

The principle of
common but
differentiated
responsibilities
politics essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

The assertion that climate change is anthropogenic and poses a serious threat to humanity is considered a valid argument by many schools of thought. This argument presents a platform for continual dialogue and negotiations between nations, supported with actions towards mitigating climate change and its threats. Resulting from several negotiations, which are not without controversy, are agreements, plans and policies such as the Kyoto Protocol, the Montreal Action Plan, the Rio Declaration and the Bali Road Map etc. all fashioned to ensure collective and wide participation amongst states in addressing climate change. Also, as part of global efforts, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), established by the United Nations (UN), is assigned the task of generating guidelines and reports and also assessing the effects of climate change and the adequacy of response measures (Svensson, 2008). In addition, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is adopted by many states in order to prevent this ‘negative change’ by mainly minimising the amount of greenhouse gas (GHG) emission into the atmosphere (Svensson, 2008; Ringius et al., 2002). However, concerns have been raised about the efficacy and feasibility of some of these agreements, plans and frameworks as measures for controlling and managing climate change (Monbiot, 2006; Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe, 2002; Hardy, 2003). These concerns call for unbiased reviews of climate change mitigation measures and the principles behind them within different framings of the problem. In this paper, I discuss a key principle behind climate change mitigation measures. I weigh the value of equity in climate change mitigation and identify the advantages and

disadvantages of adopting the principle of “ common but differentiated responsibility” (CBDR). In conclusion, I make a case for introducing viable principles as measures for tackling climate change.

EQUITY IN CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change can be framed as a single or combination of issues such as ethical, political, historical, scientific, security and health issues etc (Randall, 2010). However, one can argue that although the universal perception of the magnitude of climate change is hinged mainly on scientific claims and evidence, this perception is broadened within the other issues or framings mentioned. Principles and mechanisms to control climate change are proposed, developed and implemented at local and international scales around these framings (Randall, 2010). Nonetheless, one consequential factor underlying these scales and framings is ‘ inequity’ (Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe, 2002). Incidentally, equity is arguably the starting point of the discourse on climate change mitigation (Barkham, 1995). It forms the crux and as well constitutes the bane of many debates and negotiations on climate change (Ashton and Wang, 2003). Yet, Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe (2002) contend that equity is not adequately addressed in key agreements and documents relating climate change. Contrary to this claim, Ashton and Wang (2003) argue that equity permeates UN negotiations and agreements on climate change. Equitable participation is to a large extent dependent on the understanding of the challenges posed by climate change (Skea and Green, 1997). On these premises, I argue that the explicit understanding of equity in the context of climate change at a local or international scale sets the stage for ‘ fairness’ in dealing with climate

change problems. Notwithstanding, it is important to mention that it is difficult to reach a consensus on equity since it is reliant on different philosophical beliefs and notions (Ikeme, 2003).

While it can be argued that climate change is a common problem, it also fair to recognise that responsibilities and impacts vary (Harris, 1999; Ashton and Wang, 2003). Consequently, differences and disagreements emerge. The phrase, ' unfair advantage' in climate change negotiations, questions the practicability of equity and the comprehension of the common and differential nature of this global challenge. This undermines efforts to obtain viable solutions (Skea and Green, 1997). The mere recognition of inequity or equity may be considered a reasonable act of justice and key to solving the climate change problem. Thus, I put forward that the acceptance of ' equity' as an integral component of negotiations opens up rather chaotic but pertinent twists in the climate change debate which on one hand can promote the efforts towards mitigating climate change and on the other hand serve as a conundrum against solutions.

To explore these arguments and make a case for viable climate change solutions, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) as a tool for negotiating climate change solutions is defined and dissected at an international scale. This principle is equity-based and has been applied in key climate change negotiations (Ikeme, 2003; Okereke, 2008; Matsui, 2004; Ashton J. and Wang X., 2005).

Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration, 1992 – “ Common but differentiated responsibility” (CBDR)

The application of this principle in the climate change saga has its origin from the UNFCCC Rio Earth summit of 1992 (Harris, 1999; Ashton and Wang, 2003; Matsui, 2004). It is regarded as the key principle in addressing the problem of GHG emissions in the Kyoto protocol (Matsui, 2004; Harris, 1999). The principle of CBDR is established on the grounds of equity and fairness and demands more responsibility from developed countries in a global participation towards seeking climate change solutions (Harris, 1999; Ashton and Wang, 2003; Matsui, 2004). The principle states that:

“ States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth’s ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.” (Source: United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP, www.unep.org)

This principle has come under close scrutiny and criticism in the climate change mitigation debate. Both the developing and developed states remain sceptical about this principle (French, 2000; Okereke, 2008).

Why the principle of CBDR?

Given the complexity of issues and arguments arising from climate change debates, one can only wonder how decisions can be regarded as fair and equitable (Ashton and Wang, 2003; Carzola and Toman, 2000). And if they are regarded as such how can their efficiency be measured? Outlining the reasons behind the application of this principle in this discourse sets the stage for a thorough analysis of its strengths and weaknesses. These reasons are:

To distinguish between the contributions of the developed and developing states in the emission of GHG and subsequently determine their contributions in remedying the problem (Weisslitz, 2002; Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe, 2002).

To ensure financial aid and clean technology transfer to the developing states as a measure of mitigating climate change (Ashton and Wang, 2003; Shah, 2009).

To provide a philosophical and legal support for achieving the objectives of key international agreements such as the Kyoto protocol etc. [note: this principle is not a legal obligation] (McManus, 2009; Rajamani, 2000).

Identification and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the Principle of CBDR as a solution to climate change

In relating CBDR to answering the following questions: “ who should accept responsibility for climate change?” and “ on what basis should responsibilities be assigned”, one can explore the pros and cons of this principle within different framings. The ambiguous nature of this principle in <https://assignbuster.com/the-principle-of-common-but-differentiated-responsibilities-politics-essay/>

global climate change negotiations warrants answering these questions at an international scale. Livermann (2008) reinforces this assertion by pointing out that the challenge of the 'blame game' in assigning responsibilities to states is controlled under negotiations driven by the principle of CBDR. Nevertheless, she concedes that there are controversies in applying this principle.

Strengths

First, from a historical framing, it is difficult to reconcile the contribution of different polluters on an international scale over a long period of time (Caney, 2005). Attributing emissions directly to a country (from which the emission emanate) is impractical largely because GHG get completely mixed up in the atmosphere, which fundamentally has no boundary (Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe, 2002). On this basis, the principle identifies a 'common responsibility' (Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe, 2002) for all states. This 'common responsibility' is intrinsic in climate change negotiations and forms the fulcrum of viable agreements.

During the era of massive global industrialisation, a lot of GHG were released into the atmosphere (Stern, 2006; Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe, 2002; Hardy, 2003). But the impact of distribution of these GHG is irrespective of who is responsible (Ikeme, 2003). The need for 'historical accountability' became obvious during climate change negotiations (Neumayer, 2000). In this regard, the CBDR recognises that there are historical differences in emissions between the developing and the developed states and between developed states (Hepburn and Ahmad, 2005). In the words of Ikeme (2003, pp 7), "bygones are not bygones". On this note one can argue that this <https://assignbuster.com/the-principle-of-common-but-differentiated-responsibilities-politics-essay/>

principle is progressive in an intergenerational context. It considers how the emissions of the past can affect the future. It also establishes a moral and ethical basis for 'environmental justice' which cannot be legally guaranteed (Kamminga, 2008; Ikeme, 2003).

There are strong indications that climate change has an impact on the world's economy (Stern, 2006). Similarly, the world's economy has a hand in climate change. The economic boom which accompanied the industrialisation of the developed states arguably played a major role in aggravating climate change, leaving developing states and future generations at more peril to its effects (Barker, 2008; Stern 2006). This peril is more obvious due to the economic gap between these states. The CDBR is applied to this effect to bridge the economic gap between states, even though its application remains contentious (Najam et al., 2003; Ramajani, 2000). In the Kyoto protocol, economic based mechanisms adopted to mitigate climate change show the global proposition for shared responsibility (Halvorssen, 2007; Vashist, 2009). The CBDR is clearly one principle behind economic agreements of shared responsibility in the Kyoto protocol (Harris, 1999; Vashist, 2009). Thus CBDR is formulated to meet economic needs of states while tackling climate change.

The CBDR also saves developing states the cost of engaging in stringent carbon cut regulations, thereby indirectly helping to build their economies in order to close the gap with the developed states. Through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) of the Kyoto protocol, this principle arguably enhances the investment in clean technology globally, promoting ecological modernisation in the process. More so, CBDR facilitates the need for <https://assignbuster.com/the-principle-of-common-but-differentiated-responsibilities-politics-essay/>

developed states to provide technological and financial assistance to the developing states for combating climate change (Scarpace, unknown).

Developed states get credits under the CDM for avoiding emissions. Though, McManus (2009) argues that through the CDM, developing states meet sustainable development targets, I remain sceptical about this claim since the developing states remain at the core of disagreements in negotiations. I argue my case in the next section.

Matsui (2004) and Harris (1999) suggest that the CBDR encourages the developing states to participate in climate change negotiations by pressurizing the developed states to bear the greater responsibility in the interim. However, there is need to back up this encouragement with actions. It seems encouragement is not enough judging from the GHG emission levels of countries like Brazil, China and India. While these countries are not 'committed' to reducing their emissions now, I suggest this principle serves as legacy to ensure their future compliance and commitment in climate change mitigation initiatives, especially as they are at the forefront of pressing the developed states to comply with the Kyoto agreements.

When aligned with "neoliberal economic ideas and structures", the CBDR is usually successful (Okereke, 2008, pp 26). I argue that these ideas and structures are entwined in some of the mechanisms of the Kyoto protocol which encourage private participation in climate change mitigation such as the CDM. The introduction of 'equity based norms' such as CBDR in approaching global environmental issues such as climate change shows the consideration of justice and equity in facing the challenge (Okereke, 2008).

Weaknesses

On the contrary, the interpretation of the principle of CBDR sparks controversy in the allocation of ' historical responsibility' to states. Liverman (2000) argues that this favours the developed states. She also points out that while developing states have low emissions with high vulnerability; developed states have high emissions with low vulnerability. Hence, the basic interpretation of this principle is devoid of issues on vulnerability which is a big problem. Thus, one can infer that this principle is fundamentally constructivist and to a large extent uncaring about the issue of vulnerability of some states to climate change. By virtue of this assertion, there is no firm commitment by developed states to aid countries such as Bangladesh and the Maldives which are more vulnerable to the rise in sea levels. The case of ' vulnerability' is can be appreciated more from a health perspective. The emergence of many diseases is now attributed to the increasing global temperatures (Patz et al., 2007) and now climate change is seen as a threat to global human health (Cambell-Lendrum et al., 2007). It is also considered the " largest health ' inequity' of our time" (Patz et at., 2007 pp. 397). There is a notable asymmetry in vulnerability to diseases between the developed and developing states in favour of the developed states (Hardy, 2003, Patz et al., 2007, Cambell-Lendrum et al., 2007). The CBDR alignment with the aftermath of GHG emissions is myopic.

This principle is not modelled to advance sustainable development in the developing states. (Scarpace, Unknown). The exportation of unclean technology by developed states to developing states for financial benefits is contrary to the objective of sustainable development. Many heavy polluting

multinational industries now establish their plants in developing states where there are no stringent emission regulations.

By virtue of the CBDR, the weight of responsibility on developing countries to voluntarily cut GHG emissions is insignificant (Scarpace, unknown). Though, some schools of thought will argue that setting targets for developing states will limit their growth and possibly widen the economic gap which the principle aims to narrow (Pinguelli-Rosa and Munasinghe, 2002), I maintain that there should be some sort of commitment from developed nations based on this principle or a 'reviewed principle' because climate change still remains a common problem.

A scenario where some states with historically insignificant emissions but are now are big emitters with strong economic capabilities, is not adequately depicted in the CBDR. Due to their economic capacities some of these developing states can 'fully' participate in reduction of GHG. Under the guise of the principle, these states like China do so little to solve the problem (Scarpace, Unknown).

The ambiguity of this principle questions the level at which the principle should be adopted. Caney (2005) suggests that this principle may fit international interests but neglects lower level interest such as local national interests and individual interests.

Finally, Matsui (2004) argues the CBDR has a propensity for what he calls 'double standard' or what Okereke (2008) refers to as 'responsibility deficit' – where the willingness to act responsibly is superseded by cost-benefits.

This contention is made worse on the grounds that the CBDR principle is not <https://assignbuster.com/the-principle-of-common-but-differentiated-responsibilities-politics-essay/>

legally binding, irrespective of the fact that the Kyoto protocol was signed into law (Matsui, 2004; French, 2000). Also, the pressing economic needs of states may result in limited devotion of resources necessary for global solutions to climate change (French, 2000). There is also a sense of caution and competition amongst the developed countries such that they want to avoid any condition that may result in 'unfair economic advantage' (Green and Skea, 1997, pp 3). More so, Okereke (2008) asserts that the nature of the CBDR could result in 'hegemony'; where developed nations in a bid to maintain their economic and world dominance, project an air of interest, claiming leadership in moral and intellectual discourses in climate change.

Discussion

Only agreements considered by all parties as equitable are likely to promote action and facilitate climate change mitigation (Ashton J. and Wang X., 2003). Such agreements must be built on the tenets of equity and driven by a singular objective – 'stop climate change if we can'.

Though the implementation of CBDR is wrought with several controversies, parties to climate change debates and negotiations must recognise that it is not an utopian principle. Concessions need to be made on ethical grounds if climate change is really considered a big threat to humanity.

The CBDR is one important principle for tackling climate change equitably. Sceptics and critics have to realise that agreeing on a new principle to replace or back-up CBDR may take several years, yet more claims of 'inequity' may arise.

The 'Polluter pay principle' has a more direct approach to addressing emission issues. It could easily be drafted into law. However, it may undermine the economic gap between states (Caney, 2005). It focuses mainly finance and economics to the detriment of physical and environmental outcomes of climate change. Without a strong historical basis, this 'polluter pay principle' cannot be viable at any level in tackling climate change. However, there are arguments by Shue and Neumayer in Caney (2005) canvassing for 'individualist approach' for accounting for historical deficits in adopting this principle.

In my opinion, to make the CBDR more practicable and fit to meet the especially the challenge vulnerability in climate change, a consequentialist dynamic approach is needed. This approach shall integrate measures to assess the risk of climate change in different regions of the world and it shall be carried out continuously at different times. Global efforts will subsequently concentrate of the most vulnerable areas. This approach will not require changing the 'wordings' of principle 7. However, it will need a firm legal backing to ensure its implementation.

Conclusion

The post Kyoto negotiations will take off in 2012 and Kamminga (2007) points out that improving the Kyoto protocol is a major concern. The CBDR still remains the most potent principle to bring all states to the round table for fair negotiations. Sacrifices must be made to mitigate climate change and the big polluters, especially the US, need to establish their sovereignty in the new negotiations. Doubting the evidence of climate change is one thing, but refusal to act reasonably negates the essence of the precautionary principle.
<https://assignbuster.com/the-principle-of-common-but-differentiated-responsibilities-politics-essay/>

Environmental and Political egalitarianism need reflect in the outcome of the 2012 negotiations.

States need to ask, “ What is morally right to do in this situation”? If the talk about globalization is anything real, then we must all learn to be “ our brothers’ keepers”. The ‘ big’ states seem to prioritise economic gains in climate change mitigation while the small states are bent on playing the ‘ blame game’. However, these states need to realise that the CBDR is still a potent tool with which to achieve collective viable climate change solutions.