

Hong Kong and Climate Change: A Question of Justice

By Paul G. Harris

As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reaffirmed recently, global warming is underway, climate change is inevitable (and very likely is happening now), and hundreds of millions, possibly billions, of people will be adversely affected by it in this century. Indeed, climate change will lead to tremendous suffering and probably widespread death in the poorest parts of the world. All of this is well established, although the details of who will suffer from precisely which environmental changes is subject to ongoing research. Anyone who thinks otherwise is probably experiencing denial—or working for vested interests hoping to maintain the status quo.

Hong Kong has a part to play in this problem. Its own greenhouse gas emissions are contributing to global warming and resulting climate change, and indeed have been doing so for many decades. This means that the resulting human suffering and death is partly the responsibility of Hong Kong and its people.

Hong Kong people—at least a large proportion of them—are among the richest on the planet. As Greenpeace pointed out in a recent appeal for the Hong Kong government to do more about climate change, Hong Kong's per capita gross domestic product ranks 15th in the world—ahead of Japan and many other countries bound by the Kyoto Protocol to the Framework Convention on Climate Change.ⁱ And, as the *South China Morning Post* reported recently, Hong Kong people have the highest individual net worth in the world,ⁱⁱ ahead of countries obligated to act under the Kyoto Protocol.

However, from the perspective of international legal instruments, Hong Kong and its people are not required to do anything about their atmospheric pollution. They have no legal obligation whatever to limit, let alone cut, their own emissions that contribute to climate change and, in turn, will contribute to human suffering as temperatures increase and seas rise.

Hong Kong's apparent immunity from legal responsibility is based upon the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility" *among states*. As part of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong is considered merely one small part of a poor, developing country that is not, like other developing countries, required to limit emissions until after the rich countries do so. And obligations will begin only sometime in the future with lots of outside help by way of concessional financial assistance and technology transfer.

Put another way, here in Hong Kong we are free, according to existing international law, to pollute to our heart's content, regardless of the impact on the future's most vulnerable people and societies.

The *New York Times* has quoted Lu Xuedu of China's Office of Global Environmental Affairs as saying that "you cannot tell people who are struggling to earn enough to eat that they need to reduce their [greenhouse gas] emissions."ⁱⁱⁱ This is China's official position—and by association also that of the Hong Kong government. From the viewpoint of interstate justice—comparing, say, China to the United States—this makes perfect sense. Rich countries have been the largest historical sources of the pollution that cause this problem. However quickly China is now moving toward the unenviable position of replacing the United States as the world's greatest polluter (which it could do within two years^{iv}), it still has

hundreds of millions of poor people who deserve the right to *increase* their emissions in their pursuit of a better standard of living.

The problem with this argument is that many affluent people—tens of millions at least, and probably hundreds of millions—and certainly millions of *very* affluent people (including China's new super-rich) are, with perfectly straight faces, hiding behind arguments like that of Lu Xuedu. They might think or even say, "I am a Chinese citizen or a resident of China, so my obligations go only as far as China's." This is the basis upon which Hong Kong can say, quite correctly, that its legal obligation to cut pollution is nil.

Insofar as there is concern about climate change in Hong Kong, it seems to be mostly about mitigating and adapting to the impact *on Hong Kong*, not on reducing any suffering it might bring to others—including the mainland's numerous poor. Greenpeace reports that 69% of Hong Kong people interviewed in a poll were "concerned about the effect of global warming on Hong Kong."^v But they were not asked whether they were concerned about future effects on anyone else.

This seems to be reflected in the official policies of their local government. Hong Kong's environment secretary, who likes to remind people that Hong Kong is a part of China and therefore not obliged by the Kyoto Protocol to limit its own emissions, seems far more concerned about how action here would raise local energy costs.^{vi} She points out that, because there is no legal obligation to do anything, the government has "a degree of flexibility" when responding.^{vii}

However, while Hong Kong's atmospheric pollution does not clearly violate existing treaties, it is arguably immoral and downright callous of us merely to continue business as usual. Social justice, as opposed to international legal justice, requires first and foremost that one stop doing harm to others. Justice and equity demand not only that the most affluent polluting states do more to combat climate change, but also that the most affluent people take part.

Any reasonable concept of justice demands that Hong Kong and its affluent people stop hiding behind China's developing-country status. It would demand that Hong Kong move beyond discussion, consultation and endless consideration of its options with regard to the environment generally and climate change in particular. (Remarkably, even now, the Hong Kong government is still considering whether to plant more trees!) Justice requires that we in Hong Kong act now, and act robustly. We should cut our greenhouse gas emissions drastically, and we ought to help the poor of China and the world adapt to climate change.

Some may say that all of this is academic. After all, Hong Kong's emissions amount to only 0.2% of the global total.^{viii} But it is less insignificant if we look at it from the perspective of the world's poor people. Many already are experiencing the adverse effects of climate change and more will in the future. Their suffering has been described as the environmental equivalent of genocide, albeit in slow motion.^{ix} In the words of Andrew Pendleton of Christian Aid, "Knowing what we know now, if we don't respond, we're committing a very serious crime."^x

Many individuals in Hong Kong, including the most affluent and privileged, may argue that climate change really is not their fault, that their personal contribution is quite small.^{xi} This is largely true, but if every affluent person thinks this way and behaves accordingly, the result can be quite large—especially as the number of wealthy people increases sharply with the

rise of China (and India). This practical truth is belied by the immorality of avoiding responsibility, even if our individual impact (or our territory's impact) is small. As ethicist Thomas Pogge argues in a discussion of global poverty, "Even a very small fraction of responsibility for a very large harm can be quite large in absolute terms. . . ." ^{xii}

In the case of climate change, most Hong Kong residents consume disproportionately more than most individuals around the world (and in China) and each emits disproportionately more greenhouse gases. Pogge points out that, "Even if each privileged person typically bears only one billionth of the moral responsibility for the avoidable underfulfillment of human rights [I would include the right not to suffer or die from climate change voluntarily caused by others] . . . each of us would still be responsible for significant harm." ^{xiii} He acknowledges that "nearly every privileged person might say that she bears no responsibility at all because she alone is powerless to bring about a reform of the global order." ^{xiv} However, as Pogge concludes, this is "an implausible line of argument, entailing as it does that each participant in a massacre is innocent, provided any persons killed would have been killed by others, had he abstained." ^{xv}

One way to move forward is to begin thinking in terms of cosmopolitan justice. Cosmopolitan justice addresses what is, for conscientious people, a disconnect between our nonexistent legal obligation as affluent people in China to cut our contribution to climate change, and our responsibility as good global citizens to reduce that contribution drastically. Cosmopolitanism is concerned with individuals. In this case, cosmopolitan justice makes demands on all capable persons for a number of reasons, such as Henry Shue's principle of "do no harm," Peter Singer's historical argument of "you broke it, you fix it," Dale Jamieson's belief in the "ability to benefit others or prevent harm," Singer's maxim to "prevent extreme suffering," Thomas Pogge's "priority of vital interests", and Onora O'Neill's Kantian concept of not undermining the capacity of others to be independent moral agents. It is hardly likely that the world's present and future poor would, if asked, choose to accept the adverse impact of climate change, at least not without compensation.

Cosmopolitan justice focuses our attention on the rights *and* obligations of individuals *everywhere*. It is not reliant on where a person lives or his nationality. Cosmopolitan justice demands that we end the unethical fiction that nothing matters other than justice between states.

The implications for Hong Kong and its people are quite clear:

First, the Hong Kong government should dramatically bolster its efforts to tax and regulate energy use, and should take steps to move toward a truly post-carbon economy and society. It could, for example, mimic Western countries by giving incentives to electricity suppliers to save energy, rather than encouraging them, as happens now, to invest in new production infrastructure. The waste of electricity in Hong Kong is manifestly evident to everyone who lives here, but there is at present insufficient incentive to end it. Or the Hong Kong government could follow the lead of the Australian government—hardly an environmental daredevil given its unwillingness to join the Kyoto Protocol—by outlawing the sale of energy-wasting incandescent light bulbs, thereby pushing the shift to much more efficient compact fluorescent bulbs. And the government could do what they are doing in Europe: requiring that new appliances meet strict energy-efficiency guidelines so that consumers do not make choices that cost them, and the environment, more in the long term.

Second, affluent people in Hong Kong (that is, most of us) are obliged to act: we have at least as much obligation to control behavior that leads to greenhouse gas emissions as do *poor* people who live in industrialized states now subject to Kyoto commitments. Cosmopolitan justice demands that even if the Hong Kong government does not force us to do so, we all should act to limit and even drastically cut our own emissions. We could start by simply changing our habits: using electricity only when necessary, rather than when it is unnecessary but convenient to do so. This means doing things as simple as switching off lights and air conditioning in empty rooms. It also means questioning our consumption habits by consuming more of what we need—fresh foods produced nearby, and time with family and friends—and less of what we do not need—highly processed foods shipped from far away, or clothing we do not need (and, deep down, do not want). And when we buy appliances, it means doing all we can to find those that use energy more efficiently—even if that costs a bit more in the short term.

Third, affluent people in Hong Kong ought to take steps to aid those people who will suffer from future climate change in China and elsewhere, particularly those who are most vulnerable (that is, the poorest among them). After all, we are partly the cause of their pain—and, probably in countless future cases, even their death. We need not aid them directly—we need not become missionaries—but we can decide to give a tithe to charities, such as Oxfam, that are doing work to improve the lot of the world's poor. The aid we give in this way will almost inevitably help those most likely to suffer the ill effects of climate change.

While cosmopolitan justice demands that the government and people of Hong Kong take these kinds of actions, they are almost always in our self-interest. Saving energy, which is the quickest way to mitigate our contribution to future climate change, also saves us money. Moving toward a post-carbon economy will prepare us for a future when affordable energy is scarce or unavailable, and it will help to clean up Hong Kong's increasingly polluted air. By taking action to limit our contributions to climate change we also set an example for the rest of China. If that example spreads northward, Hong Kong will be less likely to suffer the ill effects of pollution blowing from the other side of the border.

Perhaps most importantly, our actions and our example will be part of a nascent effort by people in other developed societies to finally start addressing climate change. If we are successful in this endeavor, Hong Kong will not be as hot as it might be, it will not suffer as many typhoons and storm surges, and its people will have to witness less human suffering on the nightly television news.

The IPCC and climate scientists focus much of their work on the environmental and social impact of climate change, and rightly so. In Hong Kong there is a nascent but growing concern about how this problem will affect our economy and infrastructure in the future.

But another impact of climate change is going to be on the conscience of Hong Kong's people. We will be less human if we do not acknowledge that our current role is unjust and unfair to others, especially to the world's most vulnerable people. And if we do not soon start behaving more justly toward others regarding our contributions to climate change, history will judge us as being very selfish indeed.

.....

Paul G. Harris is a professor of international and environmental studies at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. He is author or editor of seven books on global environmental

change, including *Global Warming and East Asia* and *Confronting Environmental Change in East and Southeast Asia*.

Notes

ⁱ Greenpeace China, *Sharing Knowledge, Creating Solutions: Lessons Learned from U.S. Action on Climate Change* (Hong Kong: Greenpeace China, November 2006), p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Dennis Eng and The Guardian (London), "Hong Kong Tops Survey of World's Richest," *South China Morning Post*, 7 December 2006, p. A1. Figures are based on purchasing power parity in 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ "On the Record," *International Herald Tribune*, 11-12 November 2006, p. 16.

^{iv} "The World Energy Outlook 2006 Maps Out a Cleaner, Cleverer and More Competitive Energy Future," International Energy Agency press release, 7 November 2006, http://www.iea.org/Textbase/press/pressdetail.asp?PRESS_REL_ID=187.

^v Greenpeace China, p. 11.

^{vi} Cheung Chi-fai, "Emissions Cuts May See Power Bills Rise," *South China Morning Post*, 16 November 2006, p. A3.

^{vii} Cheung Chi-fai.

^{viii} Cheung Chi-fai.

^{ix} AFP, "Kenyan tribe may become first human victims of climate change," *South China Morning Post*, 14 November 2006, p. A13. Andrew Pendleton of Christian Aid called it "the climate change version of Rwanda." Ibid.

^x AFP.

^{xi} I first exercised the ideas in this paragraph in "Cosmopolitan Justice and Climate Change: Who's Obligated to Act and to Aid?," Paper for the Conference on Global Justice and Climate Change, Institute for Ethics and Public Affairs, San Diego State University, 6-7 April 2006, p. 13.

^{xii} Thomas Pogge, "Human Rights and Human Responsibilities," in Pablo De Greiff and Ciaran Cronin, eds., *Global Justice and Transnational Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), p. 170

^{xiii} Pogge, n. 41, p. 192.

^{xiv} Pogge, " p. 170.

^{xv} Pogge, p. 170.