

# New 'vulnerable nations' bloc looks set to redraw the climate politics map

December 1 2015, by Matt Mcdonald

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Vulnerable states have featured prominently on the first day of Paris Climate talks. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon unveiled a [new initiative](#) to strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable people and countries to the effects of climate change.

But it is the emergence of a [bloc of 44 vulnerable countries](#) calling for [much stronger climate action](#) that may be the real game-changer in international climate politics.

While the so-called North-South divide has long characterised international climate deliberations, there are signs it may be on its last legs in that forum. And that's a good thing.

## Ending the North-South divide?

The first major international environmental conference was the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. By most accounts, the conference – already undermined by the status of environmental concerns as "fringe" global issues at the time – was devastated by the scale of a divide between rich and poor countries.

While the Cold War raged and the clash between East and West dominated strategic thinking and international relations, it was the North-South divide that presented the yawning chasm between participants. Some nations, most notably Brazil, raged publicly about how

impoverished states were being asked to make sacrifices to address environmental issues.

Brazil's ambassador to the United States argued forcefully, just months before the conference, that "any ecological policy, globally applied, must not be an instrument to suppress wholly or in part the legitimate right of any country to decide about its own affairs".

It is no coincidence that the next major international environmental conference 20 years later – the 1992 Rio summit which saw the birth of the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC), the agency under which the current negotiations are carried out – was held in Brazil, and officially titled the UN Conference on Environment and Development. In the framing and rationale for the conference, its organisers were acutely aware of the need to address global development inequality if the environmental agenda was even to be heard, much less practically addressed.

In many ways, it is a divide that has endured since through the UNFCCC process. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol compelled only the "global North" to commit to emissions reduction targets. Subsequent difficult deliberations around technology transfer and climate finance also centred on the rich-poor divide. These debates, which may still play out in Paris, emphasised the different responsibilities and capacities of developed and developing states to address climate change.

## **A new view**

This is precisely why the announcement from 44 vulnerable countries that they are breaking ranks with other developing states to call for more substantial global emissions reductions, and a warming limit of 1.5°C rather than 2°C, is so significant. Of course at the most obvious level, it complicates the simple application of the North-South divide to global

politics.

But more importantly for the international politics of climate change, this new "vulnerable country" alliance's challenge to the old divide is significant for two key reasons.

It limits the extent to which an international debate about managing the global problem of climate change might descend into a debate about global inequality. The latter is of course central for coming to terms with levels of responsibility and vulnerability, but climate change is too pressing a problem not to be addressed in its own right.

What is needed instead is a focus on this global problem that is sensitive to differentiated development without being subsumed by it. Indeed, the need to be sensitive to developmental differences while focusing on the shared problem of climate change was already recognised in the 1992 [Rio Declaration](#) commitment to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility".

This challenge to the North-South divide could also deal a fundamental blow to the broader determination of some to cast environment and development imperatives as mutually exclusive. Economic growth in a number of states that have shifted towards renewable energy already, of course, illustrates how problematic this narrative is. But it is one that clings to life. The split in the global South suggests a challenge to it in ways that may effect debates beyond negotiations.

In Australia, for example, strong measures to address climate change have traditionally been denigrated for their impact on jobs and the economy, including as recently as the eve of the conference, when the government [dismissed](#) the opposition's calls for more ambitious emissions targets.

Despite the facts that such assertions consistently rely on dubious or selective economic modelling, it is a narrative that seems to have traction. But when genuinely poor states call for strong climate action, it suggests limits to the idea of these goals as mutually exclusive. At very least, countries like Australia may find it far more difficult to sustain this argument for minimal action in international deliberations, as it did in Kyoto in 1997.

There is reason to be optimistic, then, that one of the most enduring and problematic impediments to action on [climate change](#) – its adverse economic effects – is being systematically undermined. The emergence of this bloc of vulnerable countries, combined with the development of renewable energy capacity and a commitment by developed states to finance climate mitigation and adaptation in the developing world, is seriously threatening the logic on which the environment-development narrative is based.

For the sake of the environment, future generations, vulnerable populations and even long-term economic growth, that's a good thing.

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