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Just Adaptation? How the Diffusion of Norms in the Global Climate Regime Affects International Climate Politics

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Abstract: Politics in the international climate regime is a balancing act between intra- and intergenerational justice, as it has to account for both the needs of developing countries and those of future generations. Following a constructivist approach, this paper argues that international climate politics are heavily dependent upon the way climate change and the appropriate behavior required to prevent it are constructed collectively. The article shows how the diffusion of norms and changing images of climate change have shifted the interests of the actors under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. As a result, adaptation became more and more widely accepted as a necessary step in international climate politics in advancing the strategy of climate change avoidance. This also represents a shift from a focus on intergenerational justice as the main normative goal of the convention, to a broader aim of sustainable development that comprises both inter- and intragenerational justice.

Introduction

For mankind, adaptation to changing climatic conditions is nothing new. At any given point in history, people have been forced to adapt to changing climatic conditions. In the face of anthropogenic climate change however, adaptation takes on a new ethical as well as political significance. As scientific modeling has developed which allows the prediction of future climatic developments, adaptation can be undertaken anticipatorily – and hence alongside mitigation may be a complementary strategy to promote intergenerational justice in the face of climate change. Yet, because most of the regions suffering from the impacts of global warming lie in developing countries, but it is the industrialized states that bear the main responsibility for the origins of these changes, adaptation is also an issue of international politics and international justice. Thus adaptation is seen today as "a necessary strategy at all scales to complement climate change mitigation efforts."[1]

This development is mirrored in the political development of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Until 2001 adaptation did not play any significant role in the convention. It was rather seen as a hindrance of climate policy and stood contrary to the sustainability norms that were constitutive of the regime. The preservation of natural systems for future generations was the main goal of the convention as it was formulated at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). On the contrary, the promotion of adaptation measures was seen as a form of resignation and a turn away from a policy of preserving the present state of the ecosystems. Yet from 2001 on, beginning with the seventh Conference of the Parties (COP) in Marrakesh, adaptation played a major part at every annual UN climate summit.

From a conventional or rationalist perspective in International Relations this development of the climate regime is puzzling. If we were to assume the purely utility-maximizing behavior of states as the main actors in international climate politics, we would not be able to explain why they should voluntarily engage in adaptation projects that do not in large part benefit them. Yet by taking a social constructivist perspective, we can show that the growing role of adaptation was the result of a learning process in the climate regime that shifted the collective perceptions and norms in the climate change discourse. Thus, a narrative of climate change focused on the physical and ecological that was dominant at the time of the creation of the regime, was gradually replaced by a narrative that stressed the regionally specific social implications of climate change. On an ethical level this represents the shift from intergenerational justice to international justice as the main normative paradigm in international climate politics.

The challenge of constructivism in international relations theory

Constructivist approaches in the field of International Relations (IR) developed as a critique of the dominant theories in IR – Realism and Liberalism.[2] Although there are many different versions of constructivism, all share the same basic idea: the social construction of reality. While the existence of an objective reality is not put into question, it is assumed that humans are not able to perceive that reality directly. Rather, objects in the 'real world' gain their meaning through the process of human interaction and communication. Thus, the interests of political actors cannot be regarded as fixed and given, but depend on the actors self-image, the collectively shared views of the problem or issue at stake (causal ideas) and conceptions of appropriate behavior (behavioral norms).[3] Actors therefore are seen as *homini sociologici* rather than as *homo oeconomici*. In certain situations they do not act in a way that maximizes their personal gains, but rather in the way they think is appropriate for the respective situation.[4]

Applied to international climate politics this means that neither do the material characteristics of global climate change determine politics in the climate regime, nor do the interests of the actors in the regime exist independently of the ideas and norms of the dominant climate discourses. Rather, it is a particular construction – or narrative – of climate change that decides which policies are chosen. Furthermore, the conduct of actors in the climate regime depends heavily on their notions of themselves (e.g. as climate political pioneers or as a victim of climate change). Norms in climate politics, as derived from ethical principles like inter- and intragenerational justice do not simply exist; they are invented and promoted in ethical discourses by influential actors like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED).

Inter- versus intragenerational justice

In postulating a shift from inter- to intragenerational justice, this work will first clarify the meaning of those concepts as well as their relation to each other. The concept of intergenerational justice refers to the obligation of the present generation to enable the members of successive generations to satisfy their basic needs in the same way, or in some better way, than themselves.[5] Intergenerational justice in this respect does not only

mean the preservation of natural resources but refers to all resources (material and ideal) that may promote human well-being. When it comes to the political realization of intergenerational justice, there is one central problem: the short-term orientation of the democratic process. Future members of society do not have any voice in the system, and are thus not represented by present decision-makers.

Intragenerational justice on the contrary, refers to the social inequality within national societies or between different states at a global level (international- or north-south-justice). While in the case of intergenerational justice a certain generation is conceptualized as a single average individual, in the case of intragenerational justice the differences between the different living conditions within a generation are highlighted. Contrary to intergenerational justice, conflicting goals in intragenerational justice can be resolved through direct negotiations or judicial proceedings. Moreover, it is possible to directly increase intragenerational justice through distributive measures which may also have positive effects on intergenerational justice, if the future benefit of the disadvantaged outweighs the predictable deficit of the advantaged, i.e. the net-effect in the future is positive.[6]

A climate change response must have at its heart a redistribution of wealth and resources.
/ Emma Brindal /

Ethical implications of mitigation and adaptation

Unmitigated anthropogenic climate change poses a threat to intergenerational justice directly and indirectly. Firstly, it threatens to destroy significant amounts of the earth's natural capital (a clean atmosphere, ecosystems, biodiversity etc.). Secondly, there will be impacts such as extreme weather events that threaten human-security and well-being of future generations. Yet, while the direct effects of climate change will hit future generations as a whole, impacts on human-security will remain unequally distributed between future peoples in the industrialized world and the developing countries.

When it comes to alternatives to deal with these problems politically, there are two general strategies: mitigation and adaptation. Whereas the former means an abatement or prevention of dangerous climate change through the reduction of CO_2-emissions, the latter refers to the anticipatory and planned modification of human practices to accommodate climate changes. From a purely intergenerational point of view, mitigation can be regarded as the normatively superior strategy as it guarantees both natural preservation (and is thus compatible with a strict notion of ecological sustainability) and the chances of future generations as a whole to satisfy their basic needs.[7] Adaptation policies on the contrary also have the potential to increase intergenerational justice, when they have a positive net-effect in the future. Yet this potential is rather limited, as the ecological losses caused by climate change will have to be accepted in most cases. Moreover, as most adaptation has to be undertaken locally, it will not benefit future generations in their entireties.

By adopting the perspective of intragenerational justice when analyzing international politics however, we get a slightly different picture. This position was especially adopted by developing countries in the 1990s, leading to a general skepticism among developing countries regarding climate politics. At the global level, mitigation policies are potentially inconsistent with notions of international justice. This is because industrialized and developing countries have thus far made unequal contributions to the global amount of greenhouse-gas emissions. This led for example to the implementation of the 'polluter pays principle' in the first round of the Kyoto Protocol, and the search for a fair allocation mechanism for the next round (post 2012).[8]

International adaptation policies, on the contrary, are normatively rooted in a discourse of international justice. As the industrialized states bear the main responsibility for climate change, but developing countries will exorbitantly suffer from its impacts, a normative imperative can be derived for the north to finance necessary adaptation projects in the south.[9] Following this argumentation, advanced for example by developmental NGOs, financing adaptation is an appropriate measure to guarantee a sustainable development of vulnerable countries in the face of what is, to some extent, unavoidable climate change.

International climate politics between mitigation and adaptation

The years following the creation of the international climate regime at the UNCED in 1992 were characterized by intense negotiations over an international agreement on mandatory emission reduction targets (the Kyoto process). Due to the opposing positions of European Community (EC) member states, climate skeptics like the USA or Japan, and the developing countries, the negotiations proved to be very difficult. While there had been some agreement on an absolute reduction target for industrialized countries at the 1997 COP-3 meeting in Kyoto, it was ultimately not until 2000 during the second part of the COP-6 meeting in Bonn that the agreement was concluded.[10]

In the beginning of the Kyoto process the issue of adaption played a minor role, but this changed with the seventh COP conference in Marrakesh, in 2001.[11] The *Marrakesh Accords* initialized an international program to support the developing countries with adaptation measures. For this purpose, three funds for the financing of projects in the south were established. Less developed countries were engaged through *National Adaptation Strategies* (NAPAs) under the

Conference	Year	Results/Agreements
COP1 Berlin	1995	• Berlin Mandate initiates negotiations on global emission reduction agreement (Kyoto process)
COP3 Kyoto	1997	• Formulation of the Kyoto Protocol → Agreement on absolute emission reduction targets (mitigation), → Flexible Instruments (emission trading and clean development mechanism).
COP6 The Hague/Bonn	2000	• Bonn Agreements → Design of the flexible instruments.
COP7 Marrakesch	2001	• Marrakesh Accords → Creation of the adaptation, least developed countries and special climate change funds.
COP10 Buenos Aires	2004	• Buenos Aires working program → Production and distribution of scientific knowledge, → Training of decision-makers and adaptation planners, → Development of pilot projects and best practice examples, → Technology transfer,
COP12 Nairobi	2006	• 5 years working program → Adaptation research, improvement of climate prediction models, → Development of adaptation-technologies.
COP13 Bali	2007	• Agreement on the Bali-Roadmap → Initialization of a two-year negotiation process of a follow up agreement of the Kyoto-protocol.

Table 1: Important steps in international climate governance

UNFCCC. Alongside the funding of adaption projects the UNFCCC also focused on the development and distribution of scientific knowledge, providing the most vulnerable regions and countries with the means to improve their adaptation efforts. Moreover, best practice projects should serve as guidelines for policy-makers in vulnerable regions and countries. To this end the UNFCCC adopted the Buenos Aires Working Program on Adaptation and Response Measures in 2004 and the Nairobi Work Programme on Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation to Climate Change in 2006.[12]

Cognitive change as social learning

When we look into the reasons for the growing importance of adaptation, one could simply point to the fact that scientific certainty about future climate change has risen. This could have brought decision-makers to the insight that they would be better off if they look after themselves and thus prevent work on adaptation. Yet from a social constructivist point of view this is clearly only half of the story, as it does not account for the political process that led to more exact scientific insights. The UNFCCC itself is the necessary condition for this learning process through interaction. The invention and dispersion of new understandings of climate change was made possible through the stable framework of international climate negotiations.

Three mechanisms can be identified that were influential in this development. First, the annual meetings of the member-states guaranteed continuous interaction.[13] Second, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was integrated into the climate regime as a major scientific body. This enabled a steady exchange between climate scientists and diplomats.[14] Third, the members of the convention obliged themselves to regularly report about their activities in the field of climate politics (so called national communications).[15] All of this guaranteed an environment in which new understandings could evolve (and through the publications of the IPCC most fundamentally) and become collectively accepted through intensive interaction.

Climate change as a global and ecological problem

When the climate regime was born in 1992, there was already an internationally established and accepted discourse or narrative about climate change that could be called a *global-physical climate narrative*. This discourse was the result of an ongoing international scientific interaction at a variety of conferences held under the auspices of the UN and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). The discourse thus comprised the collective ideas about climate change that had been accepted by the vast majority of the scientific community at that time. Through the publication of the first assessment-report of the IPCC in 1990, this narrative had already been dispersed in the political arena of the UNFCCC.

In this dominant discourse climate change was depicted as a global problem: causes of climate change were identified with the sum of total global emissions, and the impacts were perceived as global in scale (e.g. sea level rise).[16] Furthermore it was clear that the scientific facts about the exact development and future impacts of climate change remained uncertain.[17] Nonetheless, the insight that climate change was the result of greenhouse-gas emissions can be regarded as having been collectively accepted in the dominant climate discourse.[18] Climate change was generally framed in terms of the natural sciences, which suppressed other, more socially orientated, interpretations. In terms of societal impact this meant that climate change was primarily perceived as an environmental problem, and to a lesser extent a social or economic one.[19]

Global-physical narrative	Understanding of adaptation
• Climate change is a global problem. • Climate change is a result of human action and caused by the greenhouse-effect. • Future development and impacts are unsure. • Climate change is a physical phenomenon. Global warming is fundamentally a threat to the environment.	→ • Adaptation is a local problem. • Regional impacts are unpredictable → adaptation is hard to plan. • The capacity to adapt is an inherent feature of ecosystems. • Adaptation hinders mitigation.

Table 2: Elements of a global-physical narrative.

The general conception of climate change had some serious implications for the collective ideas about adaptation to climate change. As climate change was primarily regarded as a problem for the future environment, the duty of policymakers was to avert it. In this context, adaptation was not seen as a desirable option in climate politics but rather as capitulation.[20] While climate change was seen as a global problem, the problem of adaptation was perceived to be a local one, as the impacts of global warming vary greatly from place to place. It was considered doubtful to predict impacts at a local level so that anticipatory adaptation appeared irrational.[21] The construction of the accepted conception of climate change in physical terms led to the collective belief that adaptive capacity is an intrinsic feature of regional ecosystems, rather than a function of socio-economic conditions that could be politically modified. Finally, and following from this, adaptation was widely interpreted as being part of the expected costs of global warming.[22]

> Don't blow it –
> good planets are hard to find.
> / Unknown /

Climate change as a regional and social problem

From 2001 onwards, there were a number of considerable changes in the discourse on climate change in the UNFCCC. Probably the most important change was the growing evidence of the occurrence of climate change.[23] Furthermore, the spatial perception of global warming seems to have changed. The main reason for this was the development of new regional climate models that are far more precise and allow for accurate predictions at a regional level. This led to the realization that the perception of climate change as a global problem does not adequately account for its local impacts.[24] Moreover, the focus is no longer on the effects of global warming upon certain ecosystems but on the vulnerability of certain regions and communities. This leads us to another shift in the perception of climate change: it is not illustrated in purely physical terms anymore, instead it is portrayed – at least with respect to its impacts – in its socio-economic context.[25]

The changes in the collective perception of climate change also alter the image of adaptation in the context of international climate politics. The problem of climate change now appears to be a secure scientific fact. More exact regional climate models show that the least developed parts of the world, who have contributed the least to the greenhouse effect, will likely suffer the most from its effects. This has also led to the collective perception of contemporary weather ex-

tremes as being the first significant visible consequences of climate change. Through this development the discourse of climate politics engages with the discourse of development politics and/or sustainable development. Adaptation and mitigation are no longer perceived as excluding each other, but as complementary strands of an international climate political strategy.[26]

Regional-social narrative	Understanding of adaptation
• Causes of climate change are global but the impacts are regionally specific. • Human made climate change is a reality, the consequences will be grave and the developing countries will be the hardest hit. • Climate change has to be seen in its socio-economic context. • Climate change poses a threat to the environment and to vulnerable communities.	• Adaptation is a local, regional, national and international problem. • Climate change leads to regional specific impacts that can already be felt. • Adaptive capacity is determined by geographic, biological, social and economic factors. • Adaptation und mitigation are complementary approaches. • Adaptation is a necessary political option.

Table 3: Elements of a regional-social climate discourse.

The evolution of norms in international climate politics

When the UNFCCC was initialized three dominant climate political norms in the international arena had already been established. The first norm resulted from years of ongoing international scientific cooperation and from a collective interpretation of climate change as a global problem. It can be formulated as follows: the problem of climate change should be solved by the international community in a cooperative manner.[27] The two other predominant climate norms derived from an international discourse on sustainability initiated by the Club of Rome in the 1970s, and politically enforced by the Report of the WCED in 1987.[28]

The first of these norms translates the implications of an intergenerational ethics into a behavioral norm for climate politics, arguing that efforts to mitigate climate change should be undertaken in spite of definite scientific facts (i.e. precautionary principle).[29] As global warming poses a threat for the well-being of future generations, insufficient scientific certainty must not be allowed to result in political inactivity. The second sustainability-norm reflects, in contrast to the first, a concept of international justice: because industrialized countries bear the largest share of responsibility for climate change, they should take the lead in climate politics (i.e. the polluter pays principle).[30] The WCED can be regarded as the initiator of these two sustainability norms in the climate regime, as it as it was the one organization with the authority and legitimacy necessary to successfully promote these norms internationally. With the formulation of the UNFCCC treaty these three climate norms were collectively accepted and were made international law.[31]

The growing importance of adaptation was not the result of a displacement of these climate norms by newly established ones. Rather, the concrete meaning of the norms described above changed and was extended against the background of the changing climate discourse. In the cognitive context of 1992, the primary normative imperative in climate politics was to abandon or avert climate change.[32] This can logically be derived as follows. Global warming poses a threat to the environment and to future generations, thus, climate change should be averted. In order to do so, global emissions should be reduced in absence of absolute certainty, and that due to their historical debt industrialized countries should take the lead in doing so. In other words, this logic means that according to a global-physical narrative, a strict concept of ecological sustainability leads to the normative superiority of mitigation over adaptation.

However, the more the cognitive context in climate politics has shifted towards a regional-social narrative, the more the normative judgment of adaptation changed. This can also be explained logically, as follows. Climate change poses a threat to existing and future generations especially in poor countries. The industrialized countries are responsible for the main part of climate change. Therefore, developing countries should be supported by developed nations in their efforts at adaptation to climate change, and adaptation should be undertaken in an anticipatory fashion. On an ethical level, this development reveals a normative shift away from a rather strict conception of sustainability, to a more socially oriented conception in which international justice is advanced, and increasingly serves as a driving factor in climate politics. To guarantee sustainable development, it is no longer seen as sufficient to free developing countries from obligations in the climate regime. Instead, they must actively be supported.

Polluters, non-polluters and victims in the climate regime

Including adaptation as a part of global climate governance however, is not simply the result of altruistic behavior on the part of the industrialized countries within the normative context described above. Rather, the process through which these cognitive changes took place went hand in hand with the alteration of some of the actors' identities, and thus their very interests. Most important in this respect was the development of a collective identity among the most vulnerable countries. At the beginning of international climate negotiations, most of the developing countries saw themselves as not being truly involved in questions of climate change. From the point of view of international justice, they did not feel responsible for the fate of future generations. This resulted from the fact that there were two distinct role models in international climate politics, the *polluters* (the industrialized countries) and the *non-polluters* (the developing countries).[33] There was only a small group of small island states (AOSIS) that understood themselves to be threatened by global warming. Through the process of interaction in the ongoing climate regime negotiations, this constellation of roles began to change. First, the changing climate discourse led to the insight on the part of many developing countries that their socio-economic and/or geographic situation made them particularly vulnerable. Second, developing nations began to take the communicative signals of the *polluters* in the climate negotiations into account. Although the latter had obliged themselves to prevent climate change, they either expressed their unwillingness publicly (as in the case of the 'climate skeptics') or they failed to reach their reduction targets (like some states of the European Union).[34]

> Every human has a fundamental right to an environment of quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being.
> / United Nations Conference on the Human Environment /

As a result, the developing countries began to share a notion of a common fate in facing the threats of climate change: they did not see themselves as non-*polluters* anymore, but

rather as *victims*. The changing collective identity of the developing countries thereby led to the alteration of their very interests. From their self-image as *victims*, they drew power for arguments in favor of compensation and support in the process of adaptation. Their collective identity serves as a fastener, allowing them to develop a common position in the negotiations and thereby add authority to their accounts. Thus, the growing presence of adaptation issues in the UNFCCC can be explained by more explicit claims for compensation by developing countries.[35]

Thus, under a global-physical climate discourse the perspective of intergenerational justice was normatively forwarded in the international climate regime by some of the industrialized countries (the EC member-states). In that context, the developing countries had no incentive to participate in international climate politics and relied on arguments of international justice to justify this. Yet, from the same standpoint, under a regional-social climate discourse, they actively developed claims in international climate governance. Whereas under a global-physical discourse the sufferers (future generations) were anonymous and had no direct voice in the negotiation process, the sufferers under a regional-social perspective are actively engaged in the negotiations.

Shame on us if 100 or 200 years from now our grandchildren and great-grandchildren are living on a planet that has been irreparably damaged by global warming, and they ask, "How could those who came before us, who saw this coming, have let this happen?"
/ Joe Lieberman /

Conclusion

This article has shown that the growing importance of adaptation as an international climate political strategy can be explained by a learning process which has taken place within the climate regulation regime. Scientific and political interaction led to the shift from a global-physical to a regional-social narrative on climate change. We have further seen that the political implications of ethical principles such as inter- and intragenerational justice depend heavily on the discursive context of the political issue-area. Under a global-physical narrative, the intergenerational implications of climate justice were forwarded within the climate regime, while international justice was mainly invoked by developing countries to contest their own participation in a global mitigation scheme. A regional-social discourse however, has led to a more prominent and active role for international justice arguments in climate politics, allowing them to become a driving factor in the push for a combined political strategy of mitigation and adaptation. A social constructivist analysis of this transition shows that the interests of actors in the climate regime are not independent of their surrounding beliefs and the context that influences their very identities. The self-image of developing countries changed as they began to realize that they will have to bear most of the negative consequences of climate change. And unlike future generations, developing countries have a voice in contemporary climate negotiations. This may open a window of opportunity in upcoming negotiations to integrate such countries into global mitigation schemes.

The UN climate summit (COP-15) in Copenhagen this December is going to be a critical moment in developing such a plan. There, an agreement on the institutional design of a second commitment period to the Kyoto Protocol shall be reached. With respect to intergenerational justice, it will be decisive to reach a binding agreement on global emission reductions that sticks to a maximum limited average temperature rise of 2°C, and will be accepted by the highest possible number of high-emission states.

To reach this goal however, the emerging countries and some of the larger developing countries must participate. The broadened agenda of international climate governance, with adaptation and technology transfer as part of a climate strategy sensitive to international justice, can help to manage this challenge. It raises the possibility of package deals that compensate participating developing and emerging countries with technology partnerships, fund adaptation and offer knowledge transfers, all of which together could enable disadvantaged countries to develop their economies in a sustainable manner.

Notes:

1. IPCC 2001: 8.
2. Wendt 1992: 129-130.
3. Ulbert 2005: 13.
4. March/Olson 1984.
5. Tremmel 2003: 34-35.
6. Tremmel 2003: 43-45.
7. Paavola 2008: 653.
8. Page 2008: 557.
9. Adger et al. 2006.
10. Bodansky 2001: 36.
11. UNFCCC 2001.
12. UNFCCC 2004: 1 pp.; UNFCCC 2006: 3-4.
13. Schröder 2001: 24.
14. Jamieson 2001: 291; Kjellén 2007: 211;
15. UNFCCC 1992: Art. 17-18.
16. IPCC 1990a: 2, 22-23; IPCC 1990c: xxvi.
17. IPCC 1990a: 17-18, 21; Oels 2003: 9.
18. IPCC 1990a: 6 pp.
19. Payne 2001: 46; IPCC 1990a: 6 pp.; IPCC 1990b: 3.
20. Schipper 2006: 84; Brunner 2001: 19.
21. IPCC 1990a: 2; IPCC 1990b: 2.
22. IPCC 1990b: 10 pp.; IPCC 1990c: xliv
23. IPCC 2001: 137, 222
24. IPCC 2001: 65 p., 243-244.
25. IPCC 2001: 224.
26. IPCC 2001: 141, 222, 225-227;
27. Oels 2003: 7-8; Jasanoff 2001: 329.
28. WCED 1987; Jasanoff 2001: 331.
29. Jasanoff 2001: 331-332.
30. Jamieson 2001: 298.
31. UNFCCC 1992: Art. 3, Art. 4. (p.5-6).
32. Cohen et al. 1998: 348.
33. Paterson 1996: 133.
34. Depledge 2006: 3; Depledge 2006: 15.
35. Kjellén 2007: 212.

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