

## **The Politics of Climate Change: Individual Freedoms vs Collective Rights to Life and the need for a “New Ethics for the Earth”**

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The field of sustainable international development can help us to understand the structural and ideological forces that reproduce unsustainability and the limits of the ethics underlying capitalism. Critical perspectives on ethnocentric and anthropocentric views of development might help us to question our individual choices and responsibilities and to link them with the need for social change.

The industrialization of Europe took a heavy toll on its people, communities and natural resources. Colonialism consolidated European capitalist accumulation while it destroyed and/or subordinated indigenous cultures and modes of production and imposed patterns of production and social organization that exploited local people and nature.

Centuries later, when former colonies gained independence, they were unable to modify the role they had been assigned: to provide for the imperial powers cheap labor and goods, mostly unprocessed agricultural and mineral goods. Despite many changes in the last century, gaps between the global South and North in economic and social power have increased, and unsustainable development has become a threat to life on earth.

While it is important to understand the historical and structural roots of unsustainability, we all share responsibility for this state of affairs. Elites and middle class groups in both the global South and North have enjoyed the “benefits” of unsustainable development. We have consumed according to patterns that reinforce unsustainable production and allowed socio-political inertia to maintain the status quo.

Why have we remained indifferent to the capitalist expansion that destroys and exploits ecosystems and local people and threatens life on earth? Let me suggest a couple of factors that might explain our behavior. Perhaps the most pervasive is the notion that humans are entitled to dominate nature, an idea promoted by mainstream Judeo-Christian traditions, reinforced by the “Enlightenment” and by modernist ethnocentric and anthropocentric visions of development, which after World War II shaped interventions and policies in the global South. Development has been instrumental in spreading throughout the world Western models of capitalist accumulation and social organization of production, models aimed at economic growth and modernization.

Another important factor to consider is the socioeconomic and geographic divorce between those who bear the cost of environmental degradation and those who enjoy its benefits. We consumers in the North might benefit from lower prices of food, such as seafood or hamburgers, without realizing that in distant communities, local peoples’ livelihoods and natural ecosystems have been destroyed or degraded to achieve that

cheaper cost. This degradation takes place both indirectly, such as when mangroves are polluted by expanding shrimp farms, and directly when rainforests are cleared to establish cattle ranches. If we knew the social, environmental and true economic costs of cheap food and clothing, we would perhaps think twice about our purchasing choices. But usually the costs of environmental degradation and social exploitation are far enough from us not to disturb our comfortable lives. We might, for example, choose a mode of transportation based on our individual budget or our personal convenience, without considering the social and environmental impact of our decisions.

And yet problems associated with environmental degradation and climate change are becoming more visible, interconnected and urgent, making it more difficult for us to ignore the consequences of our actions, as consumers, professionals, and citizens of the world.

Wherever we live, we are going to be affected by climate change. At the outset we will have different capacities to adapt, since some will be able to move to safer areas while the majority will face ever more precarious livelihoods, and in some cases, even death. Ultimately, however, we all face extinction unless the process of environmental degradation is reversed. To this aim, radical changes need to be made. And these changes will affect not only our lifestyles but our individual rights and freedom to choose.

We define individual rights as our birthright. However, we need to ask whether we have the right to live the way we do, when it means the destruction of life. Are we entitled without limits to individual freedoms that are threatening the collective human race, the collective life on earth? Are the necessary changes to occur spontaneously as a result of cumulative individual choices or should change be promoted or even enforced through policies that protect the collective right to life? I believe that our individual rights cannot remain unrestricted when they become a threat to the right of other individuals (human and non-human) to live.

We need to ask not only what responsibilities individuals bear to reverse environmental disaster, but what limitations on individual rights are required in order to protect collective rights to life. How are we to reconcile the conflicting interests between individual rights to freedom and collective rights to life? How should we overcome the split between those who enjoy the benefits and those who pay the costs of environmental degradation? What values should guide us when we face choices that diminish our convenience and comfort?

One option would be to act out of fear or self-interest, thinking about the need to secure long-term survival. But changes made with those motivations might not be sustainable. They might lead to violence and conflict. What we need is a change in the way we see the world, the way we behave and relate to each other.

We need a new “ethics for the earth” that can mobilize people towards radical changes in our understanding of life and our connections to nature and non-humans. If we were

to acknowledge the sacredness of life and this earth, we would see that we all are bonded as different manifestations of this sacred life. Compassion and solidarity would become a natural, internal and synergistic force, rather than an imposed or external one. This spiritual connection would grant equal rights among different people and between people and non-humans when it comes to sharing this planet. This alternative notion of individuality that acknowledges our belonging to a larger sacred collective can provide moral and spiritual incentives for acting responsibly and “selfishly” at the same time, accepting limits to our individual rights based on collective rights that are synergistic with us. We can organize then our individual and social lives around this new ethics to find rewards that are not materialistic. For instance, we might find security and a sense of belonging in our social networks rather than in our 401(k)s, or enjoy hiking nearby as opposed to exotic trips to the antipodes; or we might devote more time to our own artistic explorations and get rid of the 500-channel cable service. In other words, we could not only do responsible things like recycling, consuming less and living green, but we could actually find joy in less consumptive ways.

To this aim, we need to abandon hegemonic ethnocentric views of development and learn from other spiritual traditions, especially from indigenous peoples who have more holistic views of the sacred nature of life and earth. Knowledge of their agricultural practices, lifestyles and cultures can help us to redefine the roadmap that will guide us toward sustainable collective development and personal happiness as well. Sacrifices will arise not only from the awakening of the altruistic nature of individuals, but also when our individual experiences of personal well-being and happiness are linked to the common interests and transcendent nature of the larger web of life of which we are a part.