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NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

CLIMATE DIPLOMACY: A METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

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Climate diplomacy refers to the study of international negotiations to address climate change, yet it poses methodological challenges. Climate change is a well-known topic of discussion today, where everyone agrees on some level of change, yet disagrees on how to address it until it serves their best interests. This makes it hard to build consensus on an international platform such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (hereafter, UNFCCC), which helps implement policies at the domestic level within the state first, and then extend them to inter-state practices. To define climate diplomacy, it is essential to understand the concept of diplomacy and its usage in the international context. In international relations, diplomacy is used to conduct negotiations through dialogue, persuasion, and compromise with opponents or, ideally, to end a conflict. The concept applies to climate diplomacy when a crisis, such as climate change, becomes a threat (external) to states (internal) in the international system, and it is hard for them to reach a consensus to address it. Thus, climate diplomacy is more closely associated with the empirical, systematic, and to a large extent technical efforts of sovereign states and international organisations to manage, mitigate, and adapt to climate change. In this context, positivism emphasises objective, measurable data, such as temperature targets (below 2 degrees Celsius), greenhouse gas emission levels, and financial commitments, which stand as a basis for negotiations and for policy evaluation or implementation.

A Methodological Challenge

By comparing levels of climate vulnerability, historical emissions, and current adaptation methods, this note highlights the need to incorporate the voices of marginalised communities, climate activists, and state actors to explore justice and reparation claims. Within these countries, Bangladesh and the Maldives explicitly emphasise climate justice, where national-level policies often lack justice-oriented frameworks. Moreover,

reparation is widely discussed in international forums in the context of climate finance and historical accountability, but loss and damage finance remains under-addressed. Due to this limitation of climate finance, adaptation falls disproportionately on local communities, especially indigenous groups, women, and the poor. This paper uses Commonwealth South Asian countries as a regional lens, often ignored in the climate justice literature, alongside the Global South and the Pacific islands. It also aims to bridge the gap among climate science, political economy, and justice theory through an integrated approach to climate reparations.

The importance of climate diplomacy also lies in the Anthropocene epoch, an unofficial interval of geological time defined by human activity that profoundly influences Earth's surface, atmosphere, oceans, and biogeochemical nutrient cycling. This has resulted in humans' excessive use of Earth's resources (land, energy, fuels, etc.) and growing populations, which have dramatically accelerated climate change by altering the carbon cycle. This critical issue of climate change must be addressed urgently. As science developed, even the social sciences were shaped by the philosophy of science. By examining Earth's vulnerabilities, such as rising pollution, melting Himalayan glaciers, and the conversion of forests into deserts, multiple scientific groups produced evidence that climate change is very dangerous to human civilisation. Reluctant at first, but gradually, leaders of different states, politicians, business groups, as well as the scientific community raised an alarm that this climate change needs to be discussed at a high level, such as in diplomatic terms, at the international level. The most important platform for climate diplomacy is the UNFCCC, established through an international environmental treaty that aims to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations to prevent dangerous human-induced climate change.

Table 1. Key milestones in the history of climate diplomacy

1992 Earth Summit (Rio)	The UNFCCC was adopted, establishing the framework for climate negotiations.
1995 (COP1)	The first conference in Berlin launched negotiations to strengthen the global response and initiated annual meetings.
1997 (COP3)	Adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, which set binding emission targets for developed countries.
2010 (COP16)	The Cancun Agreements formalised pledges to limit the temperature rise to 2°C.
2015 (COP21)	The Paris Agreement was adopted, marking a major shift in international climate action.
2021 (COP26)	The Glasgow Climate Pact focused on strengthening climate commitments.
2023 (COP28)	Reached a landmark agreement to transition away from fossil fuels.
2023 (COP28)	Held in Belém, Brazil, with a focus on the implementation of commitments.

Source: Author's Conceptualisation

In total, there have been 30 international annual sessions of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC. These annual conferences are the primary venue for climate diplomacy, where representatives gather for preparatory meetings, working groups, and subsidiary body sessions; they also support the main decisions. While the UNFCCC is a central body, climate diplomacy may occur through smaller minilateral groupings,

bilateral agreements and other international forums. Since climate change is an international phenomenon, stronger states with sufficient resources or technology also remain vulnerable and cannot tackle it easily on their own. Climate diplomacy requires broader thought in the negotiation process and policy implementation.

Climate Justice Intervention

The "climate justice" concept first emerged at COP6 (the Conference of the Parties 6) in 2000 and sought environmental justice by focusing on the unequal impacts of climate change (The Guardian, 2014). This concept framed the perception of the whole world through the global North-South debate, in which the North is perceived as exploitative towards the South for many decades. The argument is that developed economies are the culprits behind the problem by burning hydrocarbons and releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. India claims the right to increase its emissions now in the name of lifting people out of poverty and providing electricity to its 300 million citizens who currently lack it. It asserts that the 'polluter pays' principle should be applicable (Vickery, 2015).

The "Equity in Climate Change" research paper highlights four equity-based proposals: per capita allocation, historical responsibility for emissions, ability to pay, and future development opportunities (Mattoo & Subramanian, 2010). This report identifies several large, poor developing countries, including India, but excludes China based on business-as-usual emissions. However, there can be no so-called "climate justice" when the per capita emissions of many developed countries are measured in metric tons, compared with those of India. Another argument is that, if all nations continue their emissions growth, it would certainly not lead to fairness in climate change and would exceed the 2° Celsius target. Also, there is a perception of 'free rider' countries, where India falls, that without making any contribution, can get satisfactory benefits.

Loss and Damage or Climate Reparation Turn

Climate reparations call for financial assistance from developed countries to developing or underdeveloped countries to address the historical contribution of developed countries towards climate change. The "Loss and Damage Fund" was further conceptualised at COP27 in Egypt in 2022 and now aims to provide financial assistance to developing states vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. COP28 saw progress toward launching the fund, with the World Bank serving as its interim secretariat. This was expected to be followed by COP29 in Azerbaijan, focusing on the fund's financing mechanisms and ensuring its resources grow to meet the projected costs and damages of approximately USD 1 trillion by 2050. This fund can be a significant contribution to the broader demand for reparations. The IPCC explicitly acknowledge the connection between colonialism and climate change. From a South Asian Commonwealth member, India actively discusses loss and damage, which holds it historically responsible.

Climate change has significantly threatened National Highways (NH), a vital transport link in the Himalayas, by increasing extreme rainfall, causing landslides and erosion, and disrupting connectivity, posing dangers to human lives. For example, NH 10, which connects to small towns such as Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Gangtok, is completely



washed out by this year's rainfall. Currently, a landslide at Seti Jhora has halted traffic, and the road will remain closed until further notice. Every year, people who use this highway have complaints about its poor condition. Even the 2023 flood in Sikkim was confirmed to be due to climate change, which caused a catastrophic Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF). The lake grew due to glacial melt, and its expansion over decades amplified the impact of the permafrost thaw, leading to widespread damage and fatalities. It is said that, to date, people have become homeless, and such damage can only be addressed through collective financial assistance. This year, 2026, flood damage in Assam is a typical example. Thus, discussions about climate finance are essential to support mitigation and adaptation actions, especially in South Asia, which has suffered from it.

Case Study of the Commonwealth Countries

Out of 56 Commonwealth member states, five are from South Asia – Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka - a voluntary association that is a successor to the British Empire. South Asia is also known as a densely populated region that depends on fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources, where Climate Change has directly or indirectly affected up to 800 million people living in the region (The World Bank Group, 2021, p. 2). According to IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) estimates, approximately 3.6 billion people are highly vulnerable to climate change, with 45 per cent of the world population continuing to be affected by floods, droughts, or extreme weather (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). For this reason, funds are required for loss and damage. According to the United Nations Environmental Programme, the cost of adapting to climate change in developing countries may range from USD 56 billion to USD 300 billion by 2030.

The susceptibility of South Asia to climate change has been evident for a significant period. Increasingly severe flooding threatens coastal regions in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In 2018, the Kerala floods in India affected people disproportionately, with many women losing their homes and livelihoods. The flood in Pakistan killed nearly 1500 people and displaced more than 30 million, resulting in calls for climate reparations. Terms such as "climate reparations," "loss and damage," and "climate justice" seek to redress the climate imbalance that threatens us all (Dearing, Dec. 7, 2023). However, reparations are generally understood as an effort to redress the harm through acknowledgement of wrongdoing (Chapman & Ahmed, 2021, p. 86). In other words, it accepts the responsibility, followed by an undertaking to repair the societal injustices and widespread harm

To address these issues, the Commonwealth tends to address climate change and its impacts through various initiatives that support member states, particularly Small Island Developing States and other vulnerable countries. The program, such as the CCFAH (Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub), established in 2015, aims to help small and vulnerable member states bid for and gain access to climate finance (The Commonwealth). As of September 30, 2023, CCFH has assisted with approximately USD 310 million in climate finance for adaptation, mitigation, and cross-cutting projects in beneficiary countries (The Commonwealth, 2023, p. 7). The World Bank's climate funding for South Asian states has risen from USD 1.4 billion in 2017 (fiscal year July 1, 2016-

June 30, 2017) to USD 3.7 billion in 2021 (fiscal year July 1, 2019-June 30, 2021) (World Bank Group). Under the Paris Climate Agreement, the need to supply climate change-related finance under the category of "loss and damage" stands distinct from financing for adaptation (efforts to adjust to the effects of climate change) and mitigation (an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit global warming) needs (Perry, 2020, p. 12).

However, in the social world, climate change challenges the philosophy of social science to bridge climate diplomacy with ecological systems, moving beyond purely technical solutions to address the ethical, political, and structural drivers of environmental hazards. This shift focuses on moving from purely empirical, positivist approaches to critical, interpretive methods that examine power structures, justice, and societal values. Thus, climate diplomacy now seeks a climate governance platform that shifts from positivist to interpretive approaches, aiming for social action to be effective and solution-based. This intersection of climate diplomacy involves examining the social, cultural, and political drivers of climate actions, as well as the normative frameworks that shape and are shaped by global climate governance.

Climate change poses an existential threat to the Commonwealth member states of South Asia, where disproportionate exposure to climate impacts intersects with deep-rooted social inequalities and colonial legacies. Despite historically contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, these nations bear the brunt of intensifying climate-induced disasters, sea-level rise, and resource insecurity. Justice and reparations in this context are moral imperatives and essential frameworks for equitable climate action. Thus, reparative measures must address both historical injustices and current adaptation needs, empowering communities, especially marginalised and Indigenous populations, to lead resilient futures. Justice and reparations in this context are moral imperatives and essential frameworks for equitable climate action. The purpose must be to assess their engagement with climate justice frameworks and evaluate the discourse and implementation of reparative measures in both domestic and international climate negotiations.

This paper has discussed the intersection of climate change, climate justice, and climate reparations in the case of the Commonwealth member states of South Asia – Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Also, to be effective, climate reparations should go beyond aid, recognising the rights of affected communities to climate resilience, development, and environmental sustainability. Mechanisms such as the 'Loss and Damage Fund' within international frameworks must be expanded and made more accessible, transparent, and locally responsive. Thus, a just climate future for South Asia's Commonwealth countries requires transformative global cooperation, grounded in historical responsibility, regional solidarity, and an inclusive vision that centres justice at every level of climate governance. Only then can we hope to achieve sustainable, green, and fair development.

Due to rising concerns about the North-South divide, ethical issues such as the polluter-pays principle, climate justice, and hurdles to technology transfer, climate diplomacy shifted from a purely scientific assessment to a global response, with complex, value-laden, and multi-actor implementation. In other words, climate governance is now recognised as a multi-scale (from local to international) and multi-actor (state and non-

state) process, with a deeply embedded, top-down approach that moves from expert-driven models to models that include perspectives addressing ethical issues. Thus, the methodological challenge in climate diplomacy is how deeply it incorporates social and ethical issues into climate negotiations. The core methodological flaws stem from incommensurable metrics, in which standardised tools struggle to bridge local/regional adaptation needs with global carbon-emission targets. There are huge power asymmetries between haves and have-nots, where wealthy nations control data standards, impose financial conditionalities, and easily marginalise vulnerable states. So, we need to answer some important questions about our methods. How sustainable is the climate solution coming from each climate negotiation, whether it involves value-based choices or just objective scientific measurement? How effective are state-centric diplomatic models when dealing with cross-border climate risks?

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