

Those parts of the world which will be most affected by climate change must be allowed to participate fully in attempts to manage it.

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*Climate change will not affect all parts of the world equally, but will instead have a disproportionate impact on specific geographical areas and populations. **Marcus Hedahl** writes that underlying social structures amplify this disparity, with the actors most responsible for causing climate change also possessing the greatest ability to mitigate its effects. He argues that those who are at most risk from climate change must be allowed to participate fully in global decision-making processes: not only because there is a moral obligation to do so, but also because they have unique knowledge of the local effects which will impact upon their communities.*



Our ancestors burned through massive quantities of fossil fuels in utter insouciance, but we now know that our actions, policies, institutions, and even moral attitudes must change. Such changes will require more than a mere reexamination of prudence, for those most likely to exacerbate and perpetuate the problem of climate change are least likely to suffer its **most adverse effects**. These changes must also encompass more than a rededication to charity, for we are not innocent Samaritans who happen upon strangers in need. Each of us is at least as much robber as Samaritan, for it is our own actions and inactions that are causing very real and grievously wrongful effects. In considering the harms of man-made climate change, therefore, the old and familiar requirements of justice will place a number of new and significant obligations upon us.

Man-made climate change also significantly exacerbates existing distributional injustices. A geographical unevenness is found in the way climate change affects different parts of the world, with many developing countries most vulnerable to the **most adverse consequences**. Yet the disparity in climate change burdens will not be reducible to accidents of geography. It will not be merely an unfortunate coincidence that those most likely to suffer the worst effects of climate change are those who are least likely to perpetuate the problem. The very same underlying social structures that lead to some bearing a greater causal responsibility for climate change will lead to them being better able to mitigate and adapt to the harms climate change poses.

The legitimate demands of those wronged by man-made climate change thereby follow a **familiar legal and social pattern**. Claims of rights and justice are often advanced as demands against the status quo, a fundamental challenge to an existing system of entrenched social practices, rather than merely a complaint about a specific act of exploitation or unjust treatment. We should – no doubt – lobby for reform, work to overthrow the current system, and strive to make our collective practices more just.



Credit: Andrea Zeppilli (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Unfortunately, however, we remain in a morally fractured world, without reform, collective agreement, or justice. The current system lurches forward, as do the aggregate and devastating consequences of our actions and our inactions. The interplay of the morally required and the politically feasible thereby requires much more than doing the best that we can; each successive action or inaction influences our future moral and legal culpability.

In such a world, the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes becomes particularly normatively important: the voices of the most vulnerable to climate change must be [heard and heeded](#). Significantly, this requirement does not stem solely from the fact that those most vulnerable have a unique access to knowledge of the particular local impacts. Those harmed by climate change also possess the authority to play a distinctive role in how obligations get shaped and specified, especially in non-ideal conditions in which some demands of justice are likely to be less than fully fulfilled.

If we recognise the significance of this authority, we can see that our failure to set up a system to meet basic rights does not merely wrong those injured by climate change by failing to prevent those harms, it further wrongs them because they have no one to demand what is rightfully their due. So, even if one is [skeptical](#) of the efficiency of such an institutional order, or even if one believes much more [radical, systemic, and even revolutionary measures](#) are required in order to prevent the injustices of climate change, there are nonetheless significant normative reasons to support institutional structures to allow those vulnerable to the harms of climate change the opportunity to participate in [decision-making processes](#) which are fair, accountable, open, and free of corruption.

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About the author

Marcus Hedahl – LSE, Grantham Research Institute

[Marcus Hedahl](#) is Dahrendorf Postdoctoral Research Officer in the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science.



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