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The Rich Must Face Their Personal Carbon Responsibility

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In a recent Editorial³ Sunita Narain issued an invitation to discuss how we can “make space for emissions.” We would like to take up this invitation.

We wholeheartedly agree with Ms Narain’s assessment that the warming of the global atmosphere is possibly the biggest and most difficult economic and political issue the world has ever needed to confront. And we agree with emphasising – in line with Sir Nicolas Stern’s recent review – that the cost of taking mitigation action now is a small fraction of what we would have to pay as the cost of inaction: i.e. the cost of climate change impact damages which we will have to face if we fail to act now. Costs, it has to be emphasised that will be – and, indeed, are already – falling predominantly on the poorest and most vulnerable who are least responsible for the problem. Climate inequity extends beyond mitigation!

Ms Narain rightly points out that “the world has changed [and that] there is clear understanding that the rich and the emerging rich world needs to make the transition to a low carbon economy”. But we feel the world has changed even further. While Ms Narain’s discourse is still couched in terms of ‘worlds’ – i.e. remains at the level of *countries* – we believe the urgency of the situation, and indeed justice, demands that we start including responsibilities and capabilities of *individuals* as well as of countries in our deliberations on how we deal with the problems of climate change.

An Issue of Distributive Justice

To explain this, let us assume that we agree, for reasons of equity, to calculate emission restrictions after the Kyoto targets expire in 2012 on a ‘per capita’ basis. More precisely, let us assume that each country would be allocated an emission cap – an ‘assigned amount’ of emission permits – totalling some *target per capita amount* (a fraction of today’s global average emissions per person) *multiplied* by the country’s (present day) *population*.

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³ “Climate: the market’s Achilles heel”, Centre for Sustainable Energy’s Fortnightly News Bulletin, 30 November, 2006

In the case, for example, of India – whose current emissions per inhabitant are much lower than the world average – this would entail a considerable surplus of emission permits. And, as long as there are surplus permits, India would therefore not be forced to introduce emission mitigation measures to stay within its assigned amount. Indeed, if there were an international trade in such permits, India could legitimately earn significant export revenues from the sale of these surplus permits.

So much for the ‘big picture’. To illustrate our point let us now take a closer look at the domestic situation. In other words, let us ask what would be an equitable distribution of, to stay with the example, India’s domestic ‘ecological space’. Even though the national emission cap – i.e. the over-all size of this space – would not require India to introduce any domestic mitigation measures, we believe that considerations of domestic equity would do so. Why? Because anyone emitting more than the agreed average target would occupy part of the Indian ecological space of someone in India who is emitting less. And distributive justice would demand that those who occupy more than their fair share of domestic ‘ecological space’ – i.e. who emit more than that target average – should either make room for those of their compatriots who do not (i.e. reduce their emissions), or at least compensate them for the use of their space.

The fact that a national target is ‘non-binding,’ in other words, does not mean that ‘business as usual’ is morally justifiable, for the strictures of distributive justice would still demand that the (carbon) rich either reduce their carbon footprints to give the (carbon) poor their fair share of the domestic ecological space, or pay an appropriate compensation.

Of course, it is unlikely that India – or, for that matter, any other developing country – is going to adopt any form of cap on their overall emissions in the near future, which makes the issue of equitably sharing a limited domestic ecological space a rather moot one. But there are other, equally pertinent reasons why (carbon) rich individuals have a moral duty to reduce their emissions, wherever they may be domiciled.

An Issue of Compensatory Justice

The crucial fact, particularly from the point of view of the poor and vulnerable, is that emissions are not just a matter of occupying one’s fair share of ecological space, it is also a matter of causing harm, something which is in danger of being overlooked if one’s focus is solely on the just allocation of emission rights.

Indeed, the principle of common but differentiated responsibility and respective capability demands that whoever is capable should not only reduce their responsibility but contribute to compensate for the harm done. And this, we believe, applies not only to countries, but also to individuals, regardless of creed, colour or, for that matter, nationality.

For example, if we assume that the global *sustainable* ecological space – i.e. the level of emissions that can annually be emitted without causing harm – were given by the 1900 global fossil fuel emissions level (approx 2GtCO₂), the *personal* sustainable ecological space would currently be around 300kgCO₂/cap. In other words, everyone on the planet

would have a budget for (at most) 300kg of harmless fossil carbon emissions. Any additional emissions are harmful and thus carry responsibility. Of course, in a great many cases, the additional emissions are due to subsistence activities and thus should *not* be held culpably responsible. However, there are personally attributable emissions, such as the ones associated with (international) air travel, which can hardly be excused on these grounds. People who travel by air are capable of facing the personal responsibility for that activity and should be made to do so.

This is why we support the idea put forward at the recent Nairobi UN climate conference by Bangladesh on behalf of the Group of Least Developed Countries to introduce an international air travel adaptation levy. And this is why we would like to reciprocate Ms Narain's call to action and invite the Centre for Science and Environment to join us in promoting the idea that (carbon) rich individuals, as well as countries, need to face up to the responsibility entailed by what its founder Anil Agarwal so aptly referred to as 'luxury emissions.'

Yours sincerely

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