A normative ethical framework in climate change

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Abstract The article spells out four domains of international distributive justice and the consequent criteria of equity, the purpose being to identify a pluralistic normative ethical framework for climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. Justice and equity should play a major role in favouring collective action against climate change, because the more the various dimensions of such action are just, the more any international climate initiative is feasible in principle. As far as mitigation is concerned, the definition of a just initial allocation of endowments focuses on the criterion of differentiated equality, taking account of undeserved inequalities as suggested by Rawls' theory of justice as fairness. With regard to the subsequent exchange of endowments, the Pareto principle, supplemented by the envy-freeness one, is a viable option. Possibly a sound reference for the just financing of adaptation activities is the criterion of differentiated historical responsibility, backed by Rawls' theory of justice as fairness. As regards the allocation of adaptation resources, the criterion of lack of human security, as substantiated in Sen's capability approach, seems promising.

1 Introduction

It is claimed that the impacts of climate change and variability will be heavier on poorer countries (Grubb 1995; IPCC 2001a; Huq and Reid 2004; Baer 2006; Paavola and Adger 2006), which are more vulnerable because of their closer dependence on agriculture, lack of financial resources, technological and institutional backwardness (Richards 2003), and low knowledge and research capacity. Poverty-related climate effects include reduced crop yields which give rise to food insecurity, lower incomes, scant economic growth, the displacement of people from coastal areas, exposure to new health risks, and an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme climatic events (Richards 2003, pp. 5–6). This exceedingly
unbalanced distribution of negative impacts will widen the gap between the North and the South\textsuperscript{1} even further, thus confirming the view that climate change is essentially a matter of justice (Shukla 1999; Gupta 2000; Parikh 2000; Muller 2002).

The chances of the adverse effects of climate change actually taking place are rather poorly understood, and the ensuing socio-economic outcomes are even less foreseeable. Therefore, each country pursues different interests and objectives, and has different perspectives on climate policy. At the same time, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) requires that these various claims must not hinder collective actions against climate change. Although both rich and poor nations are in principle willing to act cooperatively against climate change (Shue 1999, p. 531), the voluntary consent implied by the Westphalian principle, to the effect that obligations may be imposed on a sovereign state only with its consent, suggests that no supranational institution can, unilaterally and legitimately, adopt a climate treaty and bind states to comply with it: such a treaty can depend only on voluntary agreements\textsuperscript{2} (Nordhaus 1999, p. 4). Moreover, appeals to global economic efficiency are not sufficient on their own to mobilize countries, given the wide disparities in their well-being due to different mitigation capacities and vulnerability levels, and the diversified costs of adapting to climate change impacts (Rose et al. 1998, p. 25).

Therefore, since there is no global institution enforcing an international climate agreement, the latter should be self-enforcing. And a self-enforcing commitment is in general more likely when the risk is clear and present, when the stakes are relatively low, and when the incentives for free-riding are negligible (Shogren and Toman 2000, p. 30). Regrettably, this is not the case of global climate change. Consequently, any climate agreement should be widely shared, a situation which is certainly more likely when the agreement is informed by principles of justice, shaped by criteria of equity, and perceived to be fair in both its process and outcomes\textsuperscript{3} (Shue 1992, 2001; Paavola 2005). Climate change is basically an ethical issue, in fact, for justice and equity imply greater legitimacy and can persuade parties with conflicting interests to cooperate more closely on collective actions. Justice should consequently play a major role as a unifying principle which facilitates collective actions against climate change: the more climate negotiations are informed by principles of justice, the more numerous the participants will be, and the more a global manageable solution can in principle be achieved (Grubb 1995, pp. 464, 473; Pan 2003, p. 3; Gardiner 2004, p. 556). Global problems require global solutions and hence the broadest possible consensus: “even if the grounds for consensus differ among different people, and each may use different arguments for accepting the schemes, they may agree on the very principle of justice” (Rawls, in Benestad 1994, p. 726).

In the policy arena, justice and equity are not the main drivers or goals of international agreements. The parties concerned, especially when a global public good like climate stability is at issue, pursue their own interests and priorities in order to minimize their

\textsuperscript{1} Not of course in geographical terms, but rather in ones of wealth and economic development.

\textsuperscript{2} This contention is partly disputed by the Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment (1972), whose principle 21 asserts: “States have the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other states.”

\textsuperscript{3} Carraro and Buchner (2002, p. 10) instead conclude that cost-effectiveness is more likely than ethical considerations to induce more countries to enter an international climate coalition. However, their conclusion holds only with regard to the outcomes of the mitigation process for the three equity criteria that they adopt (equal average abatement costs, equal per capita abatement costs, equal abatement costs per unit of GDP), and within the limits defined by the RICE simulation model.