

## Climate Justice and Economic Justice Are Not in Conflict

*Redistribution will have to be a big part of any program that effectively tackles the climate crisis.*

**Michelle Chen** [Twitter](#), **The Nation**, February 8, 2019

Across the world, global inequality leaves hundreds of millions in dire poverty, while wealth clusters in a handful of “advanced” economies. But increasingly, middle-income countries, or “emerging” economies, are scrambling to catch up by modernizing production and expanding export industries. The problem is that these countries’ development comes with extreme environmental costs—so if bringing the world’s population up to the wasteful, carbon-intensive living standards of the developed Western economies would ruin the environment, how do rapidly developing countries raise living standards without sinking the earth deeper into climate crisis?

Researchers studying middle-income countries may have an answer, in a global economic model that could hit the right balance between climate justice and worker empowerment. [A new study](#) in the journal *Ecological Economics* on the economies of BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China), which are middle-income but growing robustly, maps out how a single industry (clothing manufacturing) could impact the environmental challenges facing both the poorer countries that are exporting clothes and the rich countries that are importing these products. The researchers argue that decarbonization and economic welfare are not necessarily at odds, but you can’t have both forever; there will eventually be a limit to growth. And governments, industries, and consumers need to ensure that we grow at a fair scale, balancing social needs and ecological challenges.

The “fast fashion” industry—which churns out mass-manufactured cheap apparel that zooms through seasonal retail trends—have become a fixture of the Global South’s manufacturing economies, providing low-wage factory jobs that keep many workers impoverished but still provide many with a favored alternative to farming or the informal economy. The industry has allowed millions of women in Asia, for instance, to earn much more stitching socks than they could plowing fields. The study analyzes what would happen if Western fashion companies could revamp their supply chains to provide these workers with a living wage. The benefits are obvious: helping workers and their families cover essential needs for a decent life—food, housing, and education. The problem is the ecological destruction that typically accompanies richer lifestyles.

The type of growth that emerging economies have historically used to raise living standards have clearly not helped make our environments cleaner or healthier. Indeed, growth has typically [come at the expense](#) of increased pollution and carbon consumption. The *Ecological Economics* study does not explicitly lay out a program for decarbonization, but does outline the balance of priorities that must drive any coordinated effort to manage, and ultimately curb, future growth.

Co-author of the study Simon Mair of University of Surrey takes an economic-realist view of how the ecological consequences of growth can be, if not totally prevented, at least more effectively managed for the countries that are increasing both their development and energy use. He argues that “it isn’t possible to completely decouple economic growth from the consumption of resources. We live in a material world.” That doesn’t mean we have no control over either process, however. The analysis suggests that the wealthiest countries should align around a global economic structure of collective growth within limits, coupled with dramatic carbon cutting in wealthy countries, and massive redistribution targeted toward Global South workers.

Environmentalists need to be much more concerned about redistribution. We should stop aiming to make everyone money rich. Instead, we should focus on bringing everyone to a reasonable material standard of living, then focus on more radical demands for freedom.

The good news is that a living wage for workers in poorer countries can be secured while still lowering overall global emissions. Still, there must be a ceiling on growth, eventually, because [“green growth” without limits](#) would likely be untenable. The question is how to grow toward a plateau while overhauling the supply chain to achieve a fair equilibrium for Global North and South. Mair points to an ethical guidepost for development that harmonizes climate-consciousness and social-consciousness: “Everyone deserves a decent standard of living, but to make that possible people in rich countries have to consume less.”

The study reveals how the global supply chain currently allows a rich economy to offset some of its emissions by offshoring its manufacturing to export-driven economies: Over time, “Western European consumption goes down, and is replaced by consumption across a mix of goods in BRIC countries. In this process some jobs are lost and replaced by jobs in other industries.” While rich countries may see some decline in emissions, according to Mair, BRIC countries’ wage growth “largely cancels out the carbon savings” in more affluent countries, which amounts to a setback for global efforts to curb emissions.

There has been growing pressure on the upper ranks of the Global South, particularly China and India, to impose more ambitious restrictions on future carbon emissions. But at the most recent COP climate conference, China, Brazil, South Africa, and India [issued a joint letter pushing back](#), calling on the United States and Europe to allow poorer countries enough “flexibility” to keep growing in order to “catch up” with their richer trade partners. But if governments want to systemically cope with climate change, their development cannot rely simply on intensification of polluting, export-based production. Navigating this tension between climate and labor needs requires economic and environmental strategies that grow the pie somewhat, redistribute wealth and resources, and shrink overall emissions in the process. Pursuing just one or two of those goals without the other would be a half-baked solution, if middle-tier economies aim to protect workers from the ecological cost of development.

The study has some caveats: It assumes that the structure and geography of the supply chain will stay fixed as consumption changes, and does not account for external factors like capital migration to even poorer countries (as when multinationals move factories from China to Bangladesh to capitalize on its lower wage levels) or automation of jobs by unwaged robots.

The core concept of the analysis is that the key to sustainable growth for middle-income countries is to provide workers both with the wages needed to attain a good quality of life, and a global economic infrastructure that moves away from harmful, carbon-intensive industry. This global dynamic points to a sobering pathway toward a more comprehensive definition of “sustainable development.”