



We should Combine the Climate and Poverty Problems

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My idea for creating a better world is to update the Paris climate agreement, combining it with a plan to put poor countries back on a growth path by modernizing their farming sectors.

Climate change is a case of global atmospheric pollution; but it is not the first. Twenty years ago, we were emitting CFCs which thinned the ozone layer, increasing the risk of skin cancer. Emitting countries reached an agreement which specified reduction targets and a timetable, with responsibilities clearly set out. There were no exemptions and no free riders. The world ‘acted as one’ and the ozone problem was resolved.

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Alas, the Paris agreement is inadequate. The responsibilities of governments are not laid out. Governments are exhorted to announce their climate ‘intentions’ but intentions are not guarantees, nor do they necessarily add up to a global solution.

Why can governments not reach a meaningful climate agreement when it was relatively straightforward for ozone?

Because countries have different priorities. For rich countries, the priority is a worldwide cut in emissions. For poorer countries, which form the majority, climate change matters, but their top priority is to escape from poverty.

This position makes sense. Poor countries have long pointed out that the responsibility for fixing climate change lies, first and foremost, with rich countries. The bulk of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are there because rich countries industrialised. Poor countries argue that they have not shared the wealth created by industrialisation. Why should poor countries pay to help solve a problem that they did not create? Especially as this could shut off their route to escape from poverty.

Until poor countries experience economic growth, they will be wary of signing up to a meaningful climate agreement. But the rub is that unless every country—rich and poor—is

onboard and playing its part, there will always be complaints that some countries are free-riding on the efforts of others.

A couple of generations ago, poor countries were on a growth path. Then rich countries started to artificially stimulate their farming sectors. They stopped importing farm commodities from poor countries and gave their own farmers subsidies. For the last sixty years, this has stymied the modernization of farming in poor countries. Farming has failed to ‘take off’, preventing overall economic growth.

The solution? Rich countries need to restore market access to poor countries. They also need to stop exporting subsidized farm products to poor countries. This is unfair and debilitating to poor countries. It undermines their farmers by taking their own home markets from them. If rich countries reform their farm policies, poor countries will be back on a growth path and will be more inclined to participate in a global climate plan.

We successfully resolved the ozone problem. Tackling climate change has proved, so far, intractable. But if we tackle the climate and poverty problems together, there is hope that we could meet the concerns of poor countries and bring them onboard a meaningful ‘climate and anti-poverty agreement.’

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