

Climate (In)justice in the Caribbean



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Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity. This phenomenon, when combined with natural climate variability, alters the atmosphere primarily due to the increase in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions derived from human activities (UN, 1992). Beyond its environmental impacts, climate change has a profound social dimension, as its acceleration is linked to the capitalist system based on fossil fuels and a pattern of hyperconsumption. This intensifies historical inequalities and increases the vulnerability of certain sectors of society (Okereke and Coventry, 2016).

Scientific literature maintains that environmental degradation and its effects are distributed inequitably. Developing nations, responsible for a smaller proportion of global GHG emissions, are the most affected due to their limited adaptive capacity (Uddin, 2017). The Caribbean, in particular, faces significant climate challenges despite its small contribution to global emissions. Its vulnerability is compounded by its dependence on highly climate-sensitive sectors, such as tourism and agriculture, underscoring the urgency of implementing adaptation strategies that also address the structural inequalities prevalent in the region (Pichs, 2023).

Global Climate Governance and the International Climate Regime

Climate change, as a global public problem, challenges the capacity of states to manage it effectively (Saucedo, 2019). Given the inadequacy of national responses, global climate governance emerged as a viable solution, promoting collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors at different levels to formulate and implement climate policies (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2015).

Climate governance is closely linked to the international climate regime, understood as the set of agreed-upon rules and procedures for decision-making on climate change (Hrabanski and Le Coq, 2019). The consolidation of this regime began with the 1992 Earth Summit and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). However, debates persist about the disparity between the resources invested and the results achieved in emissions reduction (Okereke et al., 2009).

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol adopted a top-down approach of mandatory GHG reduction commitments for industrialized countries (Betsill et al., 2015). However, the ineffectiveness of this model, highlighted by the collapse of international negotiations, led to the adoption of the Copenhagen Accord in 2009, which promoted a more flexible and decentralized approach that allowed states to make voluntary commitments (Dubash, 2009). This gave rise to hybrid multilateralism (Bäckstrand et al., 2017).

The 2015 Paris Agreement consolidated Copenhagen's voluntaristic approach, although it combined it with some elements of Kyoto (Held and Roger, 2018). It established a global goal to limit temperature rise and encouraged the adoption of voluntary commitments by states. Furthermore, it recognized the importance of subnational and non-state actors in the fight against climate change (Jordan et al., 2018), thus balancing multilateral and transnational action in climate governance (Solorio, 2021).

Climate Justice

Climate justice is crucial to revealing inequalities in the distribution of the costs and benefits of climate change. The principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR), a key principle since the Rio Summit in 1992, establishes that while all countries must assume responsibility in the fight against climate change, their obligations vary according to their historical responsibility and economic capacity (Castro, 2016).

The Kyoto Protocol reflected this principle, imposing emissions reduction commitments exclusively on industrialized countries, while the Paris Agreement adopted a less stringent approach. The limited implementation of CBDR has been criticized, particularly by developing countries, who argued that this principle has not been implemented fairly (Marion et al., 2021). Furthermore, recent literature points to the invisibility of proposals from the Global South, which have had little influence on the international climate agenda, unlike studies from the Global North (Sapiains et al., 2020; Kane and Boule, 2018).

North-South Gap and the Cases of the Caribbean

The gap between the Global North and the Global South in the context of climate change underscores profound inequalities in response capacity and the allocation of responsibilities. Economies in the Global North, the main emitters of GHGs, have boosted their development at the cost of intensifying the effects of climate change. In contrast, the Global South—including the Caribbean—is more vulnerable despite having contributed minimally to global emissions (Ayazi and Elsheikh, 2019; Rhiney, 2015). Below are some cases:

Antigua and Barbuda, which emits only 0.002% of GHGs, faces extreme vulnerability due to its geography and dependence on tourism (WHO, 2020). With 70% of its territory less than 30 meters above sea level, its economy is at risk from increasingly intense weather events, for example, Hurricane Irma in 2017, which devastated its infrastructure. This could increase poverty, which affects 18% of the population.

The Bahamas is also highly vulnerable, with 80% of its territory just one meter above sea level (Thomas and Benjamin, 2018). Despite contributing 0.1% of global emissions, it faces devastating hurricanes—such as Hurricane Dorian in 2019—causing millions of dollars in damage (Shultz et al., 2020). Its tourism-dependent economy (60%) is particularly threatened by climate change.

Saint Kitts and Nevis, with a small population and minimal emissions (less than 0.1%), faces frequent cyclones and rising sea levels. Since 1989, the island has been impacted by twelve cyclones, causing severe material losses and displacement. Dependence on tourism and agriculture exacerbates its vulnerability and limits its adaptive capacity (Dormer, 2022).

Saint Lucia, with a minimal contribution to global GHG emissions, faces significant climate vulnerability. Saltwater intrusion, rising sea levels, and tropical cyclones threaten its coastal zones and economy, which depends on tourism and agriculture (Serraglio et al., 2021). Significant economic damage is projected, reaching up to 10% of its GDP by 2025.

Conclusion

The climate crisis in the Caribbean illustrates the structural inequalities between the Global North and South, and how developing nations face devastating consequences. Caribbean economies, dependent on tourism and agriculture, are highly vulnerable to extreme weather events and lack the financial and technical capacity to adapt to these challenges. The current structure of the international climate regime has failed to provide adequate responses to the needs of these countries, perpetuating injustice.

It is imperative that global climate governance structures be reconfigured to ensure greater equity. Climate justice must be central to policymaking, ensuring that the most affected countries receive financial, technological, and political support to address climate impacts. The structural inequalities that perpetuate the Caribbean's vulnerability must be addressed through a firm commitment from major emitters in order to move toward a more balanced and fair approach.

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