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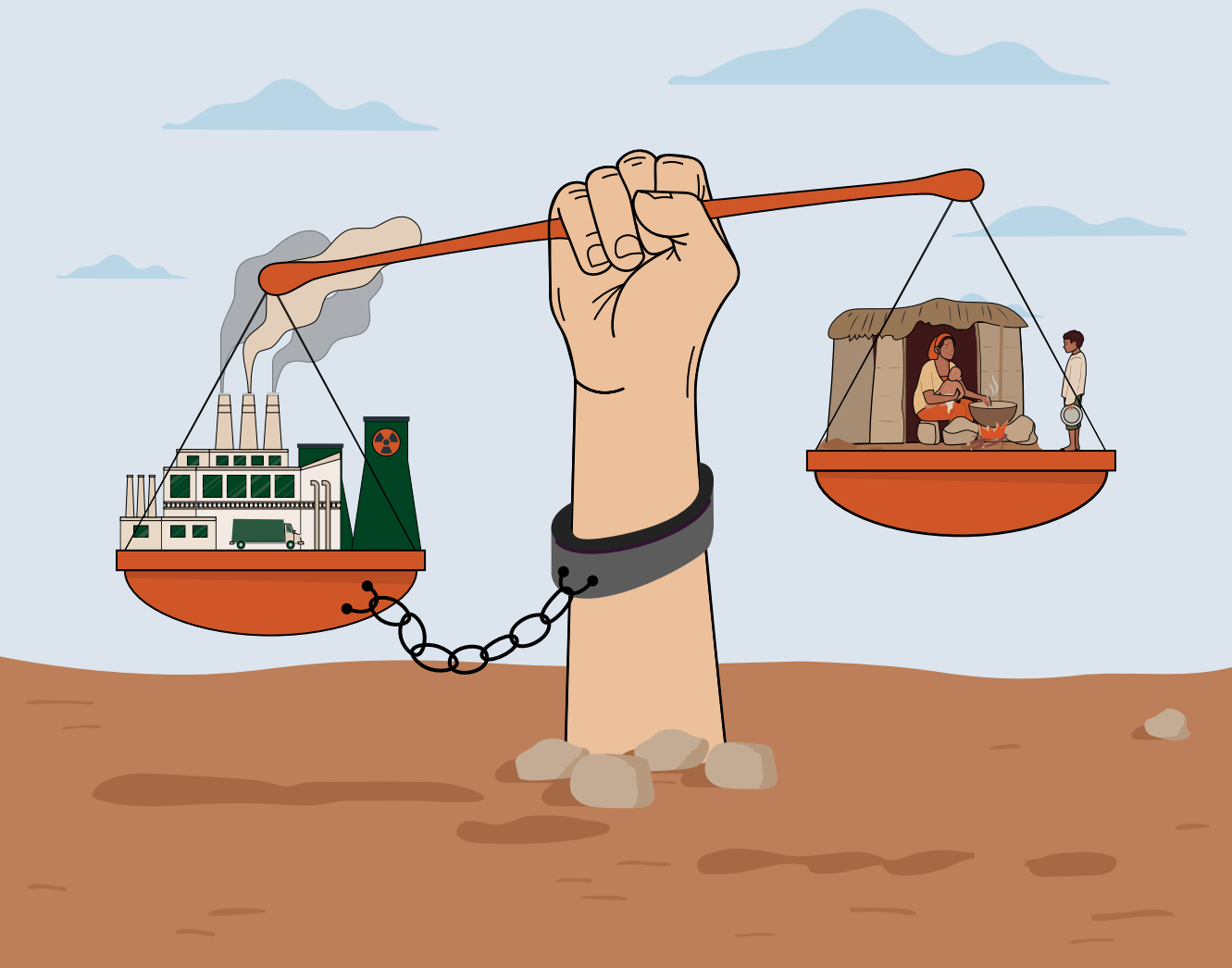
IIS BRIEF

An Ecosocial View of Climate Justice: Madagascar's Famine

Rachmania Utami Tsalasa Putri



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Introduction

Madagascar, an island country just outside of East Africa's coast, is now dubbed the world's first nation experiencing climate-driven famine. Madagascar, which relies heavily on agriculture, whether it is for trade or as a food source, depends on rainwater to water its crops. However, with the extreme weather events brought by the changes in climate, Madagascar is now experiencing a prolonged period of unprecedented drought that causes harvest failure and, thus food crisis. One would think that if Madagascar faces the brunt of the climate crisis, it must be one of its biggest contributors. Though on the contrary, Madagascar only accounts for 0.01 per cent of the world's cumulative CO2 emission (Ritchie & Roser, 2020).

The accumulation of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is intrinsically linked to the development of one nation. The richest (Global North), representing 16 per cent of the world population, contributed to almost 40 per cent of CO2 emissions. Whereas the poorest countries (Global South) only account for 15 per cent of emissions while housing nearly 60 per cent of the world's population (Guivarch et al., 2021). This divide is caused by the history of colonisation and how it hindered economic development in the Global South. During the colonial period, spanning the 16th to 20th century (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), the Global North has used emission-intensive machinery and extractive economy to accumulate wealth and cemented themselves as an aggregation of wealthy nations (Barnwell & Heleta, 2021). The Global South does not have the same opportunity, and some scholars even argue that the colonisation era has not only appropriated the Global South's resources but also diminished the CO2 emission for economic development (Bhambra & Newell, 2022; Green & Healy, 2022). A study by Hickel (2020) found that the Global North countries were responsible for 92 per cent of excess emissions. By contrast, most Global South countries are within their boundary of fair shares. Then why is Madagascar

one of the first countries impacted by the climate crisis and not the United States, for example, with its share of 24.56 per cent of the world's cumulative CO2 emissions (Tiseo, 2023) and 40 per cent of excess global CO2 emissions (Hickel, 2020)? The illustration presented is one of the reasons why inequality is one of the perspectives that must be accounted for when discussing climate change and its mitigation. This essay then would focus on the ecosocial perspective on climate change to understand how the current mitigation strategy would perpetuate existing inequalities.

Climate change is a transboundary global crisis that poses a significant threat to ecosystems and human societies. However, as the impact of it is not immediately felt, it was called a "slow violence". According to Robert Nixon (2013, as cited in Hale et al., 2015), slow violence is when the changes and threats to the environment are difficult to discern. Thus, it is easily overlooked. Furthermore, climate change is seen as a multiplier of preexisting disasters (Hirvilammi et al., 2023). Many countries have already experienced the effect of climate change as an altered environment or intensifying natural disasters. However, few realised that it was an impact of climate change as it was less observable and much more ambiguous in effect. In the context of climate change mitigation, this oversight would then exacerbate the existing inequality and, thus, perpetuate the injustice that existed between the Global North and Global South. Therefore, to address the changes in climate in a just manner, a shift towards an ecosocial worldview is crucial as it acknowledges the inextricable relationship between humans and global systems. Such an approach is essential in rectifying the structural inequalities that business-as-usual climate change mitigation entails.

In the context of Madagascar

Madagascar does have a history of facing drought. However, the 2020-2021 drought is now being called the worst drought it has ever faced in 40 years because of its severity, heightened by extreme climate shocks and its effect exacerbated by the COVID-19 economic impact (Fayad, 2023). Several regions in Southern Madagascar have been experiencing continuous periods of below-average that lead to severe drought. The meagre rainfall started in October 2021 (the start of the agricultural season) and, according to the forecast, will continue until the end of the season. Even with peak rainfall in January 2021, the numbers will still be in the deficit (around 40-60 per cent below average), and subsequently, extremely poor vegetation will follow—leading to low harvest in 2021 (Global Network Against Food Crisis, 2021). The persistent drought had left the country in a food crisis, where millions of people in

the South of Madagascar lack access to food. The economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated the crisis. The pandemic has interrupted supply chains, increased unemployment rates, and restrained access to food markets (Kaledzi, 2021). The combination of all of these variables has made staple food prices rise to an elevated level, forcing people to eat cockroaches, clay mixed with leaves, and even cooked leather (Harrisberg & Rowling, 2021).

The problem with the preexisting mitigation plan

In the context of Madagascar, a region already grappling with severe drought, the exacerbating effects of climate change have compounded the issues. Therefore, it is paramount to mitigate the cause and effect of the phenomenon. A varying degree of climate-mitigating policies have been proposed by various international organisations, such as the IMF and the UN (International Monetary Fund & Fiscal Affairs Dept., 2022; Elisha et al., 2021), but three have stood out. Namely, increasing access to renewable electricity, adopting efficient cookstoves, and eliminating fuel subsidies. Those three have been considered improbable to implement due to these reasons:

First, the problem with financing the transition. According to the International Monetary Fund and Fiscal Affairs Dept. (2022), to provide universal energy access for LDCs (Least Developed Countries, of which Madagascar is part) at 300kWh per capita per year for sufficient household activities, essential public services, and various productive uses, they will need an annual investment of $35 billion in a fossil fuel-centric "business as usual" scenario and $46 billion in a climate-friendly scenario. Considering that projects in LDCs are not highly sought-after by investors, seeking financiers may be proven difficult. Furthermore, the preexisting loan mechanisms for LDCs are disproportionately tailored to fossil fuel ventures (Elisha et al., 2021). Moreover, concerning the developed countries' pledge to help finance the transition, reports have shown that it was merely a promise, as exemplified by their lack of commitment to deliver the promised $100 billion annually in climate finance for developing countries (Schulz et al., 2022).

Second, LDCs have yet to benefit significantly from the steep decline in the price of renewable technologies. While low-carbon technologies have become cost-effective sources of power and are a prioritised investment in many regions, there are substantial disparities in the allocation of global capital. Northern America, Europe, and China receive the bulk of the global investment in renewable energy. Within the developing world, the majority of the grant is channelled into three countries:

China, India, and Brazil. In contrast, other developing states receive a mere 12 per cent of the total investment. In total, middle-to-low-income countries represented only 14 per cent of overall investment in 2017 despite comprising 41 per cent of the world's population. Conversely, high-income countries receive over 40 per cent of total investment despite having only 15 per cent of the global population (Goldthau et al., 2020). Therefore, the cost reduction of renewable technologies, brought about by the development, is mainly concentrated in the Global North and not felt in the Global South.

Third, the technological gap. The technology gap has been regarded as the root cause of persistent underdevelopment and poverty in LDCs. In the context of the changing climate and renewable technologies mitigation strategy, this gap would be perpetuated by the lack of access the Global South has to low-carbon finance and technology and, consequently, excluding them from the global value and supply chain. Additionally, notwithstanding the investors' lack of engagement in the region (Weko & Goldthau, 2022), most intellectual property rights (IPR) for low-carbon technology are concentrated in the Global North. With its reluctance to share, it could obstruct decarbonisation efforts in the Global South. This IPR dominance has led to a renewable energy oligopoly, limiting the production of clean energy technologies to a few companies in affluent nations. Consequently, lower-income countries rarely obtain licenses to utilise patented technology, exacerbating global inequality (Steinfort et al., 2023). Research by Adebambo Adewopo et al. (2018) suggests that loosening intellectual property restrictions could accelerate local initiatives in low-income countries, such as those in Africa.

Fourth, the mitigation plan disproportionately affected the poor. The issue of reversing fuel subsidies is considered a complex and delicate one, as it has disproportionately affected the poor in many countries while simultaneously being the precondition for leading a healthier life. From an economic standpoint, eliminating the subsidies seems logical as it primarily benefitted the wealthy, as shown by IMF's research, which concluded that 20 per cent of the wealthiest households, on average, capture more than six times fuel subsidies than the poorest 20 per cent (Coady et al., 2015). Additionally, the poor dedicates a significant portion of their income to energy cost, making them ill-prepared to withstand the adverse effects of subsidy removal (Guivarch et al., 2021). Analysis done by Coady et al. (2015) found that a $0.25 per litre increase in fuel prices decreases household real incomes by, on average, 5.5 per cent. Approximately half of this impact comes through the indirect effect on the prices of other goods and services consumed by households. Strategies like raising

excise on diesel, while aimed at achieving broader environmental and economic goals, can substantially drive up the costs of energy. This policy, then, without the mitigating measures to protect the poor, would only exacerbate poverty, malnutrition, and disease among the most vulnerable populations.

Ultimately, the mitigation plan, while well-intentioned, risks deepening existing economic inequalities and pushing more people into poverty, highlighting the need for a balanced and socially conscious approach to climate mitigation plans.

Ecosocial worldview and climate justice

An ecosocial worldview acknowledges the intricate interplay between human existence and the global ecosystem. Consequently, it emphasises the need to address and rectify the inherent disparities embedded in conventional climate mitigation methods. The ramifications of climate change extend beyond emissions as it delves into societal structure and resource distribution. Therefore, disparities in accessibility can intensify the adverse consequences of climate change for marginalised communities. This perspective, then, grounded in the principles of climate justice, recognises that these injustices impacted people and states differently due to the structural inequalities. Instead of viewing these disparities as mere "risk factors", they should be recognised and addressed as "indicators of oppression". The global crises of ecological degradation and social inequality are interconnected byproducts of the same flawed systems (Engstrom & Powers, 2021). Therefore, a socially equitable approach to the ecological crisis is indispensable for mitigating prospective planetary harm.

As mentioned, Madagascar's drought has been exacerbated by climate change, and it is peculiar that Madagascar is one of the first nations that faced the ramifications but not the one spearheading climate change with its 0.01 per cent contribution. The Madagascarian case exemplified the fear countries in the imperial periphery have, the fear that climate change would affect low-carbon emitters nations the hardest. These nations foresaw their poor outlook if the neoliberal capitalists (who disproportionately influence climate policies) continue to ignore and aggravate climate change's effects (Our Changing Climate, 2021). This aggregation of nations, brought together by the World People's Conference on Climate Change, opposed the Copenhagen Treaty. Instead, they argue that there is an element missing in the drafting of a climate change mitigation plan. That is, it did not take into account the climate debt the imperialist countries inflict on their colonies by excessively exploiting and extracting resources in the Global South (PWCCC, 2010). These sentiments

are not only echoed by those who attended the conference but also by developing countries in general. These nations all highlight the same agenda, that is, the need to have "common but differentiated responsibilities" and "respective capabilities" in climate action (Hickel & Slamersak, 2022). This agenda acknowledged a difference in countries' historical contribution to global emissions. Thus, it would be unjust if the Global North and Global South bear the same burden. The Global North must acknowledge that they have disproportionately benefited from extractivism in the Global South, ergo occupying their colonies' atmospheric space (Barnwell & Heleta, 2021; PWCC, 2010). In response, developing nations and scholars alike have specific demands to create a just climate action, including that imperialist countries repay emission debts, cover adaptation debts, increase investments in low-carbon technologies in developing countries, facilitate technology transfer, adopt more lenient intellectual property rights on low-carbon technologies, and undertake other reparative measures (PWCCC, 2010; Warlenius, 2017; Resnik, 2022; Weko & Goldthau, 2022; Steinfort et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the notion of climate justice stems from climate inequality. Where the imperialist nations reaped their benefit from exploiting the Global South, exhausting their resources and occupying their atmospheric space. Therefore, considering the structural inequities and power systems, there is a need for a just and equitable climate action plan to minimise harm to low-income countries and not perpetuate the system's injustice.

Conclusion

In fear of perpetuating the system's injustice to lower-income nations, climate change inequality must be addressed when talking about its mitigation. Therefore, it is paramount to acknowledge and address the structural inequalities business-as-usual climate change mitigation plan entails. As mentioned, international organisations, such as the IMF and the UN, have outlined a few plan to mitigate the cause and effect of the phenomenon in Madagascar. However, the mitigation plan, while well-intentioned, risks deepening existing economic inequalities and pushing more people into poverty. One of the ways we can circumvent this is by demanding the Global North, the imperialist nations, to recognise and repay the exploitation they had done in these developing countries. These rich countries must recognise their historical responsibility for emissions and respond to them. Those responses can be accomplished through bridging the technological and monetary gap (helping adapt and mitigate climate change) to the less developed nations in order for them

to leapfrog. Alternatively, if we do not do equitable climate mitigation soon, the Madagascar case will be one of the norms shortly. A varied choice from supercharged disasters, an increase in drought, and rising sea levels, to name a few, would naturally result in an influx of climate refugees.

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Rachmania Utami Tsalasa Putri
Mahasasiswa Hubungan Internasional
Universitas Gadjah Mada
rachmania.utami1003@mail.ugm.ac.id

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