

Who Has Moral Responsibility for Climate Change?

Written by Vanesa Castan Broto

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VANESA CASTAN BROTO, MAR 6 2013

Responsibility is a hot topic in climate change debates. Who is to blame for climate change? Who has the duty to do something about it? These questions are particularly relevant in discussions about climate change mitigation, that is, about who should reduce their carbon emissions and by how much. In his address to the COP 18 in Doha, in December 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, stated that “the developed world should bear most of the responsibility” for mitigation because “the climate change phenomenon has been caused by the industrialization of the developed world” (The Guardian, 2012). In contrast, renowned climate change economist Lord Nicholas Stern argued that developing countries are now responsible for the bulk of carbon emissions and therefore, regardless of their historical contributions, need to adopt ambitious carbon reduction objectives (Harvey, 2012).

Because these arguments are entwined with the attribution of praise or blame for action or lack thereof, they can be framed as a question about moral responsibility (following Eshleman, 2009). Climate change poses a deep moral challenge because it concerns a problem caused by those who consume most but whose consequences will be mostly felt by those who are most deprived (Jamieson, 2010). The question here is whether responsibility should be adjudicated on the merits of an action or on its consequences. Ban Ki-moon asks developed countries to take initiative to address climate change on the grounds of their historical responsibility, because it is the right thing to do. In contrast, Lord Stern is urging emerging economies to take such responsibility on the grounds of the potentially catastrophic consequences that we may expect should they decide to do otherwise.

The attribution of moral responsibility to an action has most often been discussed in relation to individuals because it requires not only finding an agent, but also establishing the agent’s intention, capacity, freedom and knowledge to do such action. Indeed, much research on climate change has approached the problem of responsibility for emissions abatement from the point of view of individual responsibility. This can be seen, for example, in studies that examine the basis for establishing personal carbon budgets (e.g. Roberts and Thumim, 2006) or in those that seek to explain why individuals do not perceive climate change as a moral imperative to change their actions (e.g. Markowitz and Shariff, 2012). However, a strictly analytical take based upon individual responsibility ideas may lead to the conclusion that, since climate change is “a problem of many hands” (many people share in the actions leading to it), “nobody is (in some sense) responsible for climate change” (van de Poel *et al*, 2012; p. 51). There are good reasons to reject this line of reasoning. First, stating that nobody is responsible for climate change leads to paralysis. Second, empirical evidence of public and private initiatives in distant corners of the world (e.g. Bulkeley and Castán Broto, 2012) suggests that both individuals and groups are actively taking responsibility for climate change mitigation.

Climate change can also be approached as a problem of collective moral responsibility. Looking at environmental issues as emerging within existing systems of production and social relations has led to a critique of individual-based understandings of environmental responsibility (e.g. Castán Broto, 2012; Agyeman and Evans, 2004). These arguments resonate with Ban Ki-moon’s warning to his audience at the COP18 in Doha: “we, collectively, are the problem” (Ki-moon, 2012). However, the responsibility of an agent is judged on an action and its intentions, but only individuals, not groups, can formulate intentions. Establishing collective responsibility without invoking personal intentions requires alternative understandings of responsibility.

The discussion on collective moral responsibility distinguishes between organized groups (e.g. a government, a corporation, an NGO) and random collections of individuals (e.g. a group of bystanders, a group of people playing on

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a beach) (see Held, 1970). In between these two extremes, there is high diversity in the ways in which groups and individuals organize themselves. May (1992) argues that it is possible to ascribe collective responsibility for action to a group when the result is only possible by the combined actions of the individuals in that group. Thus, collective responsibility appears to be appropriate in cases involving organized groups, whose organizational goals may be read as intentions, but less so in cases involving random collections of individuals. The loose group of citizens, consumers, business, governments and civil society organizations who may have responsibility for climate change resembles more the latter than the former. How can we attribute collective responsibility to such a disorganized group of institutions and individuals?

Held (1970; p.94) argued: “when the action called for in a given situation is obvious to the reasonable person and when the expected outcome of the action is clearly favorable, a random collection of individuals may be held responsible for not taking a collective action”. In other words, if a random collection of individuals can act to prevent an incoming damage, they are responsible for it. This argument renders all interested parties in the climate change debate morally responsible to prevent the potentially catastrophic events that climate change could bring in the future, as long as the action called for “is obvious to the reasonable person”.

Practical plausibility is a condition for collective responsibility (May, 1990). Responsibility depends on the group knowing what they should be doing. In the case of attributing climate change responsibilities what is to be done is also a matter for debate. Advocates of technical fixes, behavioral changes or political and economic transitions routinely seek to define competing courses for action. When the course for action is not clear, such as in this case, Held (1970; p. 94) argues that any random collection of individuals could at least be held morally responsible “for not forming itself into an organized group capable of deciding which action to take.”

If “we”, collectively, are the problem, “we” are also responsible for organizing ourselves into institutional structures capable of dealing with this problem. Thus, if the annual conference of parties is an attempt to coordinate global action for climate change, then any attempts by countries to limit or hinder the capacity of action of the COPs could be regarded as failing to take responsibility for climate change, whether this is from industrialized countries, emerging economies or poorer nations. Yet, the COP is not only an instrument to develop institutions to deal with climate change; it is also a ruthless diplomatic exercise. Different parties have different bargaining power. Not all countries enter the negotiations on an equal footing and hence, not all parties should be blamed for their results (less so those who are not or do not feel represented at the negotiations).

The argument of historical responsibility may help considering the differentiated responsibilities of negotiating parties. While this may not amount to reparation, industrialized countries- their governments and citizens- should take responsibility for climate change not only on the grounds of the actual emissions they have physically emitted but also because they have created models of consumerism that have led to the depletion of carbon sinks. On these grounds, responsibility also means investing resources in finding alternative sustainable development paths, practical and plausible. Although these actions may play a key role in understanding what is to be done they should be understood as relating to the responsibility of developed countries and not to the overall responsibility of all parties. They should be independent from attempts to organize collective action for climate change globally.

Overall, we can attribute varying degrees of responsibility to different parties but the sense of collective responsibility remains. The problem of collective responsibility for climate change is not confined to the sphere of government, as it pertains to both the material economy and the broader society whose values underpin existing production and consumption patterns. However, this collective responsibility cannot simply be distributed among all individuals because there are great differences in terms of access and use of carbon sinks and capacity to act (not only between countries, but also within countries). The good news is that evidence suggests that multiple actors, disenchanted with the international regime of climate change governance, are taking spontaneous initiatives for climate change. This is evident in cities, where local governments, companies, citizen groups and NGOs are trying out new forms of sustainable living (e.g. Bulkeley *et al*, 2011). Often, such initiatives are characterized by a higher degree of technical and social experimentation, from piloting new technologies to developing innovative partnerships (Bulkeley and Castán Broto, 2012). While they appear within a fragmented landscape of climate change action, such experimental initiatives also provide spaces for the intervention of multiple and competing interests.

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The bad news is that these initiatives may be limited to address the problem of collective responsibility unless they can lead to organized, collective actions capable of dealing with climate change challenges in the short to medium term. Skeptics may rightly point at the limited impact that these experimental initiatives have had in reducing actual emissions of greenhouse gases. Yet, spontaneous and purposive actions to reduce carbon emissions will help in developing new values and attitudes and thus, each of them represents an attempt to engage with our collective responsibility for climate change.

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