

## COMMENT: Could COP 29 be the Watershed For Finding a Solution to Reduce Emissions Equitably? A Pathway to a Level Playing Field for Reaching Net Zero

**Dr Ted Christie, Updated 27 May 2024**



### Disclosure Statement

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*The “level playing field” has its origin is the early 1980s. It’s plain or literal meaning relates to “a sense of fairness”, “equal chances”, “equality of opportunity” or no “competitive advantage” for stakeholders.*

To keep global warming to no more than 1.5°C – as called for in the Paris Agreement – emissions need to be reduced by 45% by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050.

Article 2.2 is significant in regard to achieving this aim: -

*“The Paris Agreement [in pursuit of its objective], will be implemented to reflect equity and the ‘principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances’ [the ‘CBDR-RC’ Principle]”.*

A persuasive statement on the application of *the CBDR-RC Principle* for achieving the UN temperature goals was made in 2023 by the [\*\*U.N. Secretary-General, António Guterres\*\*](#), who identified this Principle as a key driver for achieving net zero deadlines.

However, there was a significant condition that the U.N. Secretary-General noted for achieving net zero deadlines under the *CBDR-RC Principle* – one that resonates with the need for implementation of the Paris Agreement “to reflect equity”: -

*“Every country must be part of the solution.*

*Demanding others move first only ensures humanity comes last”.*

The *CBDR-RC Principle* is [legally binding](#) for all 195 Parties (194 countries plus the European Union) – industrialized and developing – that have ratified the Paris Agreement, from the time it entered into force in November 2016.

The *CBDR-RC Principle* has its origins in international environmental law. It has two underlying elements for taking action for climate change: -

- *A common responsibility for all Parties to protect the global environment; and*
- *A differentiated responsibility for each Party to take into account their country's contribution to climate change and their ability to prevent, reduce and control the threat, in the light of different national circumstances.*

### **Adoption of the CBDR-RC Principle: Sources of the Controversy**

Since its inception, the *CBDR-RC Principle* fuelled [conflicts over inequality and competitive advantage](#), creating controversy that limited its adoption!

*In the past, critics of the CBDR-RC Principle claimed it to be one of the most contentious aspects of the climate regime. Moreover, this controversy over-the adoption of the CBDR-RC Principle continues to be problematic today.*

The controversy also reflects the very wide disparity in national contributions of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions between all countries. Most emissions come from just a few countries.

*The **top five emitters** (China, the United States of America, India, the European Union, the Russian Federation) accounted for about 60% of GHG emissions in 2021.*

*The **Group of 20** (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union) are responsible for about 76% of global GHG emissions.*

*By contrast, **least developed countries** account for about 3.8% of global GHG emissions, while **small island developing States** contribute less than 1%.*

**Source:** [UNEP Emissions Gap Report 2023](#)

Confounding the “CBDR-RC controversy” is contemporary concern that has emerged over the [effectiveness of emission reduction targets](#) intended by the Parties under the Paris Agreement: Specifically, their targets to reduce emissions in their Nationally Determined Contributions.

### **A Pathway For the Adoption of the CBDR-RC Principle**

A pathway for going forward to achieve the U.N. Secretary’s clarion call for the application of the *CBDR-RC Principle* for achieving net zero is based on recognizing the key role for *equity* under the Paris Agreement.

The [plain](#) and [legal](#) meanings of ‘*equity*’ are similar: “*fairness*”, “*justice*”.

An effective linkage between, *equity* and the *CBDR-RC Principle* would provide the framework for a [level playing field](#) enabling all countries to share the responsibility for reducing emissions, *equitably*, in accordance with their actual contribution to historic global temperature rise.

*The [role of equity](#), would be to ensure that outcomes from taking action to reduce emissions under the CBDR-RC principle, would minimise the extent to which environmental costs and benefits - ecological, economic, social, cultural - were shared disproportionately between all 195 Parties that have ratified the Paris Agreement.*

### **Evaluating Historic Emissions: Relevant and Reliable Science**

The first stage for relying on an effective linkage between *equity* and the *CBDR-RC Principle* to reach the goal of net zero by 2050 requires an updated assessment of each country’s contribution to climate change i.e., in terms of their historic, cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 1850 to the present time: -

- ❖ *However, different models exist. For example, the [CarbonBrief model](#) for evaluating “Cumulative Emissions, 1850-2021” was based on fossil fuels, cement, land use and forestry.*
- ❖ *This makes the methodology adopted for the evaluation crucial.*

[The IPCC Task Force on National Greenhouse Gas Inventories](#) warrants consideration as the appropriate body to undertake such an evaluation of national cumulative contributions of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by all countries.

To ensure the scientific findings from the scientific evaluation leads to widespread acceptance through consensus decision-making by all Parties that have ratified the Paris Agreement, the standards, and criteria of science for relevant and reliable scientific data must be adhered to.

This will require consistency of any evaluation  
with the [enduring criteria](#)  
[of testability, objectivity, and impartiality](#).

## Conclusions

***[In 2017, the call was](#) for "Countries for taking the lead to undertake economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets should be based, objectively, on their rankings for contributing to global temperature rise".***

***[In 2023, the call now is](#) for "All governments, first and foremost the biggest emitters, to take bold, immediate steps towards reducing emissions now".***

***Managing, and resolving the ongoing controversy should be a priority issue for the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 29) in November 2024 in Baku, Azerbaijan.***

***The task that lies ahead for a level playing field  
as the pathway for achieving net zero,  
is to avoid it becoming an illusory promise i.e., a promise made  
which is uncertain, indefinite, vague or impossible to fulfil.***

***Click on the following [LINK](#) to read more on "Multi-Objective Analysis Methodology": An accepted evaluation model from environmental science and planning that would facilitate decision-making on National Plans, Emission Reduction Targets, and Energy Security, in the context of sustainable development - and so comply with the Paris Agreement .***