

Climate justice – the “Open Sesame” of the COP 21 climate conference

By [Eloi Laurent](#)

Climate negotiations cannot be limited to technical discussions between experts about the reliability of scientific data: they need to take the form of an open political dialogue that is nourished by ethical reflection involving the citizens. What should be the focus of this dialogue? With COP 21 opening in two months in Paris, it is becoming increasingly clear that the key to a possible agreement is not economic efficiency, but social justice. The “green growth” that was a goal in the past century has little mobilizing power in a world plagued by injustice. It is much more important to highlight the potential that resolute action against climate change holds for equality at the national and global level.

Three issues indicate how social justice is at the heart of the climate negotiations. The first concerns the choice of the criteria for allocating the carbon budget between countries in order to mitigate climate change (the approximately 1200 billion tons of carbon that remains to be emitted over the next three to four decade so as to limit the rise of ground temperatures to around 2 degrees by the end of the 21st century). Various indicators can be used both to estimate the carbon budget and to distribute it equitably among countries; while these indicators need to be discussed, we cannot under any circumstances ignore this issue in Paris. It is demonstrable that [the application of hybrid but relatively simple criteria on climate justice](#) would lead to cutting global emissions almost in half over the next three decades, which would ensure meeting the goal of 2 degrees, and even

targeting the increased rise in temperatures to 1.5 degrees, thereby enhancing the fairness of this common rule with respect to the most vulnerable countries and social groups.

The second issue concerns adaptation to climate change, that is to say, the exposure and sensitivity to extreme weather events and rising global temperatures that is differentiated between countries and social groups. Here too it is important to select relevant indicators of climate vulnerability to fairly allocate the available funding (which should increase to \$100 billion per year by 2020). But it will be very difficult to mobilize the necessary sums without [shifting the climate negotiations from the current quantitative logic to a price logic](#).

Finally, combatting inequality seems to be the most effective way to involve citizens in the climate dialogue. The fight against climate change must be understood not as a social threat or an opportunity for profit-making but as a lever for achieving equality: a chance to reduce disparities in human development between countries and within countries.

The case of China shows how constraints on cutting CO₂ emissions can turn into a tool for reducing inequality: the limitation on coal consumption simultaneously reduces the country's greenhouse gas emissions and the damage caused to the Chinese population's health by fine particles, which are distributed very unevenly around the territory and therefore within the population. The same applies to the much desired regulation of automobile traffic in France's urban areas, which represents both a gain for health and a reduction in emissions related to mobility. This dual climate-health dividend (reducing emissions to contain global warming has an indirect effect, i.e. improving health) must therefore be at the heart of the Paris negotiations. The fight against climate change offers a chance to reduce the inequalities that will be so devastating: by cross-checking the "social" map and the "climate" map, we can anticipate that the impact of heat waves

will be felt strongest in regions where both climatic exposure and the share of elderly people living alone are at high levels. The climate risk is a [socio-ecological risk](#). Inequality associated with this risk is [environmental inequality](#) [article in French]. The goal of COP 21 should not be to “save the planet” or even less to “save growth” but rather to “save our health” by protecting the most vulnerable from the worst of the climate crisis.