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**Climate Changes and the Poorest Nations:
Further Reflections on Global Inequality
By Ruth Gordon**

My paper and talk will focus on climate change and the nations of the South. I would like to explore two threads. The first concern is the utter inability of small/poor nations to do anything about Global warming, even as they are destined to suffer some of its worst effects. Hence, the first theme is Climate Change as a further reflection of their absolute powerlessness within the international system. The problem of global warming also raises larger questions when it comes to the nations of the South, however, as they attempt to modernize and 'catch up' to the industrialized nations of the North. Climate change directly and strikingly demonstrates the failure and incoherence of the idea of sustainable development, which will be the second theme of my talk and paper.

I will begin by discussing the causes and consequences of climate change, with a particular focus on its implications for southern tier nations and especially the poorest and/or smallest southern nations. The contours of the legal mechanisms adopted to address climate change will also be briefly addressed. The discussion will then turn to the position of the poorest nations in the international system with respect to this impending ecological crisis. The most impoverished nations did not create the problem; their emissions of greenhouse gases range from miniscule to non-existent. Yet, they will suffer some of the worst consequences, including, with respect to small island nations, if they will continue to exist.

Whether, and the extent to which, global warming will or will not be addressed is entirely in the hands of rich industrialized nations, however. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly apparent that these nations will not deal with the problem in a timely manner. Thus far, the international response has been far too little, coming far too late, for global warming has already begun and it is too late to halt it. Unlike other global ecological calamities, climate change cannot be reversed once it begins, at most it can be slowed. If even this will transpire, and at what rate, is anyone's guess, as is the ultimate effectiveness of any actions eventually taken. Moreover, poor, small nations are not part of the solution, even as they try to make addressing climate part of their

development goals. As previously noted, their emissions of GHGs are miniscule and thus they have nothing to sell. The mechanisms to address climate change are largely framed in economic terms, however, where at least those termed developing countries must have GHG emissions to sell to be a relevant part of the dialogue.

However, the economic debate at the heart of the Climate Change debate and the mechanisms tailored to address it brings into very sharp relief, the utter incoherence of 'sustainable development', a concept that has always been riddled with contradictions. At the core of 'development' or modernization is economic growth, even though that growth has, more often than not, damaged the natural world. Northern tier nations control the development discourse, however, and as industrialized nations began to focus on environmental concerns in the 1970s, development had to be domesticated and reconciled with environmental concerns. Thus was born the concept of 'sustainable development,' which was vague enough to mean all things to all people. To the South it meant development, pure and simple, and is it often ignored if at all possible. On the other hand, the concept permits nations and organizations with environmental concerns to be mollified by the idea that development was to be sustainable, and it became a standard part of development discourse and development project funding.

With the two largest nations in the world proceeding along a path of rapid industrialization, however, the contradictions between protecting the environment and development is becoming increasingly evident. Impoverished, pre-industrial and industrializing nations seek modernization and economic growth, which are the epitome of development, and they refuse to slow down for a problem they did not create. Indeed, it seems almost obscene to ask them to do so or to ponder doing with less for within this paradigm, development is positioned as universal, certain and natural. They are simply pursuing the inevitable and have every right to do so. Moreover, within the development paradigm, economic growth is paramount, even when it is framed as sustainable growth. However, all growth at this point, from whatever source, is contributing to the destruction of the planet and thus we must seriously ask if development can really be sustainable. It is undoubtedly true that we can make economic growth less harmful to the environment, and I believe all nations will eventually take such a course, even if these measures will ultimately be inadequate.

Nonetheless, we must seriously consider whether 'sustainable development' is untenable, be it by the north or south, in a world of irreversible climate change. It seems particularly problematic and intolerable when one thinks about northern tier nations, for it may be that the West has already occupied so much environmental space that *any* additional emissions *from any source*, will be unsustainable. We must sacrifice the climate, and live with the uncertainties and destruction this will inevitably bring, to maintain a particular lifestyle that appears to be intrinsically unsustainable even as it is held out as a guiding light to the South. Otherwise, we must acknowledge that some, perhaps many, people will be unable to live like those in the West, even if it is a cleaner more efficient West. Our unsustainable development has destroyed that possibility; to the degree it ever was a plausible possibility, and this author has many doubts on this point that will be taken up in the paper.

Several points are evident, however. As Climate Change takes on an ever-increasing urgency, it will have a negative impact on the most impoverished nations and peoples in the international community, who will be least able to address it. In addition, Climate Change will undoubtedly alter the plans of emerging middle-income nations. These nations will continue to pursue economic growth, even as the cost becomes increasingly problematic. Nonetheless, it is just as probable they will eventually build cleaner than the industrialized North, which sacrificed our climate in the name of growth, productivity and competitiveness, even if it ultimately is not clean enough. Northern industrialized nations will also become cleaner and more efficient, but it is unlikely to be timely or sufficient. The problem and solution are constantly framed in economic terms and economic needs and requisites appear to predominate and to consistently trump the environment. The quest for economic growth and development at the expense of an increasingly fragile environment will demonstrate the ultimate folly of 'sustainable development.' It is surely possible that at some juncture the environment will become more important than growth and all that it portends, but by then it is likely to be too late for many, and surely for the most impoverished among us.