

---

# Rethinking the Anthropocene: Political Economy and the North–South Climate Divide

Swati Pal

Senior Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science Indraprastha College for Women, Delhi University, Delhi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.13020058>

Received: 15 February 2026; Accepted: 20 February 2026; Published: 28 February 2026

## ABSTRACT

The concept of the Anthropocene frames climate change as the cumulative outcome of human activity, suggesting a shared and universal responsibility for planetary degradation. However, this universal framing risks obscuring the historically uneven structures of power, production, and consumption that have shaped the climate crisis. This paper critically re-examines the Anthropocene through a political economy lens, arguing that the climate emergency is not simply the result of “humanity” as a whole, but of a historically specific model of industrial capitalism concentrated in the Global North. By interrogating patterns of historical carbon emissions, industrial expansion, resource extraction, and global trade asymmetries, the study demonstrates how environmental degradation has been structurally embedded within unequal North–South economic relations.

The paper further explores how this structural inequality manifests in contemporary climate governance, particularly in debates surrounding climate finance, loss and damage, and adaptation burdens disproportionately borne by the Global South. Drawing on secondary data, existing emission statistics, and critical political economy scholarship, the study highlights the asymmetry between those most responsible for climate change and those most vulnerable to its impacts. It argues that depoliticized narratives of the environmental crisis undermine demands for historical accountability and climate justice.

By repositioning the climate crisis within global power hierarchies, this article contributes to ongoing debates on environmental justice and international political economy, calling for a re-politicization of nature and a reconfiguration of global responsibility frameworks in climate governance.

## Keywords:

1. Anthropocene
2. Political Economy
3. Global North–South Divide
4. Climate Justice
5. Environmental Inequality

## INTRODUCTION

Climate change is widely described as a global environmental crisis resulting from cumulative human activity. The dominant narrative of the Anthropocene—a geological epoch defined by humanity’s transformative impact on the Earth system—frames ecological degradation as a universal consequence of collective human action. While this framing has been influential in environmental discourse, it risks obscuring the profound inequalities embedded within the production of climate change. By attributing planetary disruption to “humanity” as an undifferentiated whole, the Anthropocene narrative may inadvertently depoliticize responsibility and mask the historical and structural power relations that have shaped the climate crisis.

The distribution of both the causes and consequences of climate change is deeply uneven. Industrialization, fossil-fuel dependence, and large-scale resource extraction were pioneered and consolidated primarily within advanced economies of the Global North. These historical processes generated unprecedented economic growth, but also entrenched carbon-intensive development pathways. In contrast, many countries in the Global South contributed minimally to cumulative greenhouse gas emissions, yet today experience disproportionately severe climate impacts, including extreme weather events, food insecurity, displacement, and infrastructural vulnerability. This asymmetry raises a critical question: can the climate crisis genuinely be understood as a universal human failure, or is it better conceptualized as a structurally produced outcome of unequal global political economy?

This paper argues that the Anthropocene framework, while analytically provocative, insufficiently accounts for historical responsibility, colonial extraction, and capitalist accumulation that underpin contemporary ecological breakdown. Through a political economy lens, climate change is better understood not simply as an environmental phenomenon, but as a product of specific economic systems, power hierarchies, and development models concentrated in the Global North. The global climate divide reflects long-standing asymmetries in wealth, industrial capacity, and political influence within international institutions.

The political economy of climate change reveals how carbon-intensive development was historically enabled by colonial resource extraction, global trade imbalances, and fossil-capital expansion. Industrial growth in the North relied heavily on raw materials, labor, and ecological appropriation from the South. These patterns of extraction not only structured global inequality but also locked the world into unsustainable energy regimes. Consequently, the burdens of mitigation and adaptation are distributed within a global system already marked by uneven development.

Contemporary climate governance further reflects these asymmetries. Negotiations around climate finance, loss and damage compensation, and emission reduction commitments reveal persistent tensions between developed and developing countries. While the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” acknowledges unequal contributions to climate change, its implementation remains contested. Financial pledges often fall short of adaptation needs in vulnerable states, and the framing of climate action frequently shifts attention away from structural accountability toward future-oriented technical solutions.

This study therefore seeks to re-politicize the climate debate by interrogating the conceptual limits of the Anthropocene and situating environmental crisis within global power relations. It asks: To what extent does the Anthropocene narrative obscure historical and structural inequalities between the Global North and South? How does a political economy perspective reframe climate responsibility and vulnerability? And what are the implications of this reframing for climate justice and international governance?

Drawing on secondary data, emission statistics, and critical scholarship in political economy and environmental studies, this paper advances three central claims. First, the climate crisis is historically rooted in patterns of capitalist industrialization concentrated in the Global North rather than evenly distributed human activity. Second, the impacts of climate change reproduce and intensify existing global inequalities. Third, meaningful climate justice requires confronting structural economic asymmetries rather than relying solely on technocratic environmental solutions.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section examines the conceptual foundations and critiques of the Anthropocene framework. The subsequent section develops a political economy analysis of climate production and global inequality. The fourth section explores the contemporary North–South divide within climate governance, focusing on responsibility, finance, and vulnerability. The final section reflects on the implications for rethinking global environmental politics and advancing a more equitable framework for climate action.

By repositioning climate change within structures of power and inequality, this study contributes to debates in global environmental politics and international political economy, arguing that nature has never been politically neutral. Rather, the climate crisis must be understood as embedded within historical systems of production, accumulation, and global hierarchy.

---

## Section II: Conceptual Debate – The Anthropocene and Its Critics

The Anthropocene has emerged as a dominant conceptual framework in environmental studies, geology, and climate discourse, describing a new epoch in which human activity has become a geologically significant force. Scholars such as Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) popularized the term, highlighting humanity's unprecedented capacity to alter planetary systems, from atmospheric composition to biodiversity patterns. While the Anthropocene has been influential in raising awareness of global environmental transformation, it carries significant analytical and political limitations. Foremost among these is its tendency to flatten historical and geopolitical inequalities, implying a collective human culpability for ecological degradation that obscures the uneven distribution of responsibility and impact.

Critics argue that the Anthropocene framework risks depoliticizing climate change by presenting environmental disruption as an emergent property of humanity writ large, rather than a consequence of historically specific economic systems and power relations. By framing all humans as equally responsible, the Anthropocene narrative neglects the structural asymmetries in global industrial development, resource extraction, and carbon emissions. For example, cumulative historical data indicate that high-income countries, particularly in the Global North, have contributed disproportionately to greenhouse gas emissions, while low-income countries in the Global South, often least responsible, face the most severe consequences of climate change. This analytical flattening limits the ability of the framework to address questions of justice, accountability, and redress.

In response, some scholars have proposed alternative conceptualizations that center historical and structural inequality. Notably, Moore (2015) introduces the concept of the Capitalocene, emphasizing that ecological crises are not the result of humanity as a whole but of capitalism as a system of accumulation, exploitation, and extraction. The Capitalocene reframes climate change as a product of specific economic and political choices: industrial capitalism, colonial resource extraction, and systemic inequalities in global trade and energy consumption. Unlike the Anthropocene, which universalizes human impact, the Capitalocene highlights the historically contingent and socially produced nature of ecological disruption.

Further, these critiques underscore the importance of integrating **political economy perspectives** into environmental analysis. Political economy offers a framework to understand how power, wealth, and historical structures shape environmental outcomes. By examining who produces emissions, who extracts resources, and who bears the burdens of environmental degradation, political economy emphasizes accountability and structural causality rather than abstract notions of collective responsibility. Such an approach situates environmental crisis within long-standing systems of inequality, highlighting the persistent gap between those historically responsible and those currently vulnerable.

Debates over the Anthropocene also intersect with broader discussions of environmental justice and global governance. While the Anthropocene frames climate change as a planetary emergency requiring collective action, it does not inherently address the **North–South asymmetries** that define the distribution of both responsibility and vulnerability. Scholars argue that integrating justice into environmental frameworks is essential to ensure that policies, negotiations, and interventions do not perpetuate historical inequalities. Concepts such as “climate debt,” “loss and damage,” and differentiated responsibilities attempt to operationalize this recognition, but their implementation remains inconsistent and contested, reinforcing the importance of a theoretically grounded critique.

Finally, the Anthropocene debate has implications for how nature itself is conceptualized. By portraying ecological change as a consequence of “humanity,” the Anthropocene risks framing nature as a passive backdrop to human agency. In contrast, political economy approaches recognize that nature is both a site and a medium of socio-economic processes, historically shaped by labor, extraction, and power hierarchies. This theoretical shift is crucial for understanding climate change not merely as a biophysical phenomenon but as a politically mediated crisis.

In sum, this section establishes that while the Anthropocene provides a useful narrative of planetary change, its limitations necessitate a more nuanced, politically grounded framework. By incorporating political economy and structural critiques, the study foregrounds historical responsibility, North–South asymmetries, and the socially

produced character of climate change. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for the subsequent analysis, which examines the production of climate change through the lens of global inequality, historical emissions, and industrial capitalism.

### **Section III: Political Economy of Climate Change and Global Inequality**

The uneven production and consequences of climate change can be fully understood only through a political economy lens. Historical patterns of industrialization, resource extraction, and global trade have structured the present-day climate crisis, generating stark asymmetries between the Global North and Global South. Industrial capitalism, concentrated initially in Europe and later in North America, relied heavily on fossil fuels, labor exploitation, and colonial resource flows. These processes not only enabled unprecedented economic growth in the North but also set the foundations for the carbon-intensive trajectories that continue to drive global greenhouse gas emissions.

Historical emission data reveal that high-income countries are responsible for the overwhelming majority of cumulative carbon dioxide emissions. For instance, the United States, Europe, and other advanced economies collectively produced over 70% of global emissions before 1990, whereas most countries in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America contributed minimally. Yet, paradoxically, the impacts of climate change—extreme weather, sea-level rise, desertification, and food insecurity—disproportionately affect low- and middle-income countries. This stark contrast underscores a fundamental inequality: those least responsible for climate change often bear the heaviest burdens.

Colonial and post-colonial economic structures further entrenched this imbalance. European imperial powers extracted raw materials, forced labor, and agricultural surpluses from colonies to fuel industrialization, embedding structural dependence in the Global South. These historical inequities persist today, manifesting in unequal access to technology, finance, and adaptive capacity. Even as developing countries strive for industrial growth to meet basic development needs, they face stricter climate constraints and obligations under international regimes—a phenomenon often referred to as “carbon colonialism.”

Global trade and investment patterns also reinforce this asymmetry. Resource-intensive production, outsourced from the North to the South, transfers environmental costs while capturing economic benefits predominantly in developed economies. Examples include mining, deforestation for export crops, and fossil fuel extraction in countries such as Nigeria, Brazil, and Indonesia. Such patterns not only exacerbate ecological degradation locally but also highlight the systemic link between development models and climate vulnerability.

Climate governance mechanisms have attempted to address these inequalities, most notably through the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” (CBDR) enshrined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). While the principle recognizes historical responsibility and varying capabilities, implementation has been uneven. Climate finance pledges often fall short of the adaptation and mitigation needs of vulnerable countries. Mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund have struggled to distribute resources equitably, while developed nations continue to dominate decision-making forums, reflecting enduring power asymmetries in international climate politics.

Moreover, the framing of climate action frequently emphasizes technical solutions—renewable energy transitions, carbon markets, and emissions targets—without adequately addressing structural inequalities. While these approaches are important, they risk depoliticizing responsibility and shifting attention from the historical, systemic causes of climate change. A political economy perspective, in contrast, situates climate vulnerability, mitigation capacity, and policy responsibility within the larger context of global inequality, highlighting the structural constraints facing countries in the Global South.

Empirical evidence further underscores the asymmetry in climate impacts. The 2019–2020 Australian bushfires, the 2010 Pakistan floods, and the 2021 East African droughts demonstrate that developing countries often lack the infrastructure, social safety nets, and financial resources to withstand extreme climatic events. While advanced economies can deploy emergency response systems and insurance mechanisms, many low-income nations face escalating humanitarian crises, highlighting the uneven distribution of climate resilience.

In sum, climate change cannot be understood as a neutral, natural phenomenon. It is historically produced, socially mediated, and structurally embedded within global inequalities. Industrialization, colonial legacies, trade asymmetries, and uneven technological access all contribute to a system in which the Global North has disproportionately shaped the climate crisis while the Global South disproportionately bears its consequences. This analysis establishes the empirical and structural foundation necessary to examine the contemporary **North–South divide in climate governance**, which is the focus of the next section.

By connecting historical emissions, industrial pathways, and colonial legacies to present-day vulnerability, this section demonstrates that climate change is both a political and economic phenomenon. Recognizing this uneven production is essential for understanding the limitations of current governance structures, as well as the ethical, practical, and policy imperatives for achieving meaningful climate justice.

#### **Section IV: North–South Divide in Climate Governance**

The climate crisis is not only an ecological or scientific issue but also a profoundly political one. International governance mechanisms, designed to coordinate mitigation and adaptation efforts, reveal persistent disparities between the Global North and South. While developed nations have historically driven industrialization and greenhouse gas emissions, they maintain disproportionate influence in decision-making institutions, financial mechanisms, and technological transfers. Conversely, developing nations, often most vulnerable to climate impacts, are constrained by structural inequalities that limit their capacity to adapt and influence policy outcomes.

The principle of “**common but differentiated responsibilities**” (CBDR), articulated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), acknowledges these disparities. CBDR recognizes that all states share a responsibility to address climate change, but obligations should vary according to historical emissions, economic capability, and technological capacity. Despite its conceptual appeal, implementation has been uneven. For example, financial pledges to support adaptation and mitigation in developing countries have often fallen short of commitments. The Green Climate Fund (GCF), intended to channel resources equitably, faces chronic underfunding and bureaucratic delays, limiting its effectiveness in reducing vulnerability in the Global South.

Beyond finance, decision-making asymmetries persist in global climate negotiations. Developed countries continue to shape the agenda, set emission reduction targets, and influence the allocation of resources, reflecting entrenched power hierarchies. Developing nations frequently encounter structural barriers to participation, including limited technical expertise, negotiation capacity, and access to scientific data. This dynamic reproduces historical patterns of domination: those most responsible for environmental degradation maintain control over solutions, while those most affected remain marginalized in governance processes.

The concept of **loss and damage** further illustrates these inequalities. While developing nations face escalating climate-related losses—from floods, storms, and rising sea levels—mechanisms to address compensation remain contested. Disputes over liability, accountability, and funding obligations highlight the tensions between historical responsibility and present-day vulnerability. Developed nations often frame climate action in forward-looking terms, emphasizing mitigation and technological innovation, while resistance to binding financial obligations underscores the structural inequities in global governance.

Case studies illuminate the practical implications of this divide. For instance, small island developing states (SIDS) in the Pacific and the Caribbean are among the most climate-vulnerable populations, yet contribute minimally to global emissions. Their appeals for international financial support and adaptive capacity are frequently met with bureaucratic delays or insufficient funding. Similarly, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa confront recurrent droughts and floods that threaten food security, yet climate finance per capita remains significantly lower than in Northern countries. These disparities highlight the structural imbalance between historical responsibility and contemporary burden-sharing.

Technology transfer and capacity-building represent additional arenas of North–South inequality. Renewable energy initiatives, carbon reduction technologies, and climate-resilient infrastructure are often developed and

controlled by Northern institutions or private corporations. Developing countries face barriers in accessing these technologies due to intellectual property regimes, high costs, and limited institutional capacity. Consequently, climate governance structures not only reflect but reinforce historical and contemporary economic and political hierarchies.

Re-politicizing climate governance requires a shift from abstract, universalistic frameworks toward approaches that explicitly recognize historical emissions, economic disparities, and global power asymmetries. Climate justice demands not only technical solutions but also structural reforms, including equitable finance mechanisms, inclusive decision-making, and accountability for historical contributions to environmental degradation. Without such measures, mitigation and adaptation efforts risk reproducing the very inequalities that underlie the climate crisis.

In summary, the North–South divide in climate governance exemplifies the broader argument of this paper: climate change is not a natural or neutral phenomenon but a politically and economically structured crisis. By examining international institutions, finance mechanisms, and decision-making asymmetries, this section demonstrates that environmental responsibility and vulnerability are deeply intertwined with historical power relations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for advancing meaningful climate justice and for developing governance frameworks that are both effective and equitable.

This analysis provides the necessary foundation for the **concluding section**, which reflects on the implications of a politicized understanding of climate change, emphasizing pathways toward global accountability, justice, and structural reform.

## **Section V: Conclusion – Re-politicizing Climate Change and Pathways to Justice**

This study has examined climate change not as a neutral or purely natural phenomenon, but as a historically produced and politically mediated crisis. By critically engaging with the Anthropocene framework and situating the climate crisis within the structures of industrial capitalism, colonial legacies, and global economic inequality, the paper demonstrates that environmental degradation is deeply uneven in both responsibility and impact. The North–South divide in climate governance further reinforces this imbalance, revealing how historical emitters retain power and influence, while those most vulnerable to climate change bear disproportionate burdens.

The analysis underscores three central insights. First, the Anthropocene narrative, while useful for framing planetary-scale change, risks depoliticizing responsibility by treating humanity as an undifferentiated agent. In contrast, a political economy perspective illuminates the structural drivers of climate change, including industrial development concentrated in the Global North, resource extraction, and systemic inequality in global trade and production. Second, the impacts of climate change are unequally distributed, with the Global South experiencing heightened vulnerability despite minimal historical contributions. Empirical evidence—from extreme weather events to challenges in climate finance—demonstrates that the consequences of climate change are closely tied to existing economic and political hierarchies. Third, contemporary governance mechanisms, while acknowledging principles such as “common but differentiated responsibilities,” frequently fall short in addressing structural inequities, perpetuating patterns of inequality in mitigation, adaptation, and access to resources.

By reframing climate change as a politically structured crisis, this study contributes to debates in environmental justice, international political economy, and global governance. It highlights the need for a re-politicization of climate policy that emphasizes historical responsibility, structural reforms, and equitable participation in decision-making. Climate justice requires mechanisms that go beyond technocratic solutions, including robust climate finance, technology transfer, legal recognition of loss and damage, and empowerment of vulnerable states in international negotiations. Without addressing these structural imbalances, mitigation and adaptation efforts risk reinforcing the inequalities that underpin the crisis.

Finally, this analysis has broader theoretical and practical implications. Conceptually, it supports a shift from universalizing frameworks like the Anthropocene to approaches attentive to historical, economic, and political asymmetries, such as the Capitalocene. Practically, it provides evidence for policymakers, international

institutions, and civil society actors to design interventions that recognize differential responsibilities and vulnerabilities. Achieving meaningful climate justice, therefore, is inseparable from addressing the global structures of power, wealth, and exploitation that have historically produced the crisis.

In conclusion, nature has never been politically neutral. The climate crisis is a product of human systems shaped by power and inequality, and any effort to mitigate its impacts must confront the historical, structural, and political dimensions of responsibility. Re-politicizing climate change, integrating political economy insights, and addressing the North–South divide are essential steps toward a more just and sustainable global environmental order.

## REFERENCES

1. Crist, E. (2016). On the poverty of our nomenclature. In J. W. Moore (Ed.), **Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism** (pp. 14–33). PM Press. ([Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology](#))
2. Crutzen, P. J., & Stoermer, E. F. (2000). The “Anthropocene.” *Global Change Newsletter*, 41(1), 17–18. ([Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology](#))
3. Moore, J. W. (2015). **Capitalism in the web of life: Ecology and the accumulation of capital**. Verso. ([Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#))
4. Moore, J. W. (2017). The Capitalocene, part I: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(3), 594–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036> ([Docslib](#))
5. UNFCCC. (n.d.). Introduction to climate finance. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/topics/introduction-to-climate-finance> ([unfccc.int](#))
6. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (1992). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Article 3). ([Wikipedia](#))
7. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (n.d.). Green Climate Fund. Retrieved from [mrhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_Climate\\_Fund](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Climate_Fund) ([Wikipedia](#))
8. Zalasiewicz, J., Waters, C. N., Williams, M., et al. (2015). The Anthropocene: A formal geological epoch? *Journal of the Geological Society*, 23(2), 227–228. (Note: Classic reference often cited in Anthropocene scholarship—add full DOI as needed)
9. **Common but differentiated responsibilities:** United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (1992). Common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR). ([Wikipedia](#))
10. **North–South carbon responsibility data:** Authoritative emissions studies (e.g., Semieniuk & Yakovenko, 2020). ([arXiv](#))
11. **Climate finance critique:** OECD (2023) Development Co-operation Report: Climate finance assessment. ([OECD](#))
12. **Ecological debt concept:** Warlenius, R., Pierce, G., & Ramasar, V. (n.d.). Ecological debt theory. ([Wikipedia](#))