



Perspective

Planetary justice: Prioritizing the poor in earth system governance

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ABSTRACT

We are in the middle of a planetary crisis that urgently requires stronger modes of earth system governance. At the same time, calls for justice are becoming increasingly pronounced in sustainability research: there can be no effective planetary stewardship without planetary justice. Rapid planetary-scale processes have reinforced and further created vast injustices at international, national, and sub-national levels. Often, the burden has fallen most severely on the poor and marginalized communities. Yet the literature on planetary justice tends to stay at the level of ideal conceptions and abstract normative arguments of justice theory, without an explicit concern for the needs of the poor. In this Perspective, we focus discussions of planetary justice on the needs of the poorest. We discuss whether the dominant approaches to planetary stewardship and earth system governance are apt at realizing a pro-poor vision of justice and what alternative approaches might be needed.

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1. Introduction

Global disasters, from catastrophic fires in Australia to the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforce a broadly shared view that we face a planetary crisis that urgently requires stronger modes of planetary stewardship and earth system governance. Calls for immediate political action abound. The business press advocates “carbon neutrality” and “carbon pricing” as “first building blocks for a new era of planetary stewardship” (Kell, 2019). Global governance experts call for “a new constitution-type agreement that will redefine the relationship between humans and the rest of the community of life” (Young et al., 2017, 69, see also Kotzé, 2019a). Some political theorists offer an even more radical reading of the emerging landscape of planetary stewardship, arguing that a global Leviathan of some sort is likely to take shape in response to the emergent planetary crisis (Wainwright and Mann, 2018). All this comes down, in short, to an increasing call for more effective planetary stewardship and transformative change towards stronger earth system governance, from local to global levels.

At the same time, however, considerations of justice are becoming increasingly pronounced in sustainability research.

Numerous studies of inequality have shown how those who benefit from the economic processes that underlie global environmental degradation pass on the risks and burden of environmental externalities to humanity at large or to future generations (Okereke et al., 2009; Hailemariam et al., 2019). Sustainability scholars have addressed questions of distributive, representative, procedural, or intergenerational justice, including recent calls for new conceptualizations of “planetary justice” (e.g., Biermann and Kalfagianni, 2020). And yet, often this literature stays at the level of ideal conceptions and abstract arguments drawing on normative theories of justice. What is missing—and this is our main point here—is a clearly articulated pro-poor focus within diverse and often abstract conceptions of planetary justice.

In short, planetary stewardship requires planetary justice. There is an urgent need for better theoretical approaches and differently focused empirical studies that put the needs of the poor first in analyzing and advocating for effective governance responses to planetary ecological crises and earth system transformations. Inspired by Gandhi's Talisman (Austin, 2003, vii), we argue that this requires powerful state and non-state actors across all scales of governance to abide by the following three tenets of pro-poor planetary justice:

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1. That the poor and marginalized majority shall not be made worse off;
2. That the lot of the poor must improve;
3. That the poor be recognized as legitimate participants (whether directly or via representation) in decisions about planetary stewardship.

We consider these three tenets (which have both a distributive/substantive and a representational/procedural component) as necessary and non-negotiable. Importantly, fostering a pro-poor focus within planetary justice scholarship and practice will also elicit greater social and political legitimacy for efforts at planetary stewardship (Gupta, 2019). Yet few analyses to date have outlined contours of a pro-poor focus within planetary justice. In this *Perspective*, we seek to begin this debate within the earth system governance research community. We discuss, first, the extent to which the dominant approaches to planetary stewardship and earth system governance address the poor in their notions of justice, and then briefly sketch out what alternative approaches might be needed.

What falls under the global poor is subject to many debates. Our understanding of the poor follows the UN definition of poverty as “a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information” (United Nations, 1996, 38). Poverty depends not only on income but also on access to social services and is intertwined with social discrimination and exclusion. Most of the nearly 1 billion people that live below the international poverty line of US\$ 1.90 a day live in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia (Sumner et al., 2020). While a pro-poor focus within planetary stewardship and planetary justice is relevant for the poor in all countries, it is particularly pertinent, we argue, for countries in the Global South that are home to the so-called “bottom billion” (Collier, 2007; for a recent critique, see Ravallion, 2020).

2. Considerations of justice in dominant approaches to planetary stewardship

Distinct understandings of the planetary crisis inform different visions of planetary stewardship and earth system governance. These distinct understandings again shape proposals for concrete institutional arrangements and policy proposals in the real world. We discuss here five dominant approaches to earth system governance and consider how each one engages with a pro-poor orientation to planetary justice. The five approaches that we discuss are market liberal, bioenvironmentalist, ecomodernist, institutionalist, and social green (here we build on Clapp and Dauvergne, 2011).

First, a market liberal approach builds on neoclassical economics and the assumption of individual rational behavior to argue that economic growth and higher incomes are essential for effective planetary stewardship. This way of thinking prompts market liberals to propose and support market-based interventions, often with a limited role for governments, as a key tool for global environmental protection. Their notion of justice is often captured in using aggregate social welfare as a yardstick for policy choices, with hypothetical possibilities of redistribution, which are rarely considered in practice. In this view, achieving justice through market processes relies on theories of trickle-down economics that suggest that prosperity fostered by unfettered market operations will lift all boats eventually, including the lot of the global poor. Critics have pointed out that these theoretical assumptions do not lead to assumed results in practice. For example, income growth over the last few decades in the United States has *lowered* the wellbeing of large parts of the population while supporting

growing profligate consumption among the wealthiest citizens (Greenwood and Holt, 2010). At a planetary scale, it is highly doubtful whether market liberalism will eventually help the lot of the global poor.

Second, a bioenvironmentalist approach focuses on the constraints of biological limits, or the “carrying capacity” of the planet. Accordingly, bio-environmentalists see population pressure and overconsumption of natural resources as major causes of environmental degradation. Neo-Malthusian arguments about limits to growth and Hardin's tragedy of commons thus inform the policy choices of many bio-environmentalists: because they view the collective force of the human species as the main problem afflicting the planet, their solutions quickly rely on controlling the growth of world population (as argued for by Jane Goodall; see Alberro, 2020) and the creation of large and stringently protected nature reserves free of human interventions (Kashwan, 2017b). That these approaches may lead to gross violations of human rights is increasingly recognized, including in the writings of bio-environmentalists like John Vidal (2016). Some bio-environmentalists also advocate for strictly controlling consumption, including by curbing immigration from “developing countries” to the more affluent countries, because immigrants would then consume at the same level as that enjoyed by residents of wealthy countries (noted in Clapp and Dauvergne, 2011, 238). In short, the bio-environmentalist worldview is ill-equipped to handle the complex causes of planetary crisis, including socioeconomic inequality and social injustice.

Third, an ecomodernist approach emphasizes the need to tap into the “power of human ingenuity and creativity” for managing planetary problems such as climate change (Nisbet, 2014). According to ecomodernists, social change can be catalyzed by government investment in specific policies and technologies recommended by experts in science and economics. Ecomodernists reject neo-Malthusian warnings against population growth and recognize that much of the world's population suffers from “local environmental health risks,” such as indoor and outdoor air pollution and many preventable diseases (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015). However, their main solutions to such problems lie in the deployment of modern technologies—for example, nuclear energy, carbon capture, genetically modified organisms, or geoengineering (Keith and Irvine, 2016). Geoengineering, some ecomodernists argue, should even be seen as an act of climate justice, given that climate change affects the poor and marginalized the most (Preston, 2016; critically here: Biermann and Möller, 2019; Flegel and Gupta, 2018). Most writing in ecomodernism, however, hardly reflects poor people's lived realities, their struggles to cope with the devastating consequences of global change, and their desire to have their voices heard. The widely cited “Ecomodernist Manifesto” barely acknowledges the problems of overconsumption (Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015). Ecomodernism also remains the only type of environmentalism that rejects the argument that social protest could contribute significantly to global environmental progress (Nisbet, 2014). In short, while ecomodernism hopes to include the global poor in their vision of a “good Anthropocene,” it is doubtful whether global technocracy can improve the lot of the global poor—or not rather increase the systematic risks and widespread disempowerment that they face. Simply put, justice—at international and local levels—is not a core consideration for ecomodernists.

Fourth, an institutionalist approach seeks to foster interstate cooperation in pursuit of planetary stewardship. International environmental agreements, intergovernmental agencies, and rules of cooperation to address specific sustainability problems are at the core of such institutionalist responses to the planetary crisis. In this view, institutional interventions are the first recourse also against

social and environmental excesses of laissez-faire capitalism. In principle, global institutions can enshrine rights that protect the poor and advance their interests, especially when these institutions are based on multilateral agreements and strong involvement of the countries in the Global South (Kotzé, 2019b). For example, the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities in the 1992 climate convention can be seen as a reflection of international justice (Klinsky and Gupta, 2019). Even so, in many global environmental regimes, considerations of social justice do not have the same legal force and political commitment as do market-based institutional arrangements (Kashwan, 2017a). Furthermore, many institutionalist research programs remain focused on the goal of effective protection of the global environment—and not on increasing justice at the same time. That said, in times of a global capitalist economy, growing nationalism and populism, and the rise of a multipolar order with multiple conflicting centers of power, global institutions still seem indispensable in a progressive agenda to advance the interests of the global poor within planetary stewardship (Biermann, 2014).

Fifth, a social green approach sees planetary degradation as inseparable from questions of social, economic, and political inequalities. This approach attributes both environmental degradation and poverty to the effects of large-scale industrialism, corporate control of the economy and hegemonic globalization of the ideologies of capitalism and consumption. In this approach, considerations of justice are often central. The focus is, for instance, on the protection and promotion of local economies, including through fair trade and targeted funding. Equally important is a focus on the restitution of land and resource rights of indigenous peoples and other rural communities, as reflected in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). UNDROP promises to make important headways toward the pursuit of justice for the world's poor and marginalized communities that depend on environmental resources. In this sense, this approach offers crucial elements of a progressive strategy for planetary justice. Even so, the social green approach to planetary justice fails to address critical challenges. First, the significant faith that social greens place in decentralization and localization does not address the potential for local tyrannies and participatory exclusions (Agarwal, 2001; Ostrom, 2010) and the challenges that the poor and marginalized groups may face within decentralized and localized interventions. Second, social greens' advocacy of structural reforms at various levels is necessary but not enough. Pro-poor planetary justice would require proactive structural interventions at both local and global levels, meant to empower poor people to benefit from and partake in governing environmental transformations.

In sum, our assessment of each of these five approaches suggests that none adequately addresses or prioritizes the pursuit of pro-poor planetary justice, even though both institutionalists and social greens address important aspects of the transformative reforms needed. While social greens often underemphasize the need for institutional reforms, including at the global political level, institutionalists remain focused on questions of institutional design with the primary aim of securing institutional and environmental effectiveness, rather than planetary justice (Kashwan, 2017b).

3. Towards a pro-poor planetary justice agenda

What would be some of the practical elements of a pro-poor strategy in planetary stewardship and earth system governance? While it is not possible to be exhaustive in this Perspective article, we sketch five possible ways forward. Each one relates to one or

more of the five approaches that we have just discussed.

First, multiple solutions have been proposed to resolve the global political failure in climate mitigation and other elements of the planetary crisis, ranging from global degrowth strategies, carbon taxes, or the redirecting of fossil fuel subsidies to the development of renewables. However, many such policies do not focus on advancing the interests of the poor, or may even increase the burden on the poorest. Therefore, a pro-poor justice strategy calls for robust international institutional frameworks that explicitly focus on supporting the interests of the poor. Any institutionalist reform, especially at the global level, requires careful and systematic scrutiny as to how it affects the situation of the poorest. For example, institutional arrangements that lead to large-scale unemployment would have to be accompanied by compensatory mechanisms, such as the provision of basic income for the poorest.

Second, pro-poor policies are also crucial for securing the integrity of local socio-ecological systems. Here, innovations developed by indigenous people and peasants often offer some of the best tools in today's climate-changed world. Examples are systems of controlled fire interventions, ethics of landscape conservation, and agroecological systems of food production (Perfecto and Vandermeer, 2010). Innovative models of multi-use agroecology promoted by transnational movements, such as *La Via Campesina*, point the way forward. Notably, in their engagements with global institutions such as the United Nations and their selective engagements with local and regional markets, *La Via Campesina* addresses many of the gaps in prioritizing the poor in planetary justice in the social green approach. Even though it is not easy to replicate agroecological approaches in industrialized countries, many of the challenges here are rooted in the structure of current regimes—which can be adjusted—and not in the feasibility of transitioning to an agroecological regime (Levidow, 2015; Bellon and Ollivier, 2018).

Third, the need to end the culture of profligate consumption and advance a pro-poor planetary justice requires broad social coalitions, including the middle classes. For instance, behavioral change across four major categories—food, agriculture and land management, transportation, and energy and materials—could contribute to as much as 19% to 38% emission reductions, compared to a reference case of projected cumulative emissions from 2020–2050 (Williamson et al., 2018). A pro-poor planetary justice perspective would need to ensure that such fundamental transformation in patterns and practices of consumption are supported by requisite structural reforms in the economy so that the burden does not fall disproportionately on the poor.

Fourth, a pro-poor understanding of planetary justice also requires that curbing profligate consumption be coupled with investing in key sectors that are central to securing the basic dignities for the world's poor and marginalized majorities. This includes investments in the key sectors of food, water, energy, and infrastructure. The characteristics of global food production illustrate the challenges of radical transformations in these sectors: a select few multinational corporations control nearly all the global food business and consume 75% of the energy requirements of the entire food sector—but feed a much smaller proportion of the world's population (GRAIN & IATP, 2018). There is little evidence that technological innovations, as proposed by ecomodernists (such as genetically modified crops) can escape the hold of special interests and support the livelihoods of the poor. On the other hand, smallholders with less than 5 ha of agricultural land per farming household use only about 30% of the farm land to produce more than 70% of the total food calories in 83 countries in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South and East Asia (Samberg et al., 2016).

Scaling up agroecological food systems would require the protection of the rights of the smallholders, as intended in the UNDROP.

Fifth, any efforts to address planetary justice must be accompanied by legal and institutional means to ensure that international support is not funneled into serving the interests of global corporations or the political and economic elites in the Global South. Eradicating the scourge of corruption, for example, would be crucial to realizing pro-poor planetary justice. Corporate-driven corruption has often been implicated in the break-down of relations of accountability between political and economic elites on the one hand and citizen groups on the other (Kramer, 2013).

Some argue that expanding the scope of pro-poor justice to a planetary scale could produce a sense of powerlessness and encourage evasion of moral responsibility on the part of those most responsible for the global environmental crisis (Dryzek and Pickering, 2018). This is indeed a possibility if a pro-poor focus within planetary justice is envisaged as a top-down intervention executed entirely at the global level. Instead, we advance a vision for building on the actions and interventions of various actors and agencies in state and society at multiple levels, from institutions of global governance to grassroots citizen initiatives. This multi-scale and multi-sector vision builds on plural actions and interventions that strengthen rather than weaken the sense of moral responsibility that we need in this current moment of planetary crisis.

4. Conclusion

In sum, planetary justice—as a system designed to secure the integrity of the planetary system as well as universal protection of basic human dignity for all people—requires prioritizing poor people's interests within planetary stewardship. It requires thinking through complex allocation challenges, such as addressing extreme concentrations of wealth in industrialized and middle-income countries and international redistributions of wealth and opportunities to help countries in the Global South to protect their populations against the catastrophic consequences of climate change. Addressing these allocation challenges head-on, both within and between countries, is critical to realizing pro-poor planetary justice. However, such challenges are not sufficiently addressed nor prioritized in the five approaches to earth system governance that we have examined here.

Planetary justice cannot be a debate among academics and activists in the global North alone. For the ideals of planetary justice to be achieved, these challenges must be linked to the lives and life worlds of the poorest and most marginalized people of the world.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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