countries to avoid further exacerbating climate change to whatever extent they can. But since we may already be locked into 1.5 and possibly even 2 degrees celsius of warming, there is a non-trivial extent to which the rich can no longer avoid wronging poor countries in this way. The question for rich countries, then, would seem to be whether or not there is any way for them to right the wrong they can no longer avoid doing. If I am right that the most important and fundamental reason it is wrong for rich countries to force poor countries to suffer the consequences of their actions is that rich countries thereby deprive poor countries of some of their autonomy, it seems fair to say that rich countries might go at least some of the way toward righting the wrong they have already done or cannot avoid doing by taking steps to restore autonomy to or protect the autonomy of those in affected countries. That is, the rich must help those affected by their actions to regain the control over their own lives they have already lost or stand poised to lose.

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The Freedoms that Count

Now, if we want to bring this insight to bear in practice, we need first to consider which freedoms it is and which it is not important to protect. For--clearly--not all are necessary in order to live a decent and dignified life. For instance, no one needs the freedom to murder others with impunity for that purpose. Or, to cite a more benign example, living a decent life does not require that one have the ability to eat enough candy to make oneself sick, since, as with murdering others, neither one’s dignity nor the quality of one’s life will be compromised if one is not able to make oneself sick by eating candy. Just as clear, however, is that some freedoms are necessary if one is to be able to live such a life. Consider, for example, the abilities to live a life of a normal length, to enjoy good as health, and to form a conception of the a good human life and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life. Plausibly, one’s ability to live a decent life consonant with human dignity is compromised to precisely the extent that one’s freedom to do these things is interfered with. If, then, we want to make use in practice of this insight about the kinds of adaptation projects we ought to go in for if we want to right climate wrongs, we need to get clear about which freedoms matter--no mean feat.

Fortunately, we don’t have to start from the ground up. Since the 1980s, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have been developing an innovative approach to development that makes freedom central. In contrast to approaches to development focused on monetary measures such as per capita GDP, their approach, known both as the “capabilities approach” and as the “human development approach,” suggests that development projects ought to aim at ensuring that people are able to do and be the kinds of things they need to be able to do and be in order to live their lives with dignity. And, not surprisingly, Nussbaum at least has weighed in on our question about which freedoms count.

Nussbaum argues that the following ten capabilities matter most if what we care about is a person’s ability to live a dignified life:

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1. **Life.** Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as not to be worth living.

2. **Bodily health.** Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

3. **Bodily integrity.** Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

4. **Senses, imagination, and thought.** Being able to use the senses, to imagine, to think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and avoid nonbeneficial pain.

5. **Emotions.** Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)

6. **Practical reason.** Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)

7. **Affiliation.** *(A)* Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) *(B)* Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails
provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, case, religion, national origin.

8. **Other species**. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. **Play**. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. **Control over one’s environment**. *(A) Political.* Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. *(B) Material.* Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.⁵

To be clear, I do not intend to suggest that Nussbaum has given us the last word about which freedoms are required for a dignified life. Like all philosophical claims, hers should be understood as provisional, subject to revision in light of reasoned reflection and careful argument. I do, however, think they are plausible enough that they form a good starting point for reflection on these issues, and so I will take them for granted in what follows.

**From Theory to Practice**

So, what is the upshot? What do all of these considerations suggest about adaptation?

One obvious consequence is that adaptation projects ought to aim to restore, enhance, or protect (as appropriate) those of Nussbaum’s ten central capabilities that people have lost or stand to lose because of climate change and measure their success in terms of how well they do this. In doing this, one might think that only the capabilities that are relevant having to do with health and safety, especially capabilities 1, 2, and 3, those concerned with life, bodily health, and bodily integrity. But this is too quick. As Breena Holland has noted, climate change can threaten some of the more cognitively sophisticated capabilities as well.⁶ For instance, being forced to flee one’s country and

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enter another as a climate refugee might threaten capability 7 by depriving one of the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation. For, depending on the culture of the country to which one emigrates, one might end up being resented or discriminated against. Indeed, this may well be happening right now in many places in Europe with respect to Syrian refugees, who are arguably climate refugees. Climate-induced migration might also threaten capability 4, for as Holland points out, climate refugees are “unlikely to be able to pursue educational achievements or artistic activities requiring formal instruction, supplies, and a social context stable enough to engage one’s creative capacities, as the senses, imagination, and thought capability would require.”

Another consequence concerns Nussbaum’s capability 10, especially the first part of part (A), “Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life.” Of course it is always important for those trying to help to be listen to and be responsive to the needs and concerns of those they are trying to help, both out of respect for the latter’s autonomy and because efforts to help are more likely to be successful with their input. But since the wrong rich countries are trying to right by helping poor countries adapt to climate change consists, as I have said, in interfering with their autonomy by forcing them to endure the consequences of decisions in which they were not allowed any part, this sort of thing is especially important in the climate case. For if, in the name of charity, rich countries were to force things on poor countries they did not want, they would not only fail to right the wrongs they have done, they would exacerbate them. In their efforts to help poor countries adapt to climate change, then, rich countries must be especially vigilant in their efforts to protect and enhance the ability of people in poor countries to have a say in the choices that affect them by eliciting input from them and being responsive to their concerns about proposed projects.

In many cases these recommendations do not entail any changes to current adaptation projects. This seems to be true, for example, of the second, seventh, and eighth of the first eight projects approved for funding through the Green Climate Fund (GCF). The description of the second project, which seeks to increase the quantity, quality, and availability of information in Malawi about droughts, floods, and other extreme weather events the frequency and intensity of which is likely to increase there in the coming years, is particularly sensitive to the kinds of issues I have tried to...
highlight here. It recognizes that, if they are to benefit from it, “People need to know what to do with this enhanced weather information.” For that reason, it continues, “the project will work with affected communities to undertake awareness raising and risk reduction in flood disaster prone areas. The capacity of local communities, district councils, and national agencies to respond to emergencies will be strengthened through training and improved emergency operations centres.” Because it will not just make information available to the people of Malawi but also help them understand how best to make use of it, this project helps to protect these people’s capabilities 1 and 2.

Also worth noting is that the GCF itself embodies some of what I have been saying. For since the GCF gives representatives of vulnerable communities a direct say in decisions about how to allocate funds is also worth noting in this connection, it helps to preserve the integrity of their capability 10.

In other cases, though, the approach to adaptation I am advocating may well entail some changes to projects. Consider, for example, projects that involve putting renewable energy infrastructure on small island developing states (SIDS). Pioneered by the Climate Institute in 2000 with the inauguration of the Global Sustainable Energy Islands Initiative, these types of projects have a long history,12 and for good reason, they have become quite popular.13 People in SIDS spend enormous amounts of money on energy—in some cases more than 30 cents per kilowatt hour14—and moving to renewables could help free up some of that money so that they can use it for adaptation. And these people need that money, since SIDS face a wide variety of risks due to the increases in sea-level and increasing violence and frequency of storms climate change is liable to produce, including damage to infrastructure and agricultural land, freshwater scarcity, depletion of coral reefs, decreases in the productivity of both subsistence and commercial fisheries, etc.15 But, it is crucial to realize, if these projects are to help these people as much as possible, and if they are to contribute to righting the climate wrongs rich countries have done or stand to do to people in SIDS, they need to aim at more than just putting more money in the pockets of residents of SIDS. In addition, they must aim at helping these people to understand the risks they face and the best ways to protect themselves
against those risks so that residents of SIDS can invest their money wisely; otherwise, these projects will do considerably less than they could to restore or protect those of these people’s capabilities that are threatened by climate change. (To be clear, the point is not that any of the organizations currently involved with these laudable project have overlooked this point but rather just to illustrate a kind of mistake it would be easy to make in an attempt to help.)

Conclusion

If, then, developed countries want to right the climate-related wrongs they have done to the world’s poor, they would do well to design adaptation projects with a view to restoring, enhancing, and protecting (as appropriate) those of Nussbaum’s ten central capabilities that people have lost or stand to lose because of climate change and to measure the success of those projects in terms of how well they do this, all while going out of their way to elicit input from and be responsive to the concerns of those they seek to help in order to ensure that, in carrying out adaptation projects, they do not further interfere with these people’s autonomy. As I have said, this way of thinking about the purpose and character of adaptation does entail changes in all adaptation projects. Even where it does not entail changes in the projects, however, it does help clarify the ethical ramifications and significance of these projects, and this by itself is an important step toward addressing one of the complaints most commonly voiced by representatives of poorer nations during past international climate talks.

One final advantage of this approach to adaptation is worth noting. The experience of having the possibilities open to one decided by others, of being made subject to forces utterly beyond one’s control, can be enervating, leaving a person with little motivation not just to chase their dreams but also to even so much as think about what dreams they ought to be chasing, since this experience can make it seem as though, whatever one’s vision of a good life, alien and unpredictable forces are likely to make it unachievable.16 This approach has the potential to re-energize people like this. For by empowering them to live a life that had come to seem out of reach, it gives them hope.

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Notes


4. This idea--that of the social bases of self-respect (and non-humiliation, Nussbaum adds)--is due to John Rawls. In his article on Rawls’ idea of the “original position” for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Samuel Freeman explains this idea as follows: “the social bases of self-respect’ are features of institutions that are needed to enable people to have the confidence that they and their position in society are respected and that their conception of the good is worth pursuing and achievable. These features depend upon history and culture. Primary among these social bases in a democratic society are the conditions needed for equal citizenship, including equality of political rights and fair equal opportunity, as well as personal independence and adequate material means for achieving it.” See Samuel Freeman, ”Original Position,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, [http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/original-position/](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/original-position/).


9. Breena Holland makes some of these points in [this recent talk](http://climateandsecurity.org/2016/03/03/climate-change-in-the-levant-further-evidence-strengthens-case-for-role-in-syrian-instability/?blogsub=confirming#blog_subscription-4) at the Sydney Environmental Institute.
10. For descriptions of the projects see the project briefs here: 
   b6cd3-cac4-409f-92e7-028ad2f902b.


    Symposium on Sustainable Energy Options for Small Island States, October 3, 1998 (Washington, D.C.: 
    Climate Institute, 1998), the proceedings of the conference, co-convened by the Climate
    Institute and Counterpart International, at which the idea was first developed.

13. Several organizations are currently engaged in projects of this sort, including the Rocky
    Mountain Institute/Carbon War Room, the Clinton Climate Initiative (partnered with the
    RMI/Carbon War Room on the Ten Islands Project), and the WorldWatch Institute. Also
    worth mentioning are SIDS DOCK and the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre.


15. See Nicholas Bowness, Small Islands, Big Issues: Sustainable Development of Islands, ed. Alina

16. Breena Holland appeals to this point in support of her claim that climate change can interfere
    with capability 6 in her “Environment as Meta-Capability”; see pp. 152-155.