

# Climate Debt

The world's scientists are nearly unanimous in their agreement that human-caused climate change poses a significant threat to future generations. However, this scientific consensus leaves many important questions unsettled—in particular, science cannot resolve questions about the fundamental moral principles that should guide our response to the threats of climate change. One idea is that the United States and other developed nations have a moral obligation to do much more than developing nations to address this issue. In particular, the idea is that developed nations have a moral obligation to immediately and sharply cut their greenhouse gas emissions, and to provide assistance and reparations to less affluent countries (estimated to be between \$400-\$600 billion annually).<sup>1</sup>

Defenders of the climate debt concept argue that developed nations have this moral obligation for multiple reasons. First, these nations are disproportionately responsible for climate change: Developing nations have contributed very little to greenhouse gas emissions, yet they are also some of the most vulnerable to the disastrous effects of climate change. Moreover, developed nations disproportionately benefit from the activities that have put us in this situation: They are much wealthier than developing nations precisely because of past industrial practices, and so they have a moral obligation to do more than developing nations to address the harms caused by these practices (especially since developing nations will now have to avoid many of these practices moving forward).

Critics of the climate debt concept argue that since much of their emissions occurred before we knew about the existence of (or the harms associated with) human-caused climate change, wealthy countries are not morally responsible for the harms caused by their past carbon emissions (especially since the people who originally set us on this path are long gone).<sup>2</sup> Critics also contend that each country is responsible for promoting the interests of its own citizen, even if this activity conflicts with the interests of other countries. Thus, even if wealthy countries have harmed other countries through their use of greenhouse gasses, they are not morally wrong for having done so.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Can individuals or groups ever be morally responsible for what other individuals or groups do, for example their ancestors? Why or why not?
2. Can individuals or groups who benefit from a certain harmful practice have a moral obligation to compensate the people harmed by that practice? Why or why not?
3. What are the moral principles that govern international competition? For example, to what extent, if any, do individual countries have a moral obligation not to cause harms to other countries?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/climate-rage-20091112?page=2>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/10/science/earth/10climate.html>

