

Transcript: Who is Responsible for Climate Change?

“Climate change is a major global challenge. But climate change is not of our making. It is the result of a global warming that came from the prosperity and progress of an industrial age powered by fossil fuel.”

— Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India

Developed and developing countries disagree sharply about who is responsible for climate change and for combating it.

Industrialization, a process through which enormous amounts of greenhouse gases are emitted, is at the center of this debate.

Developed countries, which industrialized over a century ago, have produced most of the world’s cumulative carbon dioxide emissions. In fact, the U.S. has produced nearly 30 percent of all emissions since 1850.

Because of this legacy, leaders in some developing countries argue that countries like the United States should take the lead on fighting climate change.

Developing countries, on the other hand, are now industrializing. Already India and China are among the world’s top annual emitters.

Leaders in some developed countries argue that climate change is a global problem and fighting it requires everyone’s participation, even if that means abandoning certain aspects of development.

“We seek an agreement that makes sure developing nations have the resources they need to skip the dirty phase of development if they’re willing to do their part.”

— Barack Obama, Former President of the United States

But to many, the idea that certain countries can benefit economically from industrialization while preventing similar gains elsewhere is hypocritical.

“Democratic India must grow rapidly to make the aspirations of 1.25 billion people, 300 million of whom are without access to energy.”

— Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India

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Yet another way to view the responsibility debate is by looking at per capita emissions. India has a population 20 times larger than the United Kingdom. But the British produce four times more emissions per person.

It's also important to note that many developed countries achieve their high living standards and their high emissions contributions in part by exploiting resources abroad, often in the same countries that are now trying to develop and industrialize.

Despite these different perspectives, virtually every country in the world signed the Paris Agreement because no matter how you sort the data, climate change affects everyone.