

CLIMATE INJUSTICES HAVE MULTIPLIED: IMPLICATIONS FOR FOSSIL FUEL

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Climate injustices have multiplied over time
2. Climate objectives were delayed, delaying fossil fuel phase out
3. Delay in action have shrunk the carbon budget, making it harder to share presently
4. Stranded assets were not accounted for
5. Mitigation efforts focused on efficiency, reducing opportunities for systemic change
6. Adaptation costs are paid mostly by victims
7. A symptomatic approach was taken; driving systemic factors were ignored

INTRODUCTION: CLIMATE INJUSTICE HAS MULTIPLIED OVER TIME

The challenge of leaving fossil fuels underground is inextricably linked to six cumulative climate injustices over the last 35 years (Gupta et al., 2025). This policy brief explores these different injustices (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Climate Injustices

CLIMATE OBJECTIVE DELAYED, DELAYING FOSSIL FUEL PHASE OUT

First, despite knowledge of the impacts of climate change on society pre-1990, there was a 23 year delay in adopting the quantified articulation of the climate temperature objective of 2°C and if possible as low as 1.5°C in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2015; a 29 year delay in adopting 1.5°C as the objective and a 32 year delay in mentioning the need to transition away from fossil fuel (Gupta et al., 2025). This number and the delay meant: (a) that the principle of not causing significant harm to the environment was not seriously analysed, while 1.5°C may be the safe target beyond which climate impacts are triggered, 1.0°C is the proposed just target limiting harm to less than 1% of the global population;

(b) the delay reduced the opportunities for achieving 1.0°C which was crossed in 2017, and for achieving 1.5°C which will be crossed in 3 years; (c) the delay allowed rich countries to continue to use fossil fuel sending the message to developing countries that there was no urgency; and (d) any effort to rapidly meet these targets itself implies injustices (Gupta et al., 2024).

DELAY SHRINKS CARBON BUDGET, CANNOT BE EASILY SHARED

Although the Climate Convention talks of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDRRC), which could be used to allocate a share of the carbon budget among countries, companies and people, the delay in adopting the temperature target meant that the equivalent carbon budget had shrunk so much it was impossible to equitably share the budget (Matthews et al., 2020). This led to the decision that each country should do what it can, which today adds up to a 2.7°C world (UNEP, 2025).

STRANDED ASSETS NOT ACCOUNTED FOR

Moreover, any share of the small carbon budget would no longer be able to account for the problem of intergenerational and intragenerational justice (Matthews et al., 2020). More than 78% of the remaining fossil fuel is in the developing world which implies that the burden of stranded assets is shifted to these countries (Heras et al., 2025). And if these countries decide to use their fair share, we will cross the 2.7°C level. In fact, it may have been the fear of stranded assets (i.e., the fossil fuel sector is evaluated at between USD 16 and 295 trillion) and the existential threat that fossil companies and users face that may have led them to control the narrative. This may have enabled pre-emption of CO₂ as a pollutant subject to control and ensured postponement of the mentioning of fossil fuel in the climate regime to enable continued existence. Moreover, labour in the fossil fuel sector needs a just transition, and although work has started on this, it has been limited.

MITIGATION FOCUSES ON EFFICIENCY REDUCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The climate regime calls for a policy mix. In fact, (a) a good policy mix of regulatory, economic, suasive, infrastructural, and managerial measures are needed (Schoenefeld et al., 2025). However, the policies countries adopted were mostly demand-side market mechanisms (joint implementation, clean development mechanism, emissions trading, reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation), this was efficient and politically feasible but not effective as societies were not educated on the need for structural change, and regulatory measures to enable the shift were not developed. (b) Moreover, although scholarship promotes niche developments that can shape regimes

and landscapes and make other systems obsolete, we believe that in the case of fossil fuel, promoting renewables and alternative energy will not be enough to change fossil fuel landscapes (Albert, 2021). (c) Policies continued to support fossil fuel subsidies; renewable energy subsidies went to those who could already buy electric cars, solar panels and heat pumps and not to those who needed it; and there was no planning on how to retrofit or redesign society (see PB 37, 38). (d) Funding for global mitigation was market-based and not based on the CBDRRC principle mentioned above (Kolmaš, 2023).

ADAPTATION COSTS MOSTLY PAID BY VICTIMS

The impacts of climate change have been visible for decades and are in line with projected impacts. Developing countries have asked for compensation, funding for adaptation and funding for residual damage (loss and damage). It was agreed that USD 100 billion would be made available from 2020 onwards annually (in a Conference of the Parties decision in 2015) and a USD 300 billion would be made available by 2035 with efforts to increase it to USD 1.3 trillion by 2035 annually (COP15, 2010). The injustices here are that, despite the principle of no significant harm, finance for harm was watered down from compensation (pre-1990), through new and additional to ODA resources (1990-2000), to mainstreaming climate in ODA (2000-2015), to blended finance (ODA leverages other finance), to a reduction of ODA (2025 onwards) which reduced the scope for blended finance, and now the framing is in terms of including all sources of funding as the resources made available to developing countries. Mitigation finance trumps adaptation finance; the Adaptation Gap report (2024) estimates that the adaptation finance gap is at USD 187-359 billion annually, still excluding the resources (estimated at 1-1.5 trillion annually by 2050 for developing countries) (UNEP, 2024). Reduced funding means costs are paid mostly by victims.

SYMPTOMATIC APPROACH: DRIVING SYSTEMIC FACTORS IGNORED

The driving forces of the climate problem and inequality, and the underlying system are also drivers of these injustices (Gupta et al., 2025). These driving forces include the economic/financial system that encourages market mechanisms, profit accumulation, GDP growth, sovereign debt, and the externalization of social and economic impacts, which exacerbates poverty. The driving forces of inequality include the structure of society and its treatment of public and merit goods. All of this can be attributed to the dominant neo-liberal capitalist (patriarchal and neo-colonialist) narrative that focuses on individuals and individual freedom, the free market and deregulation (and disregard for science) (Hans, 2023). This has enabled the delay in the long-term temperature target, pre-empted the sharing of the carbon budget, prioritized the stranded assets of the North and ignored those of the South, focused on market-based mechanisms, and reduced adaptation to a 'local' problem that needs to be addressed locally.

CONCLUSION

The climate arena is an arena of cumulative injustices since the 1990s. These have led us to the current situation that 1°C is not even being considered politically, 1.5°C is almost out of reach, and we are headed towards a world of irreversible climate impacts unless we can address and redress the challenges mentioned above.

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