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Why equity is fundamental in climate change policy research

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In his recent keynote address at a major international conference on climate change governance¹ that a number of the authors attended, renowned political scientist Robert O. Keohane stated that research on the politics of climate change is urgently needed (Keohane, 2016, <http://www.berlinconference.org/2016/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Keohane-Robert-O.pdf>). However, when providing an overview for the ideal direction of the field, he argued against focusing scholarship on the normative dimensions of climate policy. In response to questions afterwards, we understood Keohane as arguing that equity and justice issues are a potential distraction from addressing climate change, and could potentially undermine collective action in the face of this urgent public goods crisis.

We believe it is important to respond to Keohane's comments since they seemed to fit within an established line of argument that we have heard from very influential players in UN negotiation halls, academic journals, and meeting rooms of think-tanks and government ministries. As Todd Stern, US Special Envoy for Climate Change purportedly declared during the Durban Platform negotiations, "if equity's in, we're out" (Pickering, Vanderheiden, and Miller, 2012). Posner and Weisbach (2010) similarly suggest that discussions of justice ought to be left out of both academic work and policy discussions because they are conceptually flawed, could "derail the negotiations," and erode political will. These sentiments are particularly problematic when combined with an emerging post-Paris discourse that suggests that we are in a post-equity era of a voluntary and universal climate agreement. In this post-equity world, issues can be addressed by national contributions that will be self-determined. Despite strong references to justice, human rights, and equity in the Paris Agreement's preamble, the concept of equity is largely absent from its substantive components. Paris recognized that the agreement will reflect "equity and common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR-RC) in the light of national circumstances," a softening of the original principle of equity and CBDR-RC. The global stocktake on progress towards Paris' goals must be conducted "in light of equity", but further definitions or declarations are avoided (UNFCCC, 2015).

¹ Transformative Global Climate Governance après Paris, Berlin, Germany, 23-24 May 2016, <http://www.berlinconference.org/>

The Paris outcome reflected the desires of some powerful countries, including the United States, who have long resisted the inclusion of equity and justice in multilateral environmental agreements. However the massive bloc of 134 developing countries insisted from the first environmental summit in Stockholm in 1972 that the nations who caused global environmental problems – and the ones who had the money to address them – should carry the greatest burden in cleaning them up. Considering that adequate global action requires deeper mitigation effort from more actors than ever before, regardless of their historical emissions levels, and that climate impacts are increasingly threatening those who have typically contributed little to the problem and who often lack the resources to adapt, it is clear that justice remains as central to climate change politics and decision-making as ever.

In stating that equity is either irrelevant or dangerous in a post-Paris world, Keohane revisited three common assertions repeatedly used to downplay equity in the climate context. First, that a focus on equity risks encouraging lower quality research that is muddled by researchers' normative stances. Second, that a focus on equity could seduce scholars into devoting unwarranted time to issues less central for politics and climate action. And third, that an inherent trade-off between climate change and equity precludes a focus on the latter at the expense of the former.

As scholars committed to climate action, we suggest that these claims warrant explicit interrogation, particularly now as we face the dire need for immediate and deep action on climate change just at the time that equity provisions are sidelined in the Paris Agreement. In this commentary we rebut these common assertions and argue that analyses of equity and justice are essential for our ability to understand climate politics and contribute to concrete efforts to achieve adequate, fair and enduring climate action for present and future generations. Climate change action is too important not to address the issue of equity; failing to do so risks the collapse of the new regime.

Why we need research on equity and climate

Given scientific and political calls for more ambitious climate action, we suggest four distinct but overlapping reasons why we need *more* research on climate change and equity, not less.

1. Obligation to address human wellbeing

We agree with Keohane about the urgent need for scholarship on climate change within political science and its cognate disciplines because scholars have an obligation to do intellectually rigorous work on issues affecting human wellbeing. However, to take equity and justice issues out of scholarship on climate change policy ignores the differential impact of both climate change and policies to address it. This is problematic not only because of our obligations to address human wellbeing, but also because of the imperatives of international law, including those of human rights.

In a world characterized by vast disparities of wellbeing, it is naive and dangerous to analyse climate policies (or the lack of them) without considering how humans in starkly different structural positions are affected by them differently (Kasperson and Kasperson, 2001). By excluding equity we risk ignoring, or willfully omitting, the implications of decision-making on those who are most vulnerable and are most likely to face severe

costs of any action (or inaction). In order to focus on human wellbeing, scholarship should include work that explores how communities themselves articulate the justice dimensions of climate change (including procedural justice), and how human rights could be differentially impacted by climate change and climate policy. If the risk to human wellbeing is why scholars should focus on climate change generally, then scholarship must also feature explicit consideration for those whose wellbeing is most threatened in the context of differential impacts and capacities.

2. Understandings of justice are essential to political analysis

Like Keohane, we know we need rigorous studies of politics in order to understand and support climate action. However, far from being irrelevant to political analysis, we believe that paying attention to equity in climate change scholarship illuminates crucial political dynamics. Perceptions and experiences of injustice lead people to take action, to build coalitions, and to articulate and fight for visions and outcomes that they see as more equitable and desirable. They demand compensation for the harm caused by others or experienced by those with whom they identify. Excluding equity or justice claims from the scope of study sharply hampers our ability to conduct rigorous political analysis.

The centrality of justice claims to political processes is evident in the politics of climate action at all scales. Diversity in the contexts and aspirations of countries that are party to the UNFCCC animates political debates within and beyond the Convention (Gupta, 2014; Ciple et al., 2015). Structural inequality and different worldviews are mutually constituted and have systematically hampered agreement on fairness in climate action for decades (Roberts and Parks, 2006). These structural inequalities are amplified by demonstrable inequalities in the causes of climate change, in biophysical impacts, and in vulnerabilities. For these reasons, differentiation of effort by nations has been, and continues to be, one of the most difficult political issues within the climate regime (Gupta, 2012; Rajamani, 2012; Pauw et al., 2014). An account of global negotiations that overlooked justice claims would miss crucial political elements of the climate regime's past, present and future.

We have also seen actors organize domestically around ideas of justice. Failing to account for the equity implications of policy actions required for rapid decarbonization leaves climate policy efforts vulnerable to attack from such pro-status quo actors as fossil fuel companies, who exploit equity concerns to generate political opposition to action. To ignore the justice claims posed by communities with very different basic characteristics in a world attempting to achieve deep decarbonization is to risk committing to politically irrelevant analysis.

A common argument used to oppose a scholarly focus on equity is that equity claims can be used to block collective action. Actors trying to shirk their obligations certainly have invoked equity concerns to slow the political momentum of policy change. However, equity claims can also be used to exhort action from actors who may not immediately benefit, but who are part of a shared socio-ecological system nonetheless. The power of strategic and political uses of justice claims to promote or undermine climate action is the very thing that demands attention from climate scholars: who is using these claims, in what situations, and why?

3. Equity is not always in tension with strong climate action or collective action

Contrary to assumptions that concerns for equity necessarily thwart strong climate action, attention to equity can help to identify compromises that take the interests of all players into account, enhancing the political process by and establishing long-term legitimacy for agreements (Biermann et al., 2012). In an international system of sovereign states, governments' perceptions of what is "fair enough" are central to their negotiation mandates and affect the likelihood of meeting their commitments and cooperating with others. As Keohane noted, practices of reciprocity are key to cooperation, but reciprocity is connected to actors' perceptions of fairness. Cooperating actors are less inclined to behave in a reciprocal manner if they consider the institution unjust or the outcomes it is expected to provide inequitable (Ostrom and Walker, 2003). In addition, governments are less likely to game the regime or circumvent rules if they perceive these rules, and the processes of generating them, as equitable.

Tensions over inequality in emissions or in experiences of climate impacts could also trigger responses that threaten international stability, such as trade wars or large migration flows. Scholarship that takes equity concerns seriously can inform efforts to make the global regime more effective and durable, enhancing international security and stability.

A positive overlap between equity and climate action is also seen from the perspective of those who stand most to lose from climate impacts. Without climate action to limit warming to 2.0°C or even 1.5°C, some communities will be irrevocably harmed. For these communities there is not a trade-off between equity and climate action: climate action is necessary for survival, which is surely included in the realm of equity. These communities will strive for more ambitious action on climate than most actors in powerful and wealthy nations, and a more equitable process will provide them more leverage. And beyond highly vulnerable nations, environmental justice and climate justice declarations have for 25 years called for drastic reshaping of the energy system to achieve rapid decarbonization (FNPCELS, 1991; ICJN, 2002).

4. Understanding trade-offs requires taking equity into account

When writing about climate change policy in 1992, Henry Shue argued that existing inequalities in economic development, political power, and resources make consideration of justice "unavoidable" (Shue, 1992). Contrary to Keohane's concern that a focus on equity would propel tendencies to "trade-off climate change for equity", we argue that we can neither understand nor address climate action trade-offs without taking equity into account.

To be able to identify and weigh the nature and magnitude of trade-offs being proposed for different actors, we need analytically rigorous accounts of equity and human security. There is no representative or average global citizen or country, and the diversity of positions, opportunities and vulnerabilities has to be included in any meaningful analysis of substantive or political trade-offs. Without including equity in the analysis of policy decisions, the actual implications of trade-offs for diverse individuals and groups cannot even be identified. For example, given current technological conditions and existing inequities in access to energy and infrastructure, human wellbeing requires additional access to fossil energy for some but not others (Rao and

Baer 2012). Excluding equity from analyses of trade-offs signals a tacit agreement to sacrifice the most vulnerable groups and most silenced voices for the benefit of “the greater good,” which in the real political world generally favors those more privileged.

In summary

At this moment of need for rapid action on the issue, Keohane rightly points to a crucial role for academics in informing effective climate policy and the institutions to institute them. However, academics cannot leave equity and justice out of their analysis, nor avoid it as an explicit topic of research. Justice, and its flipside injustice, are central to the intersection of climate change and human wellbeing, and to political systems at all levels.

Rather than sidelining rigorous analytical work on these trade-offs and the justice dimensions they spawn, we argue that more work is needed to document and understand what drives adequate climate action and inaction, and what these choices mean for diverse communities and political actors. This work is important not only because we ought to do work that is relevant to those who will be most affected, but also because equity analysis is essential to our ability to understand the dynamics of political claims, actions and trade-offs. Equity is not a distraction to climate policy and analysis. Rigorous analysis that systematically considers the issue of justice is essential for our ability to understand and meaningfully inform the politics of climate action, especially in the post-Paris world.

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