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CLIMATE CHANGE, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

We discuss the implications of climate change for social justice with an emphasis on intra- and inter-generational equity, and the prospects for more sustainable development pathways. The analysis and discussions surrounding the climate change problem, particularly those drawing on the traditional economics literature, have relied on a crude economic utilitarianism that no moral philosopher would be likely to endorse. They have typically ignored the concept of justice itself and wider ethical considerations.

We present a simple Rawlsian account of the injustice of climate change. Justice has always attracted as much serious attention as utility in the theory of ethics. We argue that climate change is inherently inequitable for current and future generations, and therefore unjust. Affluent individuals and groups may avoid much of the consequent harm by relocation and by other means of private protection. Moreover, climate change will target systematically and mercilessly the vulnerable, the poor and the extremely poor. Such equity issues and the need for urgent and deep mitigation are ethical in nature and represent fundamental values that need to be fully accounted for when dealing with the climate change. They should be informed by moral philosophy relating to scientific findings with respect to climate change impacts, and not just by economics in isolation.

Furthermore, new economic thinking, allowing for induced technological change, observed market conditions and institutional inertia, holds out the prospect of replacing growth strategies at odds with finite world resources. Negotiated international actions need to make better use of under-employed resources and recognise the need for justice in social development and human well-being. Climate stabilisation policies should be designed, in addition, by international negotiation to support development and, at least, should not jeopardise the development process.