

# It is vital that EU climate policy protects the interests of Europe's poorest citizens

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As part of our series on the Dahrendorf Symposium, which was held in Berlin on 14-15 November, [Ben Ryan](#) assesses the importance of the social and legal aspects of climate change, including the human victims of the process. He argues that Europe's poor must also be recognised as potential victims of climate change, particularly through the spread of fuel poverty in European countries.



This year's [Dahrendorf Symposium](#) was devoted to the issue of Europe and climate change. It was notable that within that theme the Symposium devoted a whole panel to the social and legal aspects of climate change. This is important because amid the economic and scientific disputes this aspect is often lost in the mix.

Fundamentally, climate change is about human victims – it is *people* that suffer for our failure to address the situation. Given this basic observation, more consideration needs to be given to the effect of climate change policy on people, rather than excluding the layman from the discussion by making it a purely academic debate on the merits of scientific theories or economic policy. In particular, while there is an increasing awareness of the potential plight of future generations and the real present danger in the global South, even within the EU itself the situation of Europe's poor shows the clear significance of climate justice.

Some human victims are obvious – one need only look at the humanitarian disaster in the Philippines to see the devastating effect climate issues can have. Other victims are less obvious, but no less of a concern.

Today's decisions will have effects felt by generations not yet born. Failure to act now could have devastating consequences for future generations, who will have

their policy choices curtailed in a changed climate. As for current victims, the plight of the developing world has been noted as a key concern by Dahrendorf contributors such as Mary Robinson and [Anna Grear](#). As with many global problems the victims are, in Grear's words, entirely predictable. They are those in the developing world least culpable for our current environmental crisis and yet most vulnerable to it.

Another set of, perhaps less obvious, victims from climate change policy are the European poor. But victim-hood is not limited to death, or devastation, or infrastructural damage. Not that these are not factors even within the EU (flooding [in particular](#) being an aspect that disproportionately threatens Europe's poor), but victim-hood also covers well-being more broadly. The fact of the matter is that the impact of fuel poverty is increasing. In the UK some 2.6 million households (11.5 per cent) were [defined](#) as being in fuel poverty in 2011. That number is [even higher](#) (4.5 million) using the 10 per cent measure of fuel poverty rather than the UK government's new preferred method of Low Income High Cost measure. \*

Combined with the broader effects of austerity budgets across the EU, the prospect of families being forced to pick



Fuel poverty protest, Credit: Max Reeves (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

between food and heating has become increasingly prevalent. The coalition government has cut winter fuel allowance – having a critical impact on as many as [25,000 additional households](#). In its Annual Report on Fuel Poverty Statistics, the Department of Energy and Climate Change said that the average fuel poverty gap per household has [increased](#) by £26 to £448 since 2010, largely because of energy prices.

Even leaving aside that aspect, there is a broader injustice committed against the poorest in the EU. [Preston, Thumin et al](#) have demonstrated that in the UK the richest 10 per cent of households are responsible for three times more emissions than the poorest 10 per cent. In proportional terms these poorest 10 per cent pay more, benefit less from existing policies, and are responsible for the least emissions.

The UK is not the EU – but parallel trends are apparent in most member states. Incentives and benefits are invariably aimed at richer households and less debate is given over to the impact upon the poorest in society – despite the fact that it is they who feel most keenly the effect of both fuel poverty and climate change.

Climate change is a pressing concern, and the commitment to reducing carbon emissions is one which we should be glad EU member states are taking seriously (even if many are still failing to meet targets). Stating that the poor shoulder too much of the current burden is not to say that we are not all responsible and should be expected to play (and pay) our part in securing the future, regardless of wealth – it is not an attempt to absolve the poor from paying bills or taxes. Nor do I believe it involves a challenge to the whole capitalist system.

It is, however, a challenge to remember the importance of the poor when formulating climate policies. It is time to stop pretending that current policies are a fair reflection of either culpability or vulnerability and instead demand that the wealthiest parts of European society take a more proportionate share of the collective burden. A change in taxation to correct the current imbalance would be the easiest quick fix solution, though by no means the only possibility.

In this story the role of the EU is crucial. The European project has often seen itself as having a pivotal leading role on environmental issues. Looking at the origins of the European project, it is striking how much emphasis there has been on the living standards of workers and on a moral mission to guarantee peace. The commitment to peace was rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize, but the commitment to living standards and solidarity is under threat from climate justice. A careful balance needs to be found between the necessary moves to tackle climate change and an unjust and potentially devastating impact upon those least culpable and most vulnerable.

At a time when EU popularity is under strain, not least because of painful austerity politics, it would be wise to recall the moral leadership which has been a hallmark of the European project. Of course, a co-ordinated response to climate change is important, but an innovative and careful process needs to be considered which avoids as far as possible further burdening the poorest citizens of the Union with disproportionate costs. Climate justice must acknowledge the justice due to the EU's poorest citizens, as much as it recognises that due to future generations and to the global South – the debate simply must move beyond the scientific and economic disputes.

*This article is part of our series on the [Dahrendorf Symposium](#), which was held on 14-15 November 2013*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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