

CONCEPTUALIZING NORTH-SOUTH IN CLIMATE POLITICS*

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Climate governance history reveals cumulative North-South injustices
2. North-South dichotomy is flexible and relational: Global North vs. Global South, Norths within the South, and Souths within the North
3. Persistent historical inequalities and structural power imbalances shape climate responsibilities, decision-making, climate finance and access to resources
4. Policies that account for relational and tripartite North-South can strengthen equity and justice in climate governance.

INTRODUCTION

The history of climate governance across North-South is a history of cumulative injustices (see PB 4) (Gupta et al., 2025). Among these, the debates over defining and sharing the carbon budget, accounting for stranded resources and assets, and linking mitigation approaches to fossil fuel distribution stand out most clearly. Compounding these injustices, climate change in the Anthropocene (Steffen et al., 2007), amplified by the Great Acceleration, presents systemic risks through feedback loops and tipping points, threatening the stability of the Earth system (Richards et al., 2021; Ripple et al., 2023). Earth system governance (ESG) faces complex interactions across multiple scales, with North-South relations central to both the reproduction of inequalities and the pursuit of justice. In this context, the Global North is expected to lead mitigation efforts and provide finance, while the Global South claims differentiated responsibilities and their Right to Development (Gupta, 2010). However, this rigid binary framing obscures unequal power relations. Northern and Southern actors are indeed interconnected, and the North-South divide is better understood as flexible and relational, encompassing geographical-geoeconomic North and South, the South in the North, and the North in the South (Heras & Gupta, 2025).

TRIPARTITE AND RELATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF NORTH-SOUTH

The North-South framework is not static. Its flexibility is reflected in the malleability of its categories, within and between them, and in the varying interpretations of the Global South – as economically disadvantaged countries, as a transnational political subject, and as a post-geographic condition within capitalist relations. These multiple interpretations relationally reveal that both North and South are embedded in global processes rather than operating in isolation but also shift the focus on uneven international power relations. The relational aspect highlights the conventional North-South divide, but also a North (i.e., the rich) in the South, and a South (i.e., the poor and most vulnerable) in the North, offering a more nuanced perspective on power, agency and interdependence in climate governance.

PERSISTENT HISTORICAL INEQUALITIES SHAPE NORTH-SOUTH CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Long-standing structural inequalities (rooted in colonialism, capital accumulation, extractivism in the Souths) and increasing inequalities between the Souths and the Norths have concentrated economic, political and military power in the hands of Northern actors, shaping institutions, mitigation agendas, and energy transition pathways. Global South countries also differ significantly in emissions, governance capacities, economic resources and energy infrastructure, from emerging economies with negotiating power to Least Developed Countries (LDCs), the most vulnerable to climate change and reliant on external support. The result is a set of exclusionary policies that distort resource allocation, fragment coalitions, and ultimately undermine effective climate governance and the stability of the Earth system. Fossil fuel phase-out debates illustrate these dynamics: Northern actors have historically overused their fair share of the carbon budget, disengaged from operationalising the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities principle, and underdelivered on climate finance, shifting burdens onto the Global South (Gupta et al., 2025), while Southern perspectives (including in the North) remain sidelined. While Southern coalitions through the G77+China and new supply-side clubs (i.e., the Powering Past Coal Alliance, the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance, and the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty initiative) have exercised agency in challenging northern dominance, internal divisions and competing interests often weaken collective influence (Gupta & Allan, 2023), leaving room for divide-and-rule strategies by Northern countries (e.g., the US's second withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, lower climate finance than promised, or North-South blame games over sharing issues (i.e., sharing the carbon budget, fossil fuel resources, and accounting for stranded assets and re-sources, see PB 4).

ACCOUNTING FOR TRIPARTITE NORTH SOUTH RELATIONS CAN STRENGTHEN EQUITY AND JUSTICE IN CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

A relational understanding of North-South dynamics not only captures these historical asymmetries but also offers a foundation for more equitable and effective governance. In practice, this means that resource allocation, climate finance, stranded assets, and mitigation responsibilities should recognise the tripartite nature of the North-South divide. A justice-oriented policy agenda in Earth System Governance needs to challenge Northern-dominated power structures that continue to sustain capital accumulation and extractivism in the Souths (Özekin, 2024), making the UN system and other global institutions more democratic, equitable, just, and inclusive. Central to this effort is ensuring a fair distribution of the Earth's resources among countries, generations and species (Gupta et al., 2023), grounded in principles of international, inter-generational, intragenerational, and interspecies justice (Brankovic, 2023; Gupta et al., 2024), meeting basic needs with non-fossil energy sources to prevent long-term lock-ins (Rammelt et al., 2022), while human activity should happen within the safe and just Earth System boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Reconceptualising the North-South divide as a flexible and relational dichotomy through a tripartite relationship transforms how we can address power, justice and effective cooperation in global climate politics. It acknowledges intertwined histories and mutual dependencies while foregrounding the asymmetries that shape policy outcomes. Effective and fair climate governance must integrate historical responsibilities with differentiated capabilities, allowing for policies that are both context-sensitive and globally coherent, ensuring that Southern voices worldwide are not sidelined: a Climate System justice-centred (see PB 5), relational approach to address the North-South dichotomy is essential for the stability and predictability of our climate, which are at risk for everyone.

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