

## EQUITY, SOFTPEDALING, BACKLASH, AMBITION – AN UNVARNISHED VIEW

Tom Athanasiou  
Executive Director, EcoEquity, Co-Director, Climate Equity Reference Project  
toma@ecoequity.org

The Paris Agreement faces many dangers. It will probably survive, but it could well degenerate into a ritualistic “Pledge and Whatever” regime that is shaped by, and contributes to, the overarching global governance failure. Similarly, attempts “to drive towards rapid climate transition on the ground” will be stymied unless fundamental equity problems are seriously addressed. Such outcomes would be catastrophic, but they won’t be avoided unless we take equity seriously. Which, ultimately, is why the climate equity challenge is so critical, and why it’s not going away.

The key here is the sprawling, almost boundless nature of the climate equity challenge, and finding strategic ways to approach it, strategically, by degrees. Perfect justice is not on the agenda, but neither is the sharply minimalist conception of equity that so many of today’s “realists” have long preferred. The danger is that that when we ignore or deprecate inequity, we simultaneously empower backlash and blocking coalitions.

It’s useful to sketch a quick typology of the climate equity challenge. Here’s a very brief version of the one we came up with at the *Climate Equity Reference Project*:

- **The global “fair shares” challenge (i.e. global “effort sharing”).** As a global commons problem, the climate challenge is fundamentally a fair-shares problem. Commons problems can only be solved when, in general, each actor is seen to be doing their best to do their fair share.
- **The adaptation and loss & damage challenges,** which are far more difficult than the mitigation challenge. Mitigation, after all, is a quantifiable problem that can be understood by self-interested actors. But we all too easily turn our eyes from the suffering of distant strangers.
- **The classic just transitions challenge,** which is focused on work life disruption, particularly in coal-based and other fossil-dependent communities.
- **The larger just transition challenge,** which is that any climate mobilization of sufficient speed and scope will be extremely disruptive. But, as the US election has shown, many people feel quite disrupted enough, thank you.
- **The extraction (supply side) equity challenge,** which arises from the need to “keep it in the ground. The problems is that, in this highly unequal and unfair world, doing so will have immense distributional consequences.
- **The challenge of development justice,** which is and has always been the core of the climate equity challenge, both between and within countries. In any positive storyline, it will inevitably take center stage.

All these challenges are unfolding in a world where the richest 1% owns more than all others combined. For just this reason, it is absurd to try to frame the climate equity challenge without taking inequality – and the need for redistribution – into explicit account. This is obviously not easy, but this does not mean that it can be avoided. The challenge is rather to find “solution oriented” ways forward.

Also, a comment on the negotiations. . .

If we don't rapidly increase the speed and depth of the transition, we lose. For this reason the so-called "ambition mechanism" is absolutely critical, as is the inconvenient fact that any adequately effective ambition mechanism must include the (science based) equity assessment of national pledges and actions. In this context, some of us have launched a "civil society equity review coalition" that takes on the equity assessment challenge. The future of this coalition will be decided between now and 2018. It is, to be frank, challenged by the view – common among many climate policy veterans and particularly among key funders -- that equity is doomed to decay into "finger pointing" and thus to be an obstacle rather than an aid to increased ambition.

This is indeed a danger, but it is not our fate. There are ways forward.