

The Questions

Issues in Contemporary Ethics: Climate Change

At a Glance

In September 2019, a series of international strikes and protests for climate activism saw students from over 152 countries leave their classes to march in the streets and advocate for changes to worldwide policy regarding climate change. In covering these events, the media often focused on Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenage climate activist. This brief will examine how polarizing the issue of climate change can be, especially with regards to listening to voices from the Global North versus the Global South.



(L-R): Vanessa Nakate; Louisa Neubauer; Greta Thunberg; Isabelle Axelsson; Loukina Tille at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland (BBC News, 2020).

Case Study: Vanessa Nakate accuses media of racism

In January 2020, at a World Economic Forum event in Davos, Switzerland, climate change activists Vanessa Nakate, Greta Thunberg, Isabelle Axelsson, Louisa Neubauer and Loukina Tille were photographed together by the American Press (AP). In distributing the photo, the media outlet cropped Vanessa Nakate out of the picture while featuring everyone else. This led to a controversy when the Ugandan-born climate justice activist criticized the AP, and other media outlets that had also reportedly removed her from the picture. In response to Nakate's claims, the director of photography at AP, David Ake, claimed the photo had only been cropped due to composition reasons as the photographer thought the building in the background would be distracting (BBC News, 2020). This comes as media around the world are also accused of excluding indigenous voices in social movements such as climate change, particularly in North America. An example is Autumn Peltier, an Anishinaabe water activist who has advocated for clean drinking water in Indigenous communities since she was 7 years of age but has not received the same amount of fanfare as Greta Thunberg (CBC/Radio Canada, 2020).

Implications

Many of the most severe impacts of climate change will occur/are occurring in the Global South. Examples of this include sea level rise and displacement in countries like Bangladesh as well as drought across the Sahel. A study by the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative highlights the often-enormous differences between a country's climate challenges and its readiness to combat the problems. A vast majority of the countries with climate change challenges are documented as being unprepared for the said problems and a prime example of this is Bangladesh, the least 26th least ready country but yet the 27th most vulnerable country (University of Notre Dame). This in turn highlights the need to amplify global South voices in the fight for changing

Climate Change

Is the international community fully devoted to fighting climate change?

Who is the onus of reverting climate change on?

Who has the bigger role to play with regards to climate change, individuals, governments or corporations?

The Global South and Climate Change

How can the disproportionate effects of climate change in the Global South be reversed?

Do countries in the Global South have a duty to pursue development over climate change concerns?

The Global North and Climate Change

Are countries in the Global North responsible for the climate change effects felt by Global South countries?

Further Reading

Beer, C. (2014)

Climate Justice, the Global South, and Policy Preferences of Kenyan Environmental NGOs.

The New York Times
In Paradise, and Closer Than Ever to Disaster

CNN

She Was Cropped Out of a Photo of White Climate Activists. Now, She Says It's Time to Stop Erasing African Voices

Time Magazine
These Tiny Island Nations Are Leading the Fight Against Climate Change

United Nations
Development Programme
Small Island nations at the Frontline of Climate Action

The Guardian
It's Not Just Greta Thunberg: Why Are We Ignoring the Developing World's Inspiring Activists?

Oxford Research Group
Climate Change : Drivers of Insecurity and the Global South

climate change policy. Rather than the erasure of these voices, it is imperative that the voices of the countries who are currently suffering the effects of climate change at a disproportionate level continue to be boosted.

Comparing Perspectives

In this series, one rationalist ethics theory and one alternative ethics theory are explored to present contrasting views on issues and questions raised.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory that is focused on maximizing the greatest amount of happiness out of a given number of people. In this situation, a utilitarian might argue that because all people are equal and all happiness is equal, it does not matter whose voices are amplified. This point might be further argued by pointing to the fact that climate change will eventually affect everyone, and it does not matter if the voices of the global north or the global south are more amplified. Alternatively, a utilitarian might also argue that because the Earth's population is mostly concentrated in the global south and they are already suffering climate change effects, maximizing their happiness by elevating their voices is the wiser choice.

Postcolonialism

As an alternative theory, postcolonial ethics is concerned with the seemingly benign ways that current systems of power around the world reflect colonial attitudes. With regards to this situation, a postcolonial ethicist might argue that countries in the Global South are suffering from climate change due in large part to actions and policies that have been enacted by former colonial masters. Because global South countries often contribute less to climate change and are on the receiving end at a disproportionate level, a postcolonial ethicist could argue that their voices deserve to be amplified more than the voices of Global North activists. They may further argue, from a justice/equity perspective, that this greater power should extend to the decision-making roles in international settings, such as in the UN.

Questions for Reflections

When it comes to climate change, some activities in the Global South have made the argument that the various agreements and policies that have been signed by Global North countries only exist to block the Global South from developing or reaching the same level of innovation as the Global North. Is there any truth to this statement? Can the Global South be competitive on the international stage and prioritize climate change at the same time? How can this be achieved? Additionally, how can current global South voices on climate change be further amplified? Does this have to come at the expense of the voices of Global North activists or can both groups work in tandem? Furthermore, who pays to remedy the current effects of climate change, especially considering that India and China, both Global South countries contribute to the crisis. Should climate justice be the sole responsibility of Global North countries due to their contribution to climate change or is everyone responsible?

BBC News. (2020, January 24). Vanessa Nakate: Climate activist hits out at 'racist' photo crop. (2020, January 24). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51242972>.

CBC/Radio Canada. (2020, January 21). Teen activist Autumn Peltier appears at World Economic Forum with criticism for federal politicians | CBC News. CBCnews. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/autumn-peltier-thunberg-davos-1.5435091>.

University of Notre Dame. Country Index // Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative // <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/>.