



Outlook

JUST CLIMATE ADAPTATION AND LOSS AND DAMAGE ACTION IN AN EMERGENCY

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According to Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, the risks of negative impacts from climate change are very high (IPCC, 2022). Many world regions must already take action to cope with the adverse effects of climate change and minimize the risks of climate losses and damages, for example, loss of lives or cultural heritage, damage to housing or agriculture. Particularly in smallholder farming communities, these climate impacts threaten to undermine livelihoods and food security, likely leading to famine and other catastrophic consequences for survival and social stability. This article explores the ethical implications of different framings of both the need to adapt to changing climatic conditions and the actions that must be taken should unavoidable or unavoids climate losses and damages materialize (Roderick & Verheyen, 2008).

To explore the moral implications of climate adaptation and of loss and damage (L&D) action, consider a variation of Peter Singer's famous pond case (Singer, 1972). You walk by a deep pond and see a stranger's child drowning¹. In such a case, it seems clear that you have a duty to help, at least if you do not have to risk anything of similar moral importance. If you cannot swim and would risk drowning yourself, it would be too much to expect you to jump into the pond and save the child. On the other hand, if you can swim well enough, it would be perfectly reasonable to expect you to jump into the pond and miss an important appointment. This is the "child in a pond" case. Intuitively, everyone would agree that it concerns an emergency.

1. My variation of the original example is rather small. Singer speaks of a shallow pond; I imagine the pond to be deep enough to make it necessary to swim to save the child.

Now consider what I call the “ball in a pond” case. A mean adult kicks a small child’s ball into a pond so far out that someone must jump in and swim to get it back. This is not an emergency. Immediate help is not necessary. It would be appropriate to argue for some time with the mean ball-kicker to have them jump into the pond to retrieve the ball, because they caused the unpleasant situation. In what follows, I show why framing the challenges of climate adaptation and climate L&D in a similar way to the “child in a pond” case changes the way responsibilities in climate policy should be assigned.

In my view, international climate negotiations tend to deal with challenges of managing the negative impacts of climate change as if they were “ball in a pond” cases. The pace of these negotiations deals with these challenges as though they were not emergencies requiring immediate action. The negotiations mainly focus on how much those who have contributed most to climate change should pay to support those who must adapt to changing climatic conditions (Vanhala & Hestbaek, 2016).

In this paper, I argue that this is not the best way to frame the challenges of climate adaptation and climate L&D. I show why these challenges are more like emergencies and should be framed similarly to the “child in a pond” case. Depending on whether a case of climate adaptation or L&D is framed as an emergency, the justification for the fair differentiation of responsibilities changes. I argue that in the case of an emergency, it is not of primary importance who contributes or contributed most to the problem at hand but who is best positioned to help most effectively and efficiently.

To justify this claim, I first explain why the framing changes the moral norms for assigning responsibility to act. I then show why climate adaptation and L&D should be framed as emergencies, providing reasons for focusing mainly on ability rather than contribution to climate change in assigning responsibilities. This leads to the conclusion that in situations of adaptation or L&D where help is needed, those with the most knowledge, resources, and financial capacity should help to the best of their ability, regardless of their contribution to climate change. However, I do not mean to suggest that the major contributors to climate change are off the hook. I am simply arguing that, currently, the priorities for assigning responsibility should be different.

Context Sensitivity of Moral Norms

To see why and how context defines the relevant norms for assigning responsibility, consider my two cases again. In the first case, the life of the drowning child is at stake. If no one helps, the child will die. In

the case of the ball in the pond, the child who owns the ball may be very sad because she has lost her ball. It is also sad for all her friends who played soccer with her. However, what is at stake does not have the same moral importance as in the case of the child in the pond. This also changes what can be expected of the swimmers involved. Much more can be expected in the child case than in the ball one. But in both cases, it would be asking too much of someone who cannot swim to jump into the pond and save either the child or the ball. The moral importance of the object of responsibility under consideration, the urgency to act, and the abilities of potential agents are relevant in determining how responsibilities should be assigned. I will discuss each in turn.

Assigning responsibility always involves assigning responsibility for something. The latter is usually called the object of responsibility (Wallimann-Helmer, 2019). In our two cases, it is either saving the child or saving the ball. The difference in the moral importance of these two objects of responsibility is related to the moral values under consideration. In the case of the ball, the values relevant to the situation are the ownership of the ball, the value of playing soccer with friends, and the character of the mean adult. In addition, we may be in an area of a park where ball games are prohibited. These are all important moral considerations, but in no case can they outweigh the moral importance of the value of a life. The right to life is one of the most fundamental moral values that must be protected and preserved at almost any cost. The moral importance of the value of life explains in part why, in the case of the child in the pond, it seems less important who is responsible for the child drowning. In the situation of the drowning child, the only thing that matters is that the child be saved. This is not the case with the ball.

According to Singer, we can expect anyone who has the power to prevent something morally bad from happening to do so if they do not have to sacrifice anything of “comparable moral importance” (Singer, 1972). Such a sacrifice may concern the nature of the action to be taken or its consequences for oneself or others. If someone must do something involving costs of comparable moral importance to a child’s life, they cannot be expected to help the child. Similarly, if helping the child has negative consequences for bystanders or non-human nature, which outweigh the child’s death, it would also be asking too much from potential agents. Finally, risking one’s life to save a drowning child may be heroic, but it is also asking too much. One’s own life is of comparable moral importance to the life of any other person. However, if a passerby does not have to risk their life, it is not asking too much to expect them to save the drowning child.

These considerations may lead to the view that if fundamental moral values are at stake, then those who are in the best position to act have a duty to do so, regardless of whether they have contributed to the negative consequences in question. This is especially important in emergencies, such as a child drowning in a pond (Rubenstein, 2007). An emergency is usually characterised as a situation in which immediate action is urgent. In the case of a drowning child, someone must act immediately, or it will die. In the case of the ball in the pond, we are not faced with an emergency in the same way.

With these considerations, I am not arguing that in an emergency it becomes irrelevant who caused the problem or why the challenge arose in the first place. I am arguing, however, that in an emergency, in a situation where fundamental moral values are at stake, it is of paramount importance to assign responsibility according to ability. The less weighty the moral values involved, and the less urgent the need to solve a challenge immediately, the more other moral considerations can and must play a role.

In the next section, we turn to climate adaptation and L&D action. It becomes crucial to understand whether they are better framed as “child in a pond” or “ball in a pond” cases. In what follows, I argue that it is the former, even though international climate politics tend to frame these issues as the latter.

Priorities in Climate Adaptation and L&D Emergencies

To see whether the challenges of climate adaptation or climate L&D should be framed as more of a “child in a pond” or “ball in a pond” case, we need to be clear about the nature of the challenge facing the communities that need to act. We know from the IPCC reports that climatic conditions are already changing around the world (IPCC, 2022). They are leading to longer periods of drought, more frequent extreme weather events, sea level rise and flood risks, and many other negative impacts. Adaptation measures are needed to reduce the risk of losses and damages in exposed regions, and where these cannot or will not be avoided, L&D measures will be crucial (Mace & Verheyen, 2016).

Adaptation means taking measures to reduce the risk of droughts, protecting assets from extreme weather, or building levees to minimize the likelihood of flooding. L&D actions include measures to reduce the negative impacts of losses and damages, such as insurance schemes to compensate for damage that has occurred or early warning systems to reduce coming losses. In addition to financial and other non-economic resources,

know-how and functioning institutions are crucial for the successful implementation of all these types of measures. In most cases in which adaptation or L&D measures are required, fundamental moral values are at stake. This points towards a framing of adaptation and L&D action as “child in the pond” cases.

The case of the child in the pond represents an emergency where immediate help is needed to prevent loss of life, a fundamental moral value. But while the number of climate change-related emergencies is already increasing, many of them are most likely to occur only in the near or distant future (IPCC, 2022). This means that, for these cases, a “ball in a pond” framing still seems appropriate. In international climate negotiations, this is the most common framing. At these meetings, the focus is most often on negotiating the extent to which high emitters, especially historically high emitters, will have to contribute more to adaptation and L&D finance. Parties, especially developed countries, seem to negotiate the need for climate adaptation and L&D as if there were no fundamental moral values at stake, and as if there was still time, but no urgency, to argue about who should help communities in need adapt or prepare for losses and damages occurring.

It is clear, at least from the perspective of many developing countries, that the negative impacts they face involve fundamental moral values demanding urgent action. However, there are still many arguments in international negotiations about how much developed countries must contribute because of their current and historical emissions, as though there is still time to argue about this at length. I disagree with such a framing for one simple reason. Both adaptation and L&D measures need to be taken well in advance of the negative climate impacts that make them necessary. Not taking action now to adapt to climate change and to support such action would be like knowing about the risk of children falling into a pond and drowning, but doing nothing to prevent it. Not preparing to save the children from drowning would be like accepting that such a risk of loss (or damage) exists but doing nothing to mitigate its effects.

I argue that, in both cases, even though the emergency is not immediate, it is urgent to do everything possible to prevent it or to minimize the impact of such an emergency happening now. As a consequence of such a “child in a pond” framing, it seems more important that those who face the need to adapt and who need assistance in preparing for L&D be helped in the most efficient and effective way (Wallimann-Helmer, 2016; Wallimann-Helmer, Meyer, Mintz-Woo, Schinko and Serdeczny, 2019). This means that, for assigning adaptation and L&D responsibility, it is much more important to consider which parties can best help than to define who does and has contributed how much

to climate change. As a result, many countries, but especially developed countries, have an obligation to provide as much assistance as is necessary to ensure that all affected communities have adequate adaptation and L&D measures in place soon.

While this may imply placing the highest burden of responsibility on the same actors as if responsibilities were allocated according to the actors' contributions to climate change, the justification for such an allocation is fundamentally different. It is not because they contributed to the problem but because they have the capacity to help solve that problem. But again, the heaviest contributors to climate change are not off the hook. In times of emergency, we might not have time to argue about payments being proportional to individual contributions to climate change. But, as soon as the emergency is resolved, redistributing burdens according to contributions to climate change will become crucial².

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