

Summary of “Fairness in Allocating the Global Emissions Budget”

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Life’s not fair, and neither is any politically plausible division of the world’s carbon budget. The carbon budget is the amount of carbon that humanity can emit before we push climate change beyond whatever threshold we choose, such as the Paris target of “well below 2°C.” This paper argues that even if we start with very minimal assumptions about how to fairly allocate resources, any politically feasible allocation of that budget between countries will be unfair.

This paper uses the “proportional claims account” of fairness to capture all the dominant proposals for allocating the carbon budget. This account of fairness says, roughly, that when you divide a resource among multiple parties, you should give each party a share that is proportionate to its claims based on desert, need, and previously-agreed entitlement. Different ways of filling in the details of this account—different theories of need or desert, for instance, or different weightings of the three kinds of claims—lead to different proposals for dividing the carbon budget.

For simplicity, let’s split the world’s countries into developed and developing countries. (Section 5 of the paper argues that this simplification doesn’t undermine the argument.) Walking through various theories of desert, the paper argues that any plausible account of desert entails that developing countries should get at least as much of the budget, on a per capita basis, as developed countries. The same holds for any plausible theory of need. Existing agreements generate no entitlements. So, no matter which theories of desert and need you choose, and no matter how you weight them, fairness requires that developing countries get *at least* as much on a per capita basis as developed countries.

That means that a global equal per capita distribution of emissions rights is the *least* redistributive allocation that might count as fair. But that is already far too redistributive to be politically realistic. So, we know we won’t get to fairness, but we also know that every plausible account of fairness points in the same direction. The upshot for climate ethicists is that we should stop bickering about exactly which politically impossible division is most fair and start focusing on other things.