



Three Injustices of Adaptation Finance - A Relational Egalitarian Analysis

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Abstract

This primarily diagnostic paper offers, from the perspective of relational egalitarianism, a normative analysis of three major injustices in the context of adaptation finance. Adaptation finance includes payments provided by the affluent countries of the Global North to low-income countries in the Global South, countries particularly exposed to the harms of climate change. Relational egalitarianism is the normative view that interactions between people and between institutions have to respect the equal moral status of every human being. The first injustice, from this perspective, consists in the sheer fact that adaptation measures are required at all to deflect harm from people who did not significantly contribute to the causes of climate change. The second injustice consists in the persisting, even increasing adaptation finance gap, as countries of the Global North do neither provide adequate financial means to reduce climate risks, nor even fulfil their commitments to adaptation finance pledged in the Copenhagen Accord in 2009. The third injustice emerges from current procedures to determine criteria for distributing scarce financial resources that consolidate structural injustice. The paper concludes by providing the contours of a practical response to these injustices that respects the demands of relational egalitarianism.

Keywords Adaptation finance · Climate justice · Structural injustice · Relational equality · Climate change

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Introduction

Continuous emissions dangerously interfere with the climate, bringing governments, companies and individual citizens into conflict with Article 2 of the UN framework on climate change to aim for a “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (UNFCCC, 1992, 4). Historically and presently, these dangerous emissions originate mostly from the long industrialised countries of the Global North¹ and the quickly developing countries such as China (Our World in Data, 2019). The main options of current global climate policy are mitigation, adaptation, and loss & damage. While the public debate on climate policy still rightly centres on mitigation measures to limit global warming and reduce subsequent harm, adaptation and loss & damage are becoming more important. While loss & damage is directed to compensating for actual climate harms, adaptation aims to reduce the risks or negative impacts resulting from climate change for human or natural systems (Khan et al., 2020; Kuhl, 2024).

Aggressive early mitigation—once the risks of anthropogenic climate change had become clear with the publication of the first IPCC report in 1990—*would have* reduced the rate and magnitude of climate change significantly and therefore also would have reduced today’s need for adaptation. As a symptomatic, not a causal, attempt to address global warming, adaptation already accepts the reality and inevitability of global warming, and thus acknowledges that not all harms resulting from it will be preventable. Whereas need for adaptation also exists in the global North, countries in the Global South will be hit particularly hard by a changing climate but often lack financial means for adequate adaptation, making them dependent on adaptation finance provided by others (as recommended by the editor, tables 1 and 2 in the appendix present lists of countries of the Global North and Global South).

The failure to take adequate measures until now not only has made the need for adaptation inevitable, but also increased the costs of adaptation (Caney, 2010b, 171). In the context of financing necessary adaptation measures, which is the focus

¹ The rough distinction of countries of the Global North and Global South largely reflects the UNFCCC categories of Annex I and Non-Annex I countries. This distinction is based on UNFCCC (1992), where the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ in Article 4 implies an assignment of the responsibility to ‘facilitate adequate adaptation to climate change’ to some Annex I countries. This is relevant for our normative analysis of countries providing and receiving adaptation finance. However, as the classification of countries as Annex I or Non-Annex I country was made in 1992, the characteristics of some countries in terms of economic power and emissions, changed substantially until now, e.g. in the case of Brazil, India in China in the group of Non-Annex I countries. Furthermore, the terms ‘Global North’, ‘Global South’, ‘Developed Countries’ and ‘Developing Countries’ are loaded terms. The Global South is something ‘created, imagined, invented, maintained, and recreated’ (Kloß 2017, 7). The term ‘Global South’ might be used as a geographical reading, as global subaltern, linked to political, epistemic, cultural and economic inequalities, or as a flexible metaphor (Kloß 2017). Furthermore, the term ‘Global South’ might be employed to refer to the countries most exploited and especially oppressed by the current economic and political world order (Dainotto 2017), or to the history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, resulting in inequalities in living standards, life expectancy and access to resources (Dados and Connell 2012).

of the present paper, specific normative questions arise (Paavola & Adger, 2006, 595, Hayward, 2012, Moellendorf, 2012, Khan et al., 2020 and Caney, 2021). They include the following questions: Who should provide adaptation finance, to whom, and why? How much adaptation finance should the affluent industrialised countries of the Global North provide to countries of the Global South, such as small island developing states? According to which criteria should adaptation finance be distributed between receiving countries?

The present paper takes relational egalitarianism as the background normative framework to discuss such normative questions about adaptation finance. Its primary ambition is diagnostic: it identifies and analyses three major injustices—morally indefensible violations of relational egalitarian justice norms—that exist in the context of adaptation finance. The paper ends by outlining the contours of a practical response to the identified injustices.

However, an assessment of responsibilities between countries, as important as it is given the global political structures, must not obscure the fact of large disparities in responsibility and vulnerability within countries. Privileged individuals in vulnerable states may be contributing much more to climate change than less privileged individuals in the affluent and globally dominating states. Increased vulnerability to the harms of climate change is also distributed differently within countries and thus negatively affect also large parts of the population in affluent countries. For the following analysis, however, we largely stick to an assessment of responsibilities between countries.

A *first*, fundamental injustice in the context of adaptation finance is revealed by the mere existence of the need of adaptation to climate change in countries that did not contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions at the origin of climate change. This clearly indicates an injustice: These countries and large numbers of their inhabitants have been, and continue to be exposed to significant climate risks without having caused them and without having given their consent to being exposed to them.

A *second* injustice of adaptation finance consists in the widening adaptation finance gap between the expected adaptation costs and the financial means available: The financial commitments already made by the affluent countries in 2009 at COP 15 in Copenhagen (Roberts et al., 2021; UNFCCC, 2009a, 2009b), confirmed in 2015 at COP 21 in Paris (UNFCCC, 2015), had been renewed in 2021 at COP 26 in Glasgow. The resulting Glasgow Climate Pact intended to address the adaptation finance gap by committing developed countries to increase the provision of adaptation finance to \$40 billion per year by 2025.² But so far no full closure of the gap seems likely, as evidence even indicates increasing adaptation costs (UNEP 2021, 28).³

² UN Environment Programme: <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/what-does-cop26-mean-adaptation>. Last accessed April 27, 2024.

³ Recent important developments in climate finance like the loss and damage fund are outside the scope of our paper which is devoted to adaptation. Cf. Heilinger & Kempt (2024) for a normative analysis of the loss and damage fund from the perspective of relational equality.

The persistent adaptation finance gap makes prioritisation between countries and adaptation projects inevitable, because insufficient funds have to be distributed among numerous urgent options. This gives rise to a potential *third*, procedural injustice in the context of adaptation finance, regarding the selection and application of criteria to distribute the scarce financial means: The process of selecting the criteria itself might violate principles of relational egalitarianism, as well as the application of a particular criterion, such as vulnerability or efficiency.

This primarily analytic and diagnostic paper is structured as follows. Sect. "[The Normative Basis: Relational Egalitarian Justice](#)" introduces global relational egalitarianism as the normative foundation of the following discussion. Sects. "[The Need for Adaptation as a First Injustice](#)" to "[Using Criteria for Distributing Adaptation Finance as a Third Injustice](#)" present the three injustices just mentioned in detail: Sect. "[The Need for Adaptation as a First Injustice](#)" shows why the need for adaptation is in itself an indicator of failed attempts to mitigate or avoid climate change, and thus constitutes an injustice in terms of relational egalitarianism. Sect. "[The Adaptation Finance Gap as a Second Injustice](#)" criticises that the amount of adaptation finance provided falls short of needs and legitimate entitlements of individuals and states threatened by climate change, and fails to honour previous commitments to provide adaptation finance; indicating violations of the demands of relational equality. Sect. "[Using Criteria for Distributing Adaptation Finance as a Third Injustice](#)" scrutinises a potential criterion to distribute scarce adaptation finance-vulnerability-and discusses its normative justification, conceptualisation and application problems from the perspective of relational egalitarianism. Sect. "[Conclusion](#)" concludes by outlining the contours of a practical response to remedy the identified injustices.

The Normative Basis: Relational Egalitarian Justice

This paper's diagnosis and analysis of three injustices in the context of adaptation finance is based on a normative account of 'relational' egalitarian justice that takes the idea of the equal moral worth of all human beings seriously (Anderson, 1999; Heilinger, 2020; Nath, 2020; Schemmel, 2021; Young, 1990). On the grounds of the equal moral status of all, proponents of relational justice conclude that people and institutions must relate to and interact with one another as equals, i.e. in a way that acknowledges, recognises and respects everyone's legitimate basic needs and interests (Scheffler, 2015). Relational accounts of justice do not primarily address questions of fair distributions of relevant goods or advantages, but direct attention primarily to the *quality of the interactions* between (groups of) people and institutions that, subsequently, can explain or influence also the distribution of goods or advantages. Important questions for relational egalitarians are: Who can make their voices heard? Who decides and on what basis? Who depends on the decisions of others? And: Do interactions and deliberations demonstrate that all are participating and mutually respecting one another as moral equals?

While *relational* egalitarianism and *relational* justice is frequently introduced in opposition to *distributional* equality and justice (Anderson, 1999), the distributions

of goods or advantages (e.g. in the form of money) matter to relational egalitarians as well (Heilinger, 2024). This is because distributions often result from and thus are indicative of the underlying relations and interactions between people, groups, and institutions. Namely, if some have very much of certain goods or advantages while others have very little, this often is a consequence (and thus also a potential symptom) of underlying, fundamental asymmetries in power and influence, mirroring insufficient respect for the equal moral standing of all. For relational egalitarians, however, the primary wrong in need of correction remains the basic *relational* inequality. After all, it is the fact that some dominate and disrespect others whose perspective and views are not (or not sufficiently) heard, or the fact that some pursue their particular interests at the expense of others that lead to unequal and unfair distributions. The primary *negative* goal of relational egalitarianism thus is to end such asymmetries and unjust structures, in which some groups systematically concentrate power and consolidate their position to dominate others.⁴ The primary *positive* goal of relational egalitarianism correspondingly consists in establishing relationships and interactions between persons, groups, representatives of groups, or institutions that take place “on a footing of equality” (Scheffler, 2015).

According to this view, egalitarian interactions and decisions would lead to fair distributions. Note, however, that a limited degree of *distributive inequality* could still be compatible with the ideal of *relational equality*, namely if the unequal distributions result from truly inclusive and fair processes of deliberation and decision-making acceptable to all. What is required to secure relational equality, then, is not so much exactly equal outcomes, but a firm common commitment to the primary goals that all interact as equals, that all can at least meet their basic needs, and that no one accrues advantages at the expense of others.

Relational egalitarianism can be applied to different moral challenges, including e.g. in the field of health justice (e.g. Voigt & Wester, 2015), justice in migration and integration (e.g. Carens, 2013; Grahle, 2019), or climate change (e.g. Sparenborg, 2022 and Heilinger & Kempt, 2024). Our subsequent analysis employs this relational framework to elucidate normative issues in the context of adaptation finance.

Here, the primary issue of concern for relational egalitarians obviously lies with equality as a morally required feature of interactions, such as the international negotiations about strategic planning for adapting to global warming. A lasting and comprehensive solution to any injustices in this context will require establishing egalitarian relations, that is fair sharing of power and influence, so that all affected

⁴ The primary wrong that needs to be addressed is one that can be described as global *structural injustice*. In Young’s canonical definition: “Structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation [...], at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities. [...] Structural injustice occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting in pursuit of their particular goals and interests, within given institutional rules and accepted norms.” (Young 2006, 114). Cf. also Anderson (1999, 313) who has clearly formulated the positive and negative aims of relational egalitarianism.

have an adequate say about important issues of relevance to them, including issues of distribution of benefits and burdens to adapt to climate change.⁵

The following normative analysis contributes to debates about climate justice (Garvey, 2008, Gardiner et al., 2010, Broome, 2012, Caney, 2021 and Shue, 2021). Given the scarcity of means provided and available for adaptation finance, our discussion of injustices is located in the realm of “non-ideal” theorising (cf. Valentini, 2012): starting from the current state of affairs it aspires to identify real injustices to be addressed through stepwise, incremental improvements (cf. Kitcher, 2021). Such a non-ideal approach employs theories of justice to progress from the status quo, without spelling out a perfect endpoint of full justice, which might remain an elusive ideal in any case.

The Need for Adaptation as a First Injustice

The distinctive injustice contained in the sheer need for adaptation is due to historic and ongoing greenhouse gas emissions and insufficient *mitigation*, i.e. reductions, to prevent the climate from warming beyond a harmful level (Klein et al., 2007, 750). *Adaptation* that thus has become necessary is the adjustment of natural or human systems to actual or expected climate change and its effects to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities (IPCC, 2022). Harmful emissions and the failure to implement adequate mitigation in time impose upon others the need for adaptation to protect themselves from climate change-related harms. This need for adaptation among populations that have not themselves (significantly) contributed to the climate crisis constitutes a grave violation of several fundamental normative principles such as human rights, the no-harm principle, the principle not to expose others to risks without their consent and the precautionary principle. Importantly, however, this need for adaptation also follows from and thus is indicative of a fundamental *relational* inequality, evidencing a lack of relational egalitarian concern: some were having it their way, externalising the negative costs of their preferred way of life upon others who were unable to object or, if they were able to and did object, were ignored. Imperialist and colonial policies include, as their legacy, partly weaker or dysfunctional governmental structures in several countries of the global South, where the climate impact will be particularly severe (Chakrabarty, 2008, Dehm, 2016, Mignolo, 2018 and Reibold, 2022). This further hinders the development of adaptive capacities (Mikulewicz, 2020 and Webber, 2013).

⁵ However, the distinctive account of relational egalitarian justice does not claim to be able to cover all normatively relevant dimensions of adaptation finance. Thus it remains open for and compatible with alternative moral frameworks, in particular rights-based accounts. Baatz e.g. has argued that rights-based claims and entitlements of individual persons provide the ultimate normative basis for generating and distributing resources to protect against climate risks (Baatz 2017). Such individualist approaches that assign every human being equal moral value and deduce a subsequent entitlement to be free from unjustified risk or harm are potential complements to and allies of a relational approach.

The unequal exposure to climate related-harms and the unequal ability to respond to it, combined with a pervasive asymmetry in affluence and influence resulting from a history of inequality, oppression and exploitation, exposes that the sheer need for adaptive measures in countries that contributed little to climate change is a symptom of a grave historic and ongoing relational injustice as outlined above. A relational analysis thus locates the primary and basic wrong in the present context in the power asymmetries with which the polluters knowingly failed and still fail to change course and continue polluting, exposing others to harm and generating the need for adaptive measures. Such an externalisation of costs by powerful decision-makers treats others—people in the countries most affected by global warming but also future generations—as if they counted morally less, it ignores their legitimate basic interests and needs and leaves their perspectives and voices neither heard nor considered. The historical processes generating the need for adaptive measures are a paradigmatic instantiation of relational inequality and make the need of strategising about adaptation in itself a particularly visible mark of relational injustice. After all, the affluent industrialised Global North should have avoided—but failed to avoid—causing anthropogenic climate change in the first place.

The Adaptation Finance Gap as a Second Injustice

At the COP15 in 2009 in Copenhagen, the countries of the Global North pledged to mobilise USD 100bn for climate finance annually by 2020, balanced between mitigation and adaptation (Roberts et al., 2021, 1, UNFCCC, 2009a, 3; 2009b, 7). This USD 100bn goal required mobilizing "new and additional" funds, meaning it should be in addition to existing efforts, such as already planned official development assistance (ODA). One aim was to help particularly vulnerable countries adapt to climate change. Adaptation does not only require building sea-walls, movements away from the coast or irrigation systems in drought-prone areas, but also to manage socio-political processes to facilitate individuals and collectives to deal with environmental and social changes (Eriksen et al. 2015, Taylor, 2014). And, there should be an ex-post assessment of adaptation projects (Mills-Novoa, 2023). The money actually provided by the Global North fell short of the amount of adaptation finance needed (Khan et al., 2020, UNEP 2023). This indicates a breach of the "duty of adaptation" (Caney, 2010a, 204). Given this multifaceted characteristics of adaptation, the failure to provide even the agreed upon amount of adaptation finance constitutes the second, grave injustice in adaptation finance.

The accounting of climate finance is notoriously difficult, as different "methodologies, categorizations and definitions" are applied by developed countries when reporting to UNFCCC (OECD, 2020, 40). Accordingly, estimates of the size of the adaptation finance gap vary substantially in different calculations and the claim that the pledge from 2009 has not been met in any single year thus requires additional explanation. For example, in 2014, the OECD estimate for climate finance (including mitigation and adaptation finance) provided to developing countries was USD 37.9bn, whereas the Indian Finance Ministry estimated it as only USD 1–2.2bn (Roberts et al., 2021). Three reasons explain such significant differences in estimates of the adaptation finance gap (Roberts et al., 2021), however, without undermining the general diagnosis that the pledge was not fully honoured. First, the categories

of loans, grants, investment and insurance are not applied consistently. Second, the accounting differs concerning which funds qualify as “climate finance” that are mainly intended to be used for climate-related projects. And, third, considerations differ whether flows of climate finance are actually new and additional funds or funds reclassified from development assistance to climate finance.⁶

The persistent gap in adaptation finance can be analysed, again, in terms of relational injustice: The politically powerful players, i.e. the heavily polluting industrialised countries mostly located in the Global North, were and still are free to make promises (they have not been forced to do so but choose to pledge); and they obviously were and still are also free to fail delivering without fear of being punished or held accountable in any meaningful way. This ability to prioritise their own (economic and other) interests over the existential concern and needs of others is a particularly telling instantiation of relational inequality. Clearly tangible power asymmetries allow some agents to dominate others and to discount their basic needs and legitimate entitlements.

Furthermore, calling simply for financial transactions from rich countries of the Global North to poorer countries of the Global South comes in itself with a potential risk of perpetuating existing injustices like asymmetries of influence, power, and wealth that often result from the colonial past: Financial transfers alone – without, say, structural reforms that aim to level the economic playing field – create a hierarchy between a needy recipient and a generous “donor”, assigning recipient countries a lower status as passive and dependent (Roberts & Parks, 2006, 83, Morchain, 2018, 57). Even if the affluent countries were to provide sufficient amounts of adaptation finance, this should not be conceived of as generous support, but as meeting an important demand of egalitarian justice based on taking other countries and their populations as morally equally important.

Using Criteria for Distributing Adaptation Finance as a Third Injustice

A third major injustice from the context of adaptation finance looms in the procedures selecting and employing criteria to distribute scarce adaptation finance: It can be morally problematic when this is done by the countries providing adaptation finance according to *their own* interests and preferences without adequate consultation on a footing of equality with the recipient countries about their preferences, interests and legitimate concerns (also about the adequate size of the financial transfers).⁷ A top down decision and implementation of criteria and distribution selections can amount to a perpetuation and consolidation of pre-existing relational injustices.

⁶ Besides the level of adaptation finance, additional empirical facts contribute to this second injustice. For example, adaptation finance might be in the form of loans and be considered in the 0.7% target of GNI for development aid, despite the promise to provide “new and additional” money for adaptation finance, negatively affecting critical goals of development like health and education (Oxfam 2020). Similarly, the absence of global accounting standards for adaptation finance results in the declaration of non-climate oriented investments as climate finance (Oxfam 2020).

⁷ A parallel discussion about the problematic “donor privilege” exists in the context of official development assistance (ODA), cf. e.g. Berthélemy 2006.

A case in point is “governance by indicators”, i.e. the distribution of scarce adaptation finance based on criteria. This practice, becoming increasingly prevalent globally, employs clearly defined indicators for political decision-making (including about the distribution of funds); criteria which, subsequently, can alter the forms, the exercise, and distributions of power of global governance (Davis et al., 2012, 4). From a relational egalitarian perspective, however, the practices and dynamics leading to the identification and selection of criteria and indices to justify policy decisions are worthy of consideration as the relevant indicators may constitute or even reinforce existing, morally dubious power relations (Davis et al., 2012, 13).

Several criteria are under discussion in climate policy and academia to distribute adaptation finance. A first is *efficiency*, which is complex to implement in the context of adaptation finance (Stadelmann et al., 2013, Stadelmann 2015, Michaelowa & Stadelmann, 2018) and normatively problematic (Klonschinski, 2021). Another suggested criterion is the degree of *democracy* of a national government (Baatz, 2017; Baatz & Bourban, 2019). Other criteria discussed to distribute adaptation finance borrow from the distribution of ODA, like donor interest, recipient merit and recipient need (Betzold & Weiler, 2018): This criterion, *recipient need*, points in the direction of the vulnerability criterion which we exemplarily discuss in more detail below, as it illustrates well the normative problems arising from the perspective of relational equality.

The vulnerability criterion is prominent in the UNFCCC framework and accordingly in international climate negotiations (UNFCCC, 1992, 2009b). Vulnerability is understood as the predisposition to be adversely affected by a changing climate due to lack of capacity to adapt (IPCC, 2014, 1775). It can apply to human and ecological systems alike (Adger et al., 2007, 720). The criterion of vulnerability enjoys a prima-facie plausibility as a criterion to distribute adaptation finance and is used by the UNFCCC (2015) in the Paris Agreement to operationalise the goal of adaptation in reducing vulnerability. However, adaption policies might inadvertently reinforce, redistribute or create new vulnerabilities (Eriksen et al., 2021).

All humans and all human populations are in a very basic sense vulnerable. Determining different degrees of vulnerability thus must go beyond the universal human disposition to suffer different kinds of harm. That is why recent debate about vulnerability has distinguished universal “ontological” forms of vulnerability from more specific “contextual” forms (Mackenzie et al., 2014). The general physical vulnerability of all humans to physical hazards or adverse climate events will need to be specified by looking at distinctive factors that increase the vulnerability to suffer harm among some. Here, however, contextual distinctions become pertinent, since vulnerability can be specified in different dimensions. On the one side, vulnerability may be aggravated by geographical facts such as the location of small island developing state increasing likelihood of exposure to climate hazards; but also, and importantly, by socio-economic facts, such as the economic or political state of a country, impacting on the ability to adapt (Adger et al., 2007, 720, Betzold & Weiler, 2018, 5, Hinkel, 2011, 205, Mikulewicz, 2017). In both cases, however, such vulnerability is not a distinctive feature of some people. *Anyone* living under such conditions -in an endangered area or under unfavourable economic and/or socio-political circumstances—would be

particularly vulnerable. That is why in talking about vulnerability one must not diagnose but also appropriately explain it. The reason for which, say, island states or low-income countries have become (or have been made) vulnerable in a specific sense, is not only their geographic location but location in combination with the very fact of past economic activities in the early industrialized countries causing massive greenhouse gas emissions that lead not only to environmental degradation in the form of climate change with rising sea levels, but also to highly unequal economic abilities to cope with climate change (Chakrabarty, 2008; Reibold, 2022). Insofar as vulnerability is used as a criterion to decide about the distribution of adaptation finance, it should thus be understood as indicating who has been hurt most and is in most urgent need of redress and support from the side of those who have caused the harm.

To sum up: The problem is that talking about vulnerability often neglects the causal dynamics that brought the specific vulnerability into existence in the first place; and it conveniently locates the "problem" to be addressed among those in needs, not among those causally responsible for the danger to be addressed through adaptation. In consequence, the vulnerability-criterion runs the risk to consolidate a hierarchy between countries: some as poor and needy, unable to generate funds and distribute them by themselves; and others as generous, donors, able to establish relevant criteria for a reasonable distribution of scarce resource (Webber, 2013, 2722–3, Mikulewicz, 2020). Such a paternalistic attitude of the financiers towards the recipients can turn out to be infantilising, adding insult to injury.

An additional relational concern is that the vulnerability criterion creates misguided incentives to those seeking financial assistance, because countries need to present themselves as vulnerable and unable in order to increase the likelihood of receiving adaptation finance (Ott, 2021). This conflicts with the goal of empowering local citizens and governments to increase their adaptive capacity.

This being said, considering urgency and need is, of course, permissible and required and can function as an important factor when distributing resources. But imposing a vulnerability-criterion (or other criteria) from the top down and let the "donor" decide how to implement it, would be highly problematic from the perspective of relational egalitarianism and symptomatic for the ongoing relational injustice that caused climate change in the first place.

In the light of the mentioned critiques, it is imperative to conceive of the three identified injustices as different faces of a common, underlying relational wrong. Moving from the diagnostic main part of the paper, we will now turn to outlining some recommendations for addressing that relational wrong.

Conclusion

Advancing Justice in Adaptation Finance. A Relational Proposal

The aim of our paper was primarily diagnostic and attempted to identify three injustices in adaptation finance from the perspective of relational egalitarianism. To conclude, we outline how, based on the ideal of relational equality, the unjust status quo could and should be improved. The following is not meant as a conclusive solution for the existing and persisting injustices in the context of adaptation finance; only as the formulation of guidelines for seeking and implementing a morally acceptable, comprehensive response to them.

A Fair Determination of Criteria and Distributive Mechanisms (Injustice 3)

Based on a commitment to relational equality, the processes and methods for selecting and implementing distributive criteria must take place under conditions that respect the equal moral standing of all affected. Concretely, this positively means that debates must be inclusive, and take place on a footing of equality, i.e. as deliberations where all affected can phrase their views and are listened to respectfully, and where all views initially have equal weight. Negatively, this means that debates must be freed from dynamics of undue power and influence, where some have more power and influence and can exploit this to dominate others.

Such debates, committed to relational equality, will still be able to come up with ranked criteria and thus might ultimately prioritise and prefer one decision-making process over another. Vulnerability, rightly understood by acknowledging the problematic factors that brought it into existence, may very well function among the selected criteria. But by ranking criteria and by allowing for a plurality of ranked criteria as the ultimate decision-mechanism, it will be possible to find a compromise that accommodates to the highest possible degree the legitimate interests of all—and does so in a way that demonstrates a genuine commitment by all to realise relational equality: all working together to overcome a serious, existential problem that resulted not least from a wide-spread failure to respect relational equality in the past and present.

One important demand thus can legitimately be made upon all participating in the deliberations, namely the participating agent's commitment to relational equality.⁸ This could come in two main forms: First, any representative's claim to an equal voice in these deliberations should be tied to the condition of being in an adequate position to actually and genuinely represent the best interests of their population. Call this the *condition of adequate representation*. And second, any participating party has to commit to not unduly exploit any eventual position of power and

⁸ One may wonder whether this demand, in particular if raised by authors from the Global North, does not, in itself, constitute an undue form of domination of possible alternative normative views held by others. We do not think so, because a commitment to relational equality calls for making *everyone's* voices heard on fair and equal terms and thus is—irrespective of the concrete outcome of subsequent deliberations—, in itself the very opposite of any pre-established domination.

privilege by imposing particular interests (personal or on behalf of their particular constituency) upon others. Call this the *condition of abstaining from domination*.

Closing the Adaptation Finance Gap (Injustice 2)

The commitments resulting from fair and inclusive deliberations need to be honoured, i.e. the existing gap in adaptation finance needs to be closed so that those suffering from the harms of climate change can adequately protect themselves. The countries capable of providing financial means for adaptation—and being primarily responsible for climate change—are obliged to fully provide these means, and may also be required to increase the amounts to be paid. Importantly, they also have to refrain from ‘creative’ accounting, e.g. in the form of providing concessional loans rather than grants, or earmarking official development assistance as adaptation finance.⁹

This reasoning combines, based on a commitment to relational equality, the *sheer ability* to help others in need with causal *responsibility* for the harm already caused, to provide a sound justification for imposing duties of justice to close the adaptation finance gap (Caney, 2010a, 204). A fortiori, this justification thus objects to the term “donor” countries for countries providing adaptation finance, which suggests a charity- (not justice-) based invitation to provide financial means and puts the recipient countries in the position of needy petitioners. Relational equality understands providing sufficient financial means for adaptation as an obligation to respond to harm caused and as a joint challenge that should be met in a spirit of equality and solidarity.

Addressing Global Structural Injustice (Injustice 1)

Lastly, it is imperative to understand the injustices in the context of climate change generally, and of providing and distributing adaptation finance in particular, as symptoms of the underlying problem of global structural injustice. A commitment to relational equality ultimately demands steps towards realising fair distributions through fair representation and participation of all in all relevant fields of decision-making. The climate challenge is just one, but a particularly symptomatic and urgent field where such steps are demanded.

The importance of the challenge at hand has a further, far reaching implication: Even if meeting the aim of providing sufficient resources would be very costly for the polluting countries of the Global North and the Global South, and even if avoiding further emissions and aggravations of the climate crisis would also be very costly for them, it could still be that such increased transfers and sweeping political and economic reforms are morally adequate and required to address the existing injustice. A fairer distribution of resources and opportunities globally then requires

⁹ This obligation does not reduce co-existing obligations, such as an obligation to take aggressive mitigative measures to avoid increasing existing risks (see Sect. “Closing the Adaptation Finance Gap (Injustice 2)”) or to pay into a Loss & Damage fund.

a twofold move of contraction and convergence: Contraction in particular on the side of the heavy polluters (even if this comes with giving up some beloved but unjustifiable privileges) with the aim to converge on more equal living-conditions for all everywhere. Obviously, the need to reduce emissions and one’s material footprint generally applies to the high polluters everywhere, i.e. in countries of both the Global North and the Global South (Wilkinson/Pikett 2024); so that the lot of all those who face adverse starting conditions or deprivation can be improved, no matter in which country they live.

We are well aware of the fact that normative reasoning does not always receive the attention or generate the impact in actual political decision-making that it maybe should have. Being realistic implies having no exaggerated hopes for the positive impact of even the best available moral arguments. Yet, being outspoken in exposing and analysing existing injustices, and being adamant in formulating and justifying demands of justice is a necessary condition for and a decisive contribution to improving upon the existing, imperfect status quo. Change can only occur when the right ideas are "in the air" and ready to be seized at moments of opportunity.

Appendix

Table 1 UNFCCC category of Annex I countries resembling countries of the Global North (UNFCCC 2024a)

Australia	Greece	Poland
Austria	Hungary	Portugal
Belarus	Iceland	Romania
Belgium	Ireland	Russian Federation
Bulgaria	Italy	Slovakia
Canada	Japan	Slovenia
Croatia	Latvia	Spain
Cyprus	Liechtenstein	Sweden
Czechia	Lithuania	Switzerland
Denmark	Luxembourg	Türkiye
Estonia	Malta	Ukraine
European Union	Monaco	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Finland	Netherlands	United States of America
France	New Zealand	–
Germany	Norway	–

Table 2 UNFCCC category of Non-Annex I countries resembling countries of the Global South (UNFCCC 2024b)

Afghanistan	Georgia	Palau
Albania	Ghana	Panama
Algeria	Grenada	Papua New Guinea
Andorra	Guatemala	Paraguay
Angola	Guinea	Peru
Antigua and Barbuda	Guinea-Bissau	Philippines
Argentina	Guyana	Qatar
Armenia	Haiti	Republic of Korea
Azerbaijan	Holy See	Republic of Moldova
Bahamas	Honduras	Rwanda
Bahrain	India	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Bangladesh	Indonesia	Saint Lucia
Barbados	Iran (Islamic Republic of)	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Belize	Iraq	Samoa
Benin	Israel	San Marino
Bhutan	Jamaica	Sao Tome and Principe
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Jordan	Saudi Arabia
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kazakhstan	Senegal
Botswana	Kenya	Serbia
Brazil	Kiribati	Seychelles
Brunei Darussalam	Kuwait	Sierra Leone
Burkina Faso	Kyrgyzstan	Singapore
Burundi	Lao People's Democratic Republic	Solomon Islands
Cabo Verde	Lebanon	Somalia
Cambodia	Lesotho	South Africa
Cameroon	Liberia	South Sudan
Central African Republic	Libya	Sri Lanka
Chad	Madagascar	State of Palestine
Chile	Malawi	Sudan
China	Malaysia	Suriname
Colombia	Maldives	Syrian Arab Republic
Comoros	Mali	Tajikistan
Congo	Marshall Islands	Thailand
Cook Islands	Mauritania	Timor-Leste
Costa Rica	Mauritius	Togo
Côte d'Ivoire	Mexico	Tonga
Cuba	Micronesia (Federated States of)	Trinidad and Tobago
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	Mongolia	Tunisia
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Montenegro	Turkmenistan
Djibouti	Morocco	Tuvalu
Dominica	Mozambique	Uganda

Table 2 (continued)

Dominican Republic	Myanmar	United Arab Emirates
Ecuador	Namibia	United Republic of Tanzania
Egypt	Nauru	Uruguay
El Salvador	Nepal	Uzbekistan
Equatorial Guinea	Nicaragua	Vanuatu
Eritrea	Niger	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)
Eswatini	Nigeria	Viet Nam
Ethiopia	Niue	Yemen
Fiji	North Macedonia	Zambia
Gabon	Oman	Zimbabwe
Gambia	Pakistan	–

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Declarations

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