THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Climate Sense podcast

"Justice and fairness in global climate action"

Washington, D.C.
Wednesday, November 23, 2022

Guests:

MARIA FERNANDA ESPINOSA
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ecuador (2007; 2017–18)
Minister of National Defense of Ecuador (2012–14)
President, 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly (2018–19)

KUMI NAIDOO
Human rights activist, South Africa
Former Executive Director, Greenpeace

MIROSŁAW PROPPÉ
Chief Executive Officer, WWF Poland

DANIEL YERGIN
Vice Chairman of S&P Global; chairman of CERAWeek

Host:

SAMANTHA GROSS
Director, Energy Security and Climate Initiative
Fellow, Foreign Policy, Energy Security and Climate Initiative
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

In this episode of "Climate Sense," Samantha Gross explores the issue of justice and fairness in global climate action. Many of the world's poorest countries have contributed the least to existing greenhouse gases but are on the front lines of the changing climate. It is not enough to have science, knowledge, and resources. What is essential to climate justice is making sure that climate change is not an excuse to let the developing world shoulder the work and costs of reducing emissions.

[news clip (Vice President Kamala Harris); music]

GROSS: Climate change is already affecting the lives of billions of people around the world. That's the verdict from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations body responsible for studying the problem. Climate change is a truly global issue—we're all in this together. You might think that would make it an easier problem to deal with, since the whole world—every person, every country, every continent—stands to be harmed by a changing climate. But you'd be wrong.

I'm Samantha Gross, director of the Energy Security and Climate Initiative at the Brookings Institution. I started my career in engineering and have been in Washington for 20 years now, working on energy and environmental policy—practical solutions to some of today's most important problems. "Climate Sense" is intended to help people understand climate change—both its causes and the solutions we're working toward. You can find all the episodes in the series at Brookings dot edu slash Climate Sense Podcast. And, if you have a question you'd like answered on this podcast, I'd love to hear from you. Send it to Podcasts at Brookings dot edu and I'll try to answer it in the final episode of this series.

In this episode, I'll explore the issue of justice and fairness in climate action. The world's poorest usually get the short end of the stick—how can we ensure that we stabilize our climate in a way that doesn't continue this trend?

Responsibility for climate change isn't shared evenly around the world, not even close. And the costs of dealing with a changing climate, both for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and for adapting to the amount of change that is already baked in, these costs aren't evenly spread out either. All of this means that climate change raises important issues of justice and fairness, across countries and regions within countries.

Wealthy countries have contributed by far the most to the greenhouse gasses that are in the atmosphere now, and thus the warming that we are experiencing now. The United States is the largest cumulative emitter of greenhouse gases, having released 20% of all greenhouse gas emissions since the Industrial Revolution. Developing countries have contributed much less over time, but in many cases their emissions are rising rapidly as they grow and develop. China became the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter in 2006 and China is currently responsible for more than one-quarter of total global emissions.

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And the developing world simply can't follow the same path as rich countries already did to develop their economies over the last 150 years. The resulting emissions would bring about more temperature rise than human society can deal with. Poorer countries aren't well equipped to deal with the effects of climate change that we see already, let alone those to come. Kumi Naidoo, a South African human rights activist and former executive director of Greenpeace, describes this problem very well.

NAIDOO: People need to recognize that one of the moral questions or a question that is presented in the space of morality is how can the rich countries of the world, who destroyed the forests, destroyed the biodiversity for economic progress, now turn around and say to poor countries, you can't do the same. And that's a fair question. Right?

But what I say to our leaders in my part of the world, Africa and other developing countries, listen, we are already paying the first and most brutal price as a result of our dependency on fossil fuels and the kind of energy system, agricultural system, transport systems, and so on that we have. Now it is true that it's not fair, right? But we cannot bury our heads in the sand on it just because they did it, we will absolutely do the same, even though we are the ones paying the first consequences and we are going to make it worse for ourselves.

GROSS: This is such a sad truth—the countries who contributed least to the greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere and the current problem of climate change have the most to lose. As often happens, the world's poorest people bear the brunt of global problems. Less developed countries that can't afford to adapt to a changing world, minority communities located in flood plains, farmers dealing with droughts or floods—these are the people on the front lines of the changing climate.

Wealthy countries can and should help developing countries establish low-carbon energy systems and adapt to a changing climate—it's a way to pay back our debt for already putting so much greenhouse gas in the atmosphere over time. Way back in 2009, at a climate conference in Copenhagen, rich countries promised to direct $100 billion per year by 2020 to less-wealthy countries to adapt to climate change and develop in a cleaner, low-carbon way. Wealthy countries broke this promise. Our best guess is that the wealthy world provided about $80 billion the year before the pandemic, with finance declining during the pandemic years. Rich countries made the $100 billion promise again at the Glasgow climate conference at the end of 2021. We'll see if that promise is kept.

Mitigating and adapting to climate change is going to be expensive for everyone, but Kumi says it well—we need to act together to get this right.

NAIDOO: So, that is why we have to approach the climate challenge in the context of morality with the acceptance that what we need is climate justice. Right? We have to address the climate challenge with a deep sense of justice, because if we don't we will not be able to carry a whole range of countries who might not be as economically powerful as the G-8 countries or the G-20 countries. But if they are not helped and supported to make the changes and transitions that they need to make, then even if all the G-20 countries in the world make the changes, the other countries are large enough and collectively will actually hold us back.

So, unless we have an approach moving forward that this can be a moment of opportunity, I know it sounds a bit bizarre, but I have been saying this for a long time: climate change does present us with a very powerful opportunity, because for far too long we've lived in a world of rich and poor, developed and developing, north and south, east and west, all of that.

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But the moment we are in now offers us a possibility that we must recognize that climate change doesn't respect borders and we either get this right as rich and poor countries acting together, and hopefully we secure the future of the majority of humanity as it exists. Or if we delay acting in moving the direction true, the countries that contributed least to it might be the ones that pay the first and most brutal price.

[news clip; music]

GROSS: Nobody, rich or poor, can completely escape the effects of climate change. Although working together is our best chance to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, the climate challenge could also widen the gap between the Global North and Global South, the developed and developing world, in a geopolitical sense. Trust among these countries is often low. And wealthy world standards about what projects should be developed or financed may not be appropriate for the developing world, for economies that are just getting off the ground. Dan Yergin, Pulitzer prize-winning author and vice chairman at S&P Global, who I talked to about fossil fuels in episode two, shares a story about this growing divide.

YERGIN: The other geopolitical issue is the possibility of the emergence of a new North-South divide. And I hear from developing countries the sense that you, being Western Europe, North America can't impose your state of development on us. And I was talking to the energy minister from Senegal, and she said to me, as I've heard from in other countries, they can't get financing from European banks to build gas pipelines and they see gas pipelines as the way to improve people's lives, living standards, and their health and have them not cook with wood and waste. And she said the banks won't provide financing, and she said it's like you've taken away the ladder and told us to jump or fly. How do we do that?

And so, I think we've started to see a more explicit tension between North and South on climate energy. And it takes on a geopolitical cast as well. And keep in mind that Europe is about five percent of world population and the developing world is about 80 percent and has different agendas.

GROSS: A second big global challenge in climate is what to do about communities and whole countries that depend on fossil fuels for their livelihood. We often think about the oil-dependent countries of the Middle East or coal country in Appalachia in the United States. These communities are facing economic challenges already and thinking about how they will fit into a changing world.

The oil producing Gulf states in the Middle East have grand "Vision" plans about moving their economies and societies away from dependence on oil revenues. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan even includes building a whole new city on the coast of the Red Sea, intended to showcase new technology and attract business and tourism. The initial phase is estimated to cost half a trillion dollars. Not every country can invest that kind of money in such an audacious project.

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Poland makes a really interesting case. Poland currently relies on coal for about 45% of its total energy, but it's also part of the European Union, which aims to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions 55% by 2030. For that reason, Poland needs to change fast, but whole communities there are built around the coal industry. I visited Warsaw and Konin, in central Poland, to talk to people about how the transition is going. While I was there, I spoke to Mirosław Proppé, the head of the Worldwide Fund for Nature in Poland and someone who knows a thing or two about transitions, as he was in college during the fall of communism.

PROPPÉ: I finish my college in '91, so it was just the beginning of the change, of the transition. But I saw my parents being so afraid also about myself, about me, how I will start my career. The jobs were disappearing. Some professions were disappearing. The new ones somehow were appearing, but without any books or anything. I was studying at the management faculty and we didn't have any books, because of the all the books for the economy and everything were just bad books from the communist era. For marketing or finance management, there was no books at all. So, we were just having lectures. And it was all new for us.

Was it easy? Maybe it was easy for me because I didn't have any experience and background. But for people experienced and with some background, yes, it was harder.

GROSS: Poland has seen a huge economic transition in its recent history, from communism to a market economy, but that doesn't make the coming, and necessary, transition away from coal any easier. The influx of refugees from Ukraine that has happened since I recorded this interview, just adds another layer of difficulty.

For regular people to accept yet another big transition, it helps to make it clear that the transition is toward something better, that there is something positive for them on the other side. Mirosław describes an approach to helping coal-dependent communities see a future for themselves despite the changing energy system.

PROPPÉ: So, today first question is, do we speak about the transition? Or do we really speak about the development? So, this is about the setup, how you set up the whole narration and the whole presentation of the story to the people. Whether you want to tell them, I want to change you, or maybe you want to tell them, today you are living in a hard working environment. You are living in a dusty and unhealthy air. You are living in the streets where you have the dust on the streets and so on and so on. And what I want, I want to go with you to the better place where you still are working in your home, in your home city, but with the clean air and the children are not so sick and so on, and you are not afraid if your husband is back at the end of the day, at the end of the shift home because there was an accident in the mine.

The black coal, today in Silesia, you have to go down one kilometer. That's very costly. That's unhealthy for the people. And if you speak to the miners, they don't want to close the mine, but they don't want their children to work in this mine.

[music]

So, first is the painting the picture, is it the picture of the trauma and going through something really hard? Or is it a picture of something new?

GROSS: These stories are about Poland, but they could apply in many mining-dependent communities. In the U.S. and the UK, men have worked in the coal mines for generations, but change could offer a healthier future for the next generation. Offering jobs and economic growth to people where they live is helpful anywhere.

It's not just the residents of mining communities who have a hard time imagining a different future. Government officials can also be challenged in understanding where to go from here. A cleaner and greener future without coal sounds great, but the pathway to get there is often uncertain. National and local authorities need new skills and revenue sources and need to be consulted in designing a new future, replacing coal in power generation and heating with better alternatives.

PROPPÉ: The case with Poland was that for most of the time, politicians—and I'm speaking in the last 20 years—politicians who are not believing in climate change, green agenda, anything like this, we really had the goal as country to get to be a member of NATO and European Union. And when we got it in 2003 for NATO and '04 for the European Union, there was, okay, what's next? What do we want? It's true that the politicians were denying sometime climate change, and it was not a topic in the public debate. It has raised for the last three years. And because the change is already happening globally, but also in the European policy, it was like a hit into their Polish big enterprises, energy enterprises, which they are listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange and you can observe that the value of them has dropped dramatically. Now, this has been used again by some politicians to draw in the narration of being penalized for nothing and things like this. So, populist voices.

If you speak about the largest open pit mine in center of Poland, the company that owns it was paying a lot of taxes. So, the local authorities were the most rich local authorities in Poland, and they never care about anything. It will be forever. It's so important for the national energy system, this power plant, that it will be there forever. Now we know it and people knew it will not be forever, but no one told the local authorities and local people, no, it won't be forever. So, we have to start thinking about what's next.

Now, when it was announced, the local authorities are lost because they were never involved in developing any plans. And it's not their fault, really, because to some extent because they were never have an experience to develop this way of thinking.

GROSS: It's not just government policy that is closing down power plants and shifting power generation to new and generally greener fuels. Equipment wears out, energy systems change, it's just important to ensure that change moves in the right direction and that affected people are involved in the decision-making process.

PROPPÉ: Before joining WWF, when I work for global consultancy, I was working for the owner of this power plant, and I was implementing asset management. So, very technical, engineering-based approach to assess your production assets if they are to be used anymore or

not. And we already calculated in 2014 that this plant will be over between 2025 to 2030. Because, even if there is coal, the 50-years-old plant cannot work anymore. Even if you have a plant, you will not have coal.

And I like to say that we can discuss all the rules and laws and we can change them, except one: the law of physics. So, from this point of view, there is end of story, end of game.

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So, what we are doing with a couple of NGOs, we are supporting delivering the information but supporting civic society, local community, local businessmen also, to come to one table and to start the discussion. It's not easy because there is a lot of emotions and trust and so on, because this is just the beginning.

GROSS: This question plays out in a larger way when entire countries' economies are based on revenue from fossil fuels. The Gulf States have their grand plans, but how do middle- and lower-income countries cope and begin to remodel their entire economies?

Ecuador is a country where the economy heavily depends on oil production and exports. Maria Fernanda Espinosa, an Ecuadorian diplomat and former president of the UN General Assembly, who I talked to in episode three about the challenge of international climate agreements, has some thoughts on the situation in such countries, especially for the poor.

ESPINOSA: So, when you are a middle-income countries, which the majority of countries in the world are middle income, 70 percent of the countries are middle income, and basically you experience a double trap, which is the lack of a diversified economy and very much dependent on commodities in general. And usually middle income countries have wide inequalities. It's a lot of concentration of wealth and of power. And that is a little bit of the characteristic of most of the countries in Latin America.

When you are a country that depend on one or two particular exports, when you are heavily dependent on oil, what to do is how to organize the choreography for a proper transition without having the poor paying the price. The poor meaning the ones that need a welfare state, the ones that need proper social security protection scaffolds, the ones that need direct transfers from the government, the ones that need proper and well-functioning public health systems, public school systems. And so you need cash, you need to have a fiscal system that allows the welfare state to operate in countries that are highly unequal.

[music]

This is the challenge. And when you are told and all the experts tell you the best thing is to invest in renewable energy. And we all say yes, of course, that's the solution, of course, and it pays off because it creates jobs, innovation, technologies, et cetera. It's all good. The problem is how you basically close down your macroeconomic dependency on fossil fuels. It would be nice if I was the president one day to say, let's stop oil production tomorrow, which is all fine. The problem is who is going to pay the price for that?

And I think that this is really a very complex question to answer. And of course, it needs planning, it needs long-term planning. But it needs climate literacy from citizens and from voters, basically, and especially looking at the middle classes, how to be responsible, how to have the responsibility with the voters, with the people of your country, but also with future generations.

And so, the public policy choices, the investment choices that you have to make as a president, as a government, are much more difficult than we would think.

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So, sometimes we say we know what to do, we have the science, we have the knowledge, we even have the resources. But then how to do it, we need the political will, and sometimes political will is not enough. It's really not enough because there are so many pieces of the puzzle that you need to pull together.

[news clip (Sir David Attenborough)]

GROSS: My guests on this episode demonstrate that climate justice means different things to different people and in different contexts. But the idea boils down to a sense of fairness and making sure the harms of climate change itself and the dislocations that happen as the world strives to reduce its emissions don't fall mostly on the poor. Because as Kumi said at the beginning, if we do nothing, that's how it will turn out.

Policymakers at all levels of government need to consider people with a lot to lose from climate change—those who could lose their homes or their livelihoods or the economic vibrancy of their communities—and how to help them. These people are not just in other countries, but in the United States as well.

Climate policy is ultimately for people—preserving ecosystems and ways of life for all of us. So policy that doesn't help everyone really misses the point.

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Many thanks to the experts I talked to in this episode. Fred Dews is the producer; Gastón Reboredo the audio engineer; and Matt Murphy the audio intern. My thanks also to Louison Sall and the communications teams in Brookings Foreign Policy and the Office of Communications. Show art was designed by Shavanthi Mendis.

You can find episodes of "Climate Sense" wherever you get your podcasts, and learn more about this show on our website at Brookings dot edu slash Climate Sense Podcast. You'll also find my work on climate change and research from the Brookings Initiative on Climate Research and Action on the Brookings website.

I'm Samantha Gross, and this is "Climate Sense."