



# Climate imperialism

## How can the rest of the world respond?

Report on the lecture by Jayati Ghosh

Development economist, Prof Jayati Ghosh taught economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi for 35 years, and has been Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, USA since January 2021. She has authored and/or edited 21 books and received several national and international prizes, including the International Labour Organisation's Decent Work Research Prize for 2010 and the 2023 Galbraith Award. She has advised governments in India and other countries, consulted for international organisations and is a member of several international boards, including the UN Secretary General's High-level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism and the UN High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs.

*The third annual Ben Turok Memorial Lecture was delivered by Professor JAYATI GHOSH at an online event held on 23 November 2023 hosted jointly by the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) and the Institute for Social Development at the University of the Western Cape (ISD). The event marked the anniversary of the death of IFAA's founder and former director, struggle stalwart Prof Ben Turok, who passed away on 9 December 2019. It is a tribute to an unrelenting critic of abuse of power and all forms of injustice and discrimination; it is also aimed at keeping alive Prof Turok's political legacy based on economic justice, socio-economic rights, redistribution and political transformation. >>*



Prof Ghosh acknowledged IFAA's founder as “an inspiration to many of us across the developing world. I think we all recognised his integrity, his passion, his commitment and the possibilities that he raised of different worlds being possible.” Below are some of the highlights of her lecture.

The lecture began with a critique of how countries of the Global North have succeeded in framing discussions on climate change in ways that disadvantage and actively harm the rest of the world. Prof Ghosh described this as an expression of climate imperialism and warned: “The interaction of humans with the environment is now possibly one of the most crucial forms of imperialism.” She went on to offer the following definition:

The core countries and the elites within every country globally are able to produce and consume excessively. They generate hugely disproportionate and increasing global carbon emissions with rising ecological footprints. Yet the negotiations that are supposed to address climate change do so in very misinformed and unequal, deceptive and even harmful and debilitating ways. Global market-oriented finance and the fiscal strategies of the major advanced countries actually operate to increase carbon emissions at the same time as they make the required finance for effective mitigation unavailable to the rest of the world.

Ghosh made the point that richer countries actually add to the problems of climate change as they try and adapt to it. “For example, in naturally fire-adapted ecosystems they go into fire suppression! Seawalls against flooding are put up, which makes the problem worse in other parts where you're not putting up a seawall. When there are warmer climates, everybody goes in for more air conditioning, which adds to the greenhouse gas emissions.” She said actions such as these that claim to be forms of ‘adaptation’ to climate change are in fact *maladaptation*, which is actually adding to the problem. “This is inadequately recognized by most of the people who are doing it”.

Climate change has caused substantial loss and damage across all ecosystems – but Ghosh emphasised that it is the low- and middle-income countries that are the worst affected. She provided statistics reporting that the rich countries, which today comprise 14% of the global population, account for nearly 80% of carbon emissions.

She cited the latest “Climate Inequality Report” which was recently released by the World Inequality Database. It provides projected GDP impacts for the rest of this century, and shows once again that the worst affected will be most of Africa, South Asia, Latin America “and not the countries that are responsible for creating the mess, not the rich countries of the northern hemisphere.

“The most remarkable thing is that [in] the last two decades emissions have gone down for the bottom half of the population across pretty much all regions, [yet they have] ballooned in the top 10%.” However, she said it is not the rich countries that have to reduce their consumption. “Actually, it's the rich people who have to reduce it, the rich everywhere ... It's really about large capital and the rich versus everybody else. And that's what imperialism is all about.”



The reason why we are in this planetary mess today is because of the build-up of emissions over the past one and a half centuries. More than half of these emissions occurred in the last 30 years. Since the 1980s the US [and] European governments certainly knew that carbon emissions are a problem, and they knew that mitigation was important, essential and probably urgent. Yet in this period when more than half of the emissions occurred they actually increased carbon emissions, despite knowing the problems associated with this.

Countries are assigned “climate responsibility” based on *current* national carbon emissions. These form the basis of climate negotiations and the national commitments to control carbon emissions that have been made by all countries at the Conference of the Parties (COP), the annual meeting of all states that are parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Drawing attention to anomalies in the ways in which carbon emissions are measured, and therefore responsibility is meted out, she said: “The measures of the total current carbon emissions are production-based, not consumption-based. Yet we know that the North consumes much more carbon through trade because it exports a lot of the carbon emitting production to the South.”

This ignores the overwhelming importance of historic responsibility for past emissions of greenhouse gases from 1850 to the present. This carbon debt comprised nearly 80% of global cumulative carbon emissions up to 2011, yet it is ignored and so understates the responsibility of richer countries. Measures of GDP, on the other hand, are distorted by purchasing power parity (PPP) adjustments which overstate incomes of poorer countries. Measures of carbon emissions are production-based rather than consumption-based. This underplays the continued significance of consumption in the North. Recent increases in carbon emissions are used to blame certain countries, especially China and India. >>



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Ghosh made it clear that this way of attributing responsibility for the crisis obscures the fact that it is a global problem. “If somebody came from Mars to look at how humanity is addressing climate change, they would really be quite surprised because it’s obviously a global problem – climate change doesn’t respect national borders and passports and visas – yet we still deal with it nationally”.

Posing the problem as development and poverty reduction vs climate mitigation is a false dilemma, she said. Poverty eradication is compatible with climate change mitigation – if inequality is reduced. Two thirds of carbon emissions are due to inequality *within* countries (and this is similar across most regions). The carbon emissions of the wealthiest 1% of the world’s population are around 15% of the current annual total.

Countries can choose a development pattern that improves the level of energy efficiency of the economy. This requires access to both finance and technology. It requires changes in urbanisation patterns. And of course it involves reducing the share of the most carbon-emitting sources, from coal and petroleum-based to natural gas and to clean renewables like solar, wind and possibly hydro sources. This is better for concerned economies and societies than continuing with current patterns. The investment requirement has been estimated at 1.5% to 2.5% of GDP of large economies annually (Chomsky and Pollin 2020).

While Prof Ghosh was not hopeful that the rich countries and controllers of international finance will suddenly step up to make the world a better place, her strong argument is that it would be possible to both address climate change and reduce world poverty. “If you wanted to lift everybody who’s below the current global estimate of poverty ... and you provided the basic needs, goods and services accordingly, ... you could actually get everybody out of income poverty with only a 5% increase in global carbon emissions” A 1.5% wealth tax on centimillionaires (individuals owning more than US\$100 million in assets), would provide \$290 billion per year. “The current estimate of the adaptation needs of low and middle income countries is two-thirds of that amount. You could fund adaptation needs with a wealth tax on centimillionaires as currently estimated.

“What we really have to do is control the carbon emissions of the very rich with regulation and taxation. So maybe no more moon trips, maybe massively tax private jets and so on”



All this requires first abandoning the unjust and counterproductive features of the existing framework within which climate change is negotiated and second reviving a progressive multilateralism. “We need more cooperation across different kinds of low- and middle-income countries. We need to coordinate our strategies ... because combined actions are much more effective.” She believes it is very hopeful that, at the urging of the African Union, the UN has voted for negotiations to start on a UN Tax Convention to change how global tax rules are set. (At present they are largely set by processes managed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], a club for rich nations).

We definitely have to have the technology and the finance. In terms of all economic justice, the rich countries should provide it ... We have to recognize that the geopolitics and the global imbalances of power are such that rich country governments are not going to suddenly become nice... We need to create changes in the relative power imbalances globally. These are stacked against us because we do not operate together.

We also need coalitions with like-minded people in the global North, and a recognition among citizens of the Global North that the system is operating against them just as much as it is against most of the people in the South. It’s the elites that are benefiting everywhere. Only then can we get the kind of coalitions that will put pressure on northern governments. We have to get many more people in the rich countries to be on our side.”

Ghosh quoted the feminist political economist, Nancy Folbre (2020), who once said: “Necessity is the mother of coalitions!”

Listen to Prof Ghosh’s presentation to the third annual Ben Turok Memorial Lecture at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIqHtgV CZ2M>

#### REFERENCES

- Chomsky, N. & Pollin, R. 2020. *The climate crisis and the global green new deal: The political economy of saving the planet*. London, New York: Verso Press.
- Folbre, N. 2020. *The rise and decline of patriarchal systems: An intersectional political economy*. London, New York: Verso Press. 