

# Climate justice and reparations overdue | The Express Tribune

*Abbas Moosvi September 17, 2022*

Pakistanis are paying the cost for climate change despite little to no share in its responsibility

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With celebrations around the resumption of the IMF's Extended Fund Programme cut short in light of the devastating floods that ravaged through the country, Pakistanis have found themselves – physically and metaphorically – on an island, paying the cost for climate change despite little to no share in its responsibility. The conversation on reparative justice – in which the developed world compensates the Global South for the crimes committed to it since at least the industrial revolution – can no longer be avoided. This will be the first step in generating a comprehensive policy apparatus to curtail carbon emissions by individual countries and lay the groundwork for robust institutions in vulnerable regions that are able to withstand the inevitable shocks in store, at least for the foreseeable future.

One of the common reservations against reparations is the alleged difficulty of quantifying precisely how much is owed, to whom it is owed to, and from whom. Economic-anthropologist Jason Hickel addresses this question by looking at historical emissions by territory from 1850 to 1969 and consumption-based emissions from 1970 to 2015 – comparing these figures to the scientifically agreed upon planetary boundary of 350 parts per million atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration i.e. ratio to all other molecules present at any given point in time.

After adjusting for population differences, it was found that the USA accounted for a whopping 40% of 'overshoots' i.e. cumulative emissions exceeding allocated budget. Russia and Germany were ranked joint second, with 8% each – followed by the UK (8%), and Japan (5%). Contrary to popular notions, both India and China fell into the category of 'undershooters' – both contributing less CO<sub>2</sub> than their fair share, the former by 90.2 gigatonnes and the latter by 29.4 gigatonnes. Pakistan was also an undershooter, contributing 10.7 gigatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> less than its fair share. Overall, the Global North's (USA, Canada, Europe, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Japan) share in the proportion of total national overshoots stood at 92%.

Using data from the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative and Germanwatch's Climate Risk Index, international humanitarian organisation Concern Worldwide ranked Pakistan

8th in its list of countries most vulnerable to climate change. This is evident by the rise in temperatures, floods/droughts, deforestation, rapidly melting glaciers, and more – along with the forecasted displacement of large segments of the population as a result of these extreme events. At a broader level, it is worth noting that out of the top-10 most vulnerable countries, 3 belonged to South Asia and 6 belonged to Africa – the remaining being Haiti, ranked 4th most vulnerable.

There seems to be a clear pattern here, whereby countries of the Global North both contribute to and benefit from the degradation of the environmental commons while those of the Global South pay the consequences despite remaining within stipulated limits in terms of emissions. This is not to mention that within these vulnerable countries, the lion's share of the burden falls disproportionately on the marginalised – whether that be women, ethnic peripheries, religious minorities, or the working class at large. Domestic elites, tucked away in their gated housing societies, remain largely oblivious of these facts. In the words of activist-academic Ammar Ali Jan, "... it would be fair to say that they are heading the most successful 'separatist movement' in the country, a movement that seeks to insulate itself from the squalor and abandonment reflected in the experience of millions of Pakistanis."

With little to no incentive to address the plight of the poor, ruling elites thus turn to the usual suspects in times of crises, predatory multilateral donor agencies and international financial institutions – which peddle the empty rhetoric of 'humanitarian assistance' and 'climate resilience' to impose further indebtedness at a time when over 30 million have been displaced from their homes and approximately 800,000 livestock losses have been incurred, with total financial costs (of both relief and rebuilding) estimated around \$20 billion. All this will lead to food insecurity, dwindling exports (due to the textile sector being hit especially hard), and further price hikes in the immediate future – multiplying the grievances that are expected to arrive with the resumption of the IMF programme.

Debt has always been deployed as an imperial tool to keep countries subservient via the imposition of 'conditionalities' designed to weaken institutions and subjugate them to the interests of Western powers. The aid/charity model will continue to foster fragility unless the process of 'development' is radically rethought to prioritise the needs of citizenries rather than global/domestic bureaucrats.

Besides, no amount of 'preparedness' will address the problem unless root causes are addressed: in this case, a global economic system hell-bent on endless production in the pursuit of profit, a pathological force that has continued to extract from postcolonial countries despite several decades of independence. Fossil fuel leviathans around the world, including the likes of Saudi Aramco, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Gazprom, BP, etc., neatly integrated into an intricate global web of polluters, are granted a free hand in the not-so-slow destruction of the planet.

Indeed, a ground-breaking study by Carbon Majors reported that a total of 100 companies are responsible for over 70% of carbon emissions since 1988, the top-25 of which are responsible for more than half. The only reason for this, of course, is that it suits the interests of big multinational corporations headed by parasitic elites that influence policy vis-à-vis their own networks of friends occupying key decision-making roles in the power corridors of their respective countries.

Any 'climate diplomacy' in Pakistan (and the Global South in general) that is to serve a useful function must therefore unapologetically push for wide-scale reparations, debt

waivers, and infrastructural assistance not as a favour fuelled by altruistic concern but a duty and responsibility for the historic pillaging of natural resources in pursuit of endless growth – whether through industrialisation or colonial exploitation.

Economists in particular, who populate the international financial institutions that have come to dictate policies in developing countries in tandem with big donor agencies, must revise their tunnel-vision in a manner that ensures academic analyses do not miss the forest for the trees: policies that have wrought immense violence and destruction since the advent of neoliberalism in the 1970s. Cosmetic interventions simply will not suffice: the planet is being fried as we speak!

*Published in The Express Tribune, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022.*

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