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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Rock Ethics Institute
Publisher	Rock Ethics Institute, The Pennsylvania State University
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Download date	2026-11-16 21:31:42
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Negotiating Historic Responsibility: Procedural Ethics

By Rock Ethics Institute on April 6, 2009 5:13 AM| 1 Comment

Editors Note: *The following post examines procedural justice issues that have arisen when some countries from the global South have attempted to get developed countries to take historic responsibility seriously as a way of establishing just national allocations for climate change obligations. And so this post also touches upon a few issues relating to just allocation of national targets. The post also explores the impossibility of completely separating scientific issues from ethical questions. The article makes it clear that to model historic responsibility, ethical issues arise that cant be delegated to scientists alone for resolution. Almost all scientific models of climate change issues require choices that need to be understood as raising ethical questions.*

I. Introduction

The main components of what is now called 'historic responsibility to climate change' have long been discussed in international climate negotiations. Historic responsibility for climate change is often considered to be an ethically relevant criterion for allocating responsibility to reduce the threat of climate change. The issue has been on the table ever since the UN General Assembly mandated an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to prepare a Framework Convention on Climate Change. Under the early stages of UN climate negotiations, historic responsibility was addressed in terms of the polluter pays principle and past contributions to climate change. Most of these topics have now become discussed under the loose heading of 'historic responsibility' (Friman and Linnér, 2008).

Some argue that the issue of historic responsibilities has already been addressed by dividing the world into Annex I and non-Annex I while ascribing the bulk of emission reduction commitments to the first. Others assert that Annex I countries have been avoiding their historic responsibility partly by not meeting their agreed commitments and partly by creating loopholes in the details of implementation policy allowing them to buy themselves out of moral obligations.

II. Two framings in UNFCCC: causal and conceptual historic responsibility

Throughout the climate change debate, at least two broad understandings of historic responsibility have emerged. Both acknowledge importance of history when determining responsibility for climate change. The main difference is a different emphasis to the importance of causal connections between contributions and responsibilities. Building on ideas of Simon Caney (2006), the two perspectives could be called conceptual and causal. The conceptual view looks at the present unequal distribution of capacity to act while taking the history of creating this situation into account. If the history of acquiring a high degree of capacity to act has been unfair, those holding this capacity also have historic responsibilities to act before others must act. The causal view represents a much stricter, more causal approach. It models historic contributions to climate change and in some way or another stringently translates these calculations into obligations for climate change.

A struggle has unfolded over preferred interpretations of historic responsibility in UNFCCC negotiations (for a detailed mapping of the issue in UNFCCC see Friman, 2007). Arguments entailed by "conceptual historic responsibility" have regularly been made in UNFCCC as a storyline to require Annex I countries to take the lead in avoiding dangerous human interference with the climate system. This argument has been made in various settings since the early 1990s.

Arguments entailed by the idea of "causal historic responsibility" have also been made throughout the climate negotiations. Whereas arguments of the conceptual type have been repeated statements in the main deciding bodies, casual connections have most notably been explored in a continuum of technical reports in the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA).

III. The causal framing: differentiating responsibility according to historic contributions

Those of the opinion that industrialized countries have often shunned their historic responsibilities, by neglecting their Annex I responsibilities or by undercutting the division between Annex I and non-Annex I countries in implementation policy, often argue for a more causal interpretation of

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contribution and responsibility. This means that responsibility in someway or another should be considered directly proportional to historic contributions of GHGs to the atmosphere. In the UNFCCC negotiations, this kind of argument first appeared in comprehensive form in the middle of the 1990s.

The first attempt to calculate responsibility for causal contributions was officially presented to the UNFCCC in March 1996. It was a summary of a World Bank working paper titled International burden sharing in greenhouse gas reduction (cf. Grüebler and Naki?enovi?, 1992). Simply put, it calculated responsibility in direct proportion to contribution of atmospheric GHGs for the period from 1800 to 2050 in a CO2/CH4 atmosphere-ocean climate model. The summary relating to historic responsibility, as well as the entire section on cutbacks proportional to contributions, met with little attention.

The second time causal calculations based responsibility appeared was in May 1997. This time it was advanced by Brazil as proposed elements in the Kyoto Protocol that was then under negotiation (UNFCCC, 1997). Contrary to the World Bank text, this proposal was well discussed.

The Brazilian proposal was intended to put causal historic responsibilities on the table as a means to resolve dispute over differentiation. However, it was refuted both by Annex I and non-Annex I based on two official reasons. Firstly, the proposal was attached to exemplifying calculations. These were very simple, intended as a rough example. Most of Annex I, however, criticized the proposal for what they saw as a too simplistic climate model becoming the official explanation for Annex I refusal to consider the proposal. Secondly, the Brazilian proposal did not only underscore differentiation. It was also so-called “evolutionary” meaning that when a non Annex I reached a certain amount of historic contribution it too would have to take its responsibility. Because of this, many non-Annex I countries, in their official rhetoric, rejected the proposal since it laid outside the negotiating mandate, which was to focus on strengthening commitments for Annex I countries only.

For these reasons, the Brazilian proposal was never accepted as a mechanism for allocating responsibilities under the Kyoto Protocol. However, it did survive the Kyoto negotiations in that it was referred to SBSTA. The proposal combined several justice principles in allocating responsibilities, yet the SBSTA discussions were limited to technical calculations. Express considerations of the ethical issues raised by the calculations were not considered and accurate modeling became the prime focus of the discussions.

Serious discussion of the causal view on historic responsibility under the UNFCCC had now been limited to a highly technical and skillful modeling exercise. The idea among the participating researchers seems to have been to leave any ethical decisions to the politicians and merely present them with facts on historic contributions, within uncertainty ranges. This exercise went on until summer 2008 when SBSTA decided to conclude its consideration of this agenda item. SBSTA, however, welcomed the efforts made and opened the door for considering the results in other negotiating groups.

IV. Science and politics in framing historic responsibility

A few things stand out in this story on causal historic responsibility relating both to the negotiating procedure and to the apolitical framing of calculations of historic contributions.

First, the technical modeling exercise only late in the process acknowledged that contribution does not necessarily translate directly into responsibility. There are arguably a wide array of responsibility-issues that do not normally fall inside the confines of climate modeling, that is issues that can not be decided on technical grounds alone. Even when the language of contribution was used, a set of assumptions was made relating to modeling, clearly affecting the outcome in terms of responsibility (e.g. focusing on emissions at state levels and internalizing problems of e.g. historically changing boarders). While policymakers were presented with choices of start and end years, issues such as how to include land use change and forestry, which gases to include, and many other issues, a set of assumptions discussed in the literature on historic responsibility were left unconsidered. This represents choices of demarcation, however honest, which are not easily made without creating mistrust among politicians. In other words, the calculations performed to determine historical responsibility must make “value” decisions that cannot be made by non-political, technical judgments.

Second, this case illustrates how the framing issues together with disparities in knowledge production can influence the inclusiveness and fairness of negotiations. Southern participation in the policy process was constrained by lack of scientific expertise on the part of Southern countries in regard to biophysical discourses relevant to modeling technicalities. Such technical framing is traditionally preferred by Northern policy-makers. Southern experts participating in the UNFCCC debate on historical responsibility were more inclined towards understanding issues in their ethical and moral philosophical dimensions. The historical responsibility issue became diverted by problems of how to correctly represent physical nature in climate models. This marginalized the original Brazilian intention that equity should be the guiding principle of the North–South interaction such as on the topic of historic responsibility; Southern participation was welcomed, even funded for that, yet made very difficult due to the technical nature of the question.

In short, two sources of mistrust on behalf of the South upon the North arise: the first is located to the actual methods and the second in the procedure. When one constructs a model of historic contribution to climate change, the modelers will necessarily have to make choices about such matters as which sectors and gases to include, start and end evaluation dates, whether to include

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poverty thresholds, population related questions, how to deal with changing geographical boarders, etc. These choices cannot be “value-free” and therefore cannot be considered to be purely “value-neutral” technical questions. In addition the models are difficult to understand because they are comprised of dense mathematical equations. These facts lead to two kinds of suspicions. Because models are technically complicated and opaque, they create barriers to meaningful participation by the South. Lack of inclusiveness easily creates legitimacy deficits. Because models often are value-laden yet often framed as apolitical, they are greeted with suspicion.

The recent focus of historic responsibility under UNFCCC as a technical question has made it very difficult for Southern countries to participate according to their perspectives. Some Southern representatives believe that the technical framing that evolved since Kyoto has led to a process that has obscured the main objectives of establishing responsibility on the basis of historical causation while making ethical judgments hidden in technical language. If the UNFCCC negotiations are to make progress based upon consensus views of the North and the South, the negotiators will need to assure that equity as a method of allocating responsibility is taken seriously.

If differentiation according to historic responsibility should be more than very broadly conceptual, it is truly time to politically deal with the issue. Policymakers cannot any longer leave it up to the scientists how to decide the modeling and other parameters of historic contributions and responsibility; the South’s views on causal historical responsibility must be integrated into the technical analyses. If, on the other hand, historical responsibility should not be accounted for more than in the broad division of Annex1 and non-Annex I, with vague instruments for causal equity, it is due time that those holding capacity to act also show a broad and decisive willingness to abide by conceptual equity. If none of these criteria are met in Copenhagen, it is a very likely that the mistrust between the North and South will block a global agreement.

By:
Mathias Friman
PhD Candidate,
Centre for Climate Science and Policy Research
The Tema Institute
Linköping University
mathias.friman@liu.se
+4611363184

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1 COMMENT

Asteroid Miner | May 4, 2009 9:54 PM | Reply

The First World DOES NOT owe anything to the Third World. The built up CO2 since 1750 was a necessary part of inventing technological civilization and is a SUNK cost. The third world owes the first world for having invented science and technological civilization. They would still be in the stone age if we had not invented science. ONLY greenhouse gasses produced FROM "NOW" ON may be considered because before now, nobody knew and because ex-post-facto laws are unconstitutional for good reason. "NOW" means the date when CO2 pollution has to be reduced by 90%. I am not guilty of any non-crime that neither I nor my actual ancestors committed. You can’t put ghosts in jail. The Western countries suffered through the Industrial Revolution so that others can skip the pain of the industrial revolution. Others can jump directly from the stone age to the 21st century. Third worlders owe the first worlders for that. Nature has always exacted a severe penalty for laggards. It is not our fault that they overpopulated, failed to invent science and chose to live in places that should have been left uninhabited. Mass death by starvation is a tradition that goes back thousands of years in several countries. That is not my fault.

Brazil has made the argument that the first world owes the third world. Americans have hassled Brazil about the clearing of the Amazon forest. Brazil may be returning the favor. If Brazil said: "Americans and Europeans should quit mowing their lawns, golf courses, etc. and

allow trees to grow to return North America and Europe to their former forested state," that would be a reasonable argument. We did in fact clear the forest and returning our lawns to a more natural state would be beneficial.

China, India and Russia are now part of the First World. None of them has any excuse for building more coal fired power plants because all three have other technical means to generate electricity. All three must cease coal burning and convert ALL coal fired power plants to other sources on the SAME schedule as the US. There are other technical means are nearly CO2 free compared to coal burning. China and India must stop using coal for home heating and cooking as well. [Coal ash can be mined for uranium, arsenic, etc..] China, India and Russia are free to purchase the latest safest and cleanest nuclear reactor and other technology from the US. The former Soviet Union should replace all of its unsafe Chernobyl type [1940s technology] reactors with Fourth Generation American reactors. Since coal contains the super-carcinogen Benzene, since coal is the number one source of carbon dioxide and since coal is the most polluting fuel there is, coal must be left in the ground undisturbed from now on. Spent nuclear fuel must be recycled as France does and the US did in the old days rather than wasted. [Nuclear fuel recycling must be done in a GOGO [Government Owned Government Operated] plant to prevent fuel from being stolen and taken to Israel, as happened near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.]

Some countries claim that they need to build coal fired power plants to "catch up." That is nonsense. Third world countries need never own a coal fired power plant because they can purchase better, cheaper, cleaner non-coal 21st century technology from first world countries. There is nothing whatsoever to be gained by anybody in building coal fired power plants. A firm fixed date should be set after which all coal fired power plants should be replaced with some other source of energy that does not produce greenhouse gas in normal operation. Our moral obligation is to make sure that all coal fired power plants operating after the firm fixed date are forced to cease operating by whatever means necessary, since shutting down coal fired power plants is necessary to avoid extinction. No country, third world or not, has a right to claim otherwise. Per the latest issue of Scientific American, we must reduce our CO2 production by 80% by 2020. That is not possible without shutting down all coal fired power plants. Carbon sequestration must be reserved for industrial processes that cannot be done without making CO2.

Ethical and moral philosophy have been superseded by Sociobiology, a new science. . The teaching and practice of ethics in the Philosophy Department is obsolete. Philosophers should now take degrees in science. The allegation that scientists can't figure out ethics is utter nonsense. If scientists were in charge, global warming would have been prevented a long time ago.

What part of the word "Extinct" don't they understand? We [species Homo Sapiens] are destined for extinction within a century, possibly within less than half a century, if Business As Usual continues. We have one "ethical" imperative that supercedes all others, and that is to avoid the extinction of Homo Sapiens. No other imperative supersedes the imperative to avoid extinction. See the attached. The second imperative is our own survival. They are not the same because, in principle, only one pregnant teenager is a sufficient number of people to save, to save the species. We DO NOT have any obligation whatsoever to climate refugees because taking them in would compromise OUR own chances of survival and would diminish the odds of avoiding extinction. An overcrowded lifeboat sinks. It is the fault of China and India that China and India have too many people.

The claims of third world countries that first world countries "owe" them is an attempted grand theft, a scam, a fraud. Changes in climate and even weather have always killed people in large numbers. Changes in climate have always driven evolution, including the evolution of ethics and the emergence of man. Other organisms have also always driven evolution. The difference this time is that there is a high probability of the extinction of one particular species that we care about more than any other. That species is Homo Sapiens.

One good response to climate change is to set up a self-sustaining colony of humans on another planet, say Mars, because some tipping points have already been crossed and we may be too late already. [The first "colonists" on Mars would be "accidental" colonists: scientists with post-doctoral degrees who went there to do research and became stranded by events on Earth.] There seem to be millions of inhabitable worlds in our galaxy. Where is E.T.? He should have been here by now. E.T. may have made himself extinct by global warming. If we do not make ourselves extinct by global warming, we may be the first in our galaxy to avoid that fate. Fairness has nothing whatsoever to do with who survives or who should be sent to Mars. Nature/evolution has never concerned herself with fairness. Survival on Mars will require the highest IQs our species has to offer. The inclusion of lesser IQs or non-scientists would make survival impossible because the environment of Mars is far too harsh. Likewise, the number of Martians has to be very small because Mars cannot support anybody until we create the means of such support.

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