

Climate Policy Quest Backgrounder

Building a Low-Carbon Future: The Need for Collective Action



Climate change is a global issue with global consequences. This is because there are no geographic boundaries in the atmosphere and greenhouse gasses can move freely across the atmospheric space, affecting everyone irrespective of individual contribution to emissions. This classifies climate change as a **tragedy of the commons**.

Tragedy of the Commons

First proposed in 1968 by Garrett Hardin, the term tragedy of the commons refers to the dilemma of the overuse of limited natural resources shared by a group of individuals acting out of their self-interest. Demonstrated through an example of a group of farmers sharing a common land (i.e., 'commons') for their cows, each farmer will act out of his self-interest to add more cows to graze that land. Even though the grass will grow again to support new cows grazing the land, over time the land will not be able to sustain the grazing of too many cows as it will not grow back fast enough to support all the cows. However, the farmer would not necessarily consider whether there is enough grass left behind for other farmers, as all farmers in this scenario will act out of self-interest and only consider the benefit they receive from using the common public resource (i.e., milk from grazing more cows) (National Science Foundation, 2011).

This metaphor demonstrates that the limited natural resources of our planet paired with the overpopulation of humans where individuals always act out of self-interest to sustain themselves on this

planet will eventually lead to a tragic outcome.

Climate change is a tragedy of the commons—this is because the atmosphere is a shared resource by all individuals inhabiting this planet. All humans inhabiting this planet act out of self-interest when consuming these limited resources, including consumption of resources causing emissions leading to climate change, often without considering its effects on other individuals. Tragedy of the commons poses the question of how to fix it, as the resource at question belongs to the 'commons' and cannot necessarily be privatized—such as the atmosphere. This leads to a need for cooperation between all individuals when consuming a limited resource to ensure the planet sustains all individuals in an equitable manner (National Science Foundation, 2012).

What is Climate Justice?

Climate change impacts different communities around the world in varying degrees, and as such the burdens of dealing with the impacts of climate change are borne unfairly or inequitably between the rich and the poor. This poses the question of **climate justice**, which links climate change to human rights and development—i.e., ensuring the rights of the people most vulnerable to the effects of climate change are safeguarded by adopting a human-centred approach towards addressing climate change, where the benefits and burdens of its impacts are shared equitably and fairly (Mary Robinson Foundation - Climate Justice, n.d.). An

important aspect of climate justice is who pays to fix it—as such industrialized countries have historically contributed more to the global greenhouse gas emissions over time, whereas many less industrialized countries more prone to natural disasters are paying the price of the effects of climate change today.

Bibliography

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