

A MORAL TEMPEST:

2014 United Nations Climate Change Summit

Trillium Chang

On September 23rd, the United Nations started the long anticipated Climate Change Summit in New York City. Expectations are high, and an atmosphere of optimism and solidarity pervades discussions. This conference marks the first time in five years where world leaders have met to forge a global vision for low-carbon economic growth and climate action. The conference is meant to galvanize political momentum for a universal climate agreement next year in Paris.

Despite the enthusiasm, the specter of the failed 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Summit still looms large. Not only was the Copenhagen conference wrangled by negotiation deadlocks, but it also ended with dropping the earlier 2050 goal of reducing global Green House Gas (GHG) emissions by eighty percent.

This year's UN Climate Change Summit faces not only political obstacles but also moral issues. There is fierce debate over how future emissions should be divided according to the carbon budget based on the safety threshold for GHG emissions. In particular, it is unclear how far major developing countries should have to share emission cuts. These considerations encompass issues such as per capita emissions, economic circumstances, historic and future responsibilities for emissions,

One point of discussion is that that new climate change agendas should be gravitated towards benefiting the Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) because rising global temperatures tends to increase inequality between



"Stop Dirty Oil" photo was taken during People's climate change march in Toronto. More than 400,000 people from around the world participate in the march to demand action from their governments

nations. LEDCs are more vulnerable to climate change due to their geographical location and their lack of resources to preempt natural disasters. However, due to the rise of the upper- and middle-class, a majority of the population of LEDCs can now afford to consume as much as their counterparts in More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs). With the rise of these new consumers, the amount of energy and materials used in developing nations parallels, if not sometimes exceeds, MEDCs.

Another point of consideration lies in how much climate change will affect future generations. More particularly, climate change raises intergenerational equity challenge because GHG emissions will affect future populations. These future populations do not have the agency to prevent these harms because the causes of many problems, such as unstable food and water security, were started many generations prior. As such, present governments must consider the long-term impact of GHG emissions, especially because many of these harms are both significant and irreversible. Countries need to internalize the costs of their actions and their policies rather than simply letting future generations pay the bill.

Will this year's conference be a deciding moment for environmental policy to acknowledge these numerous ethical demands? The jury is still out.