Interview - Joyeeta Gupta

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Joyeeta Gupta is Distinguished Professor of Climate Justice, Sustainability and Global Justice (University of Amsterdam), and is also Professor of Environment and Development in the Global South and holds a water professorship at IHE-Delft Institute for Water Education. She is the co-chair (2024-2025) of the UN Secretary General Appointed Group of Ten High-level Representatives of Civil Society, Private Sector and Scientific Community to Promote Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (10-Member-Group) – a component of the UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism. She is a Commissioner in the Global Commission on the Economics of Water and was Co-chair of the first phase of the Earth Commission (2019-2024), convened by Future Earth and the Global Commons Alliance during which time 22 publications were achieved with a top publication in Nature and in Lancet Planetary Health. She was awarded the 2023 Spinoza Prize – the highest distinction in Dutch science and also called the 'Dutch Nobel Prize'and was lead author of the Nobel Peace Prize winning report on climate change of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Where do you see the most exciting research or debates happening in your field today?

One of the most exciting developments in my field is the surge in climate litigation, spurred by academic work highlighting its potential. As legislatures and executives remain slow to act on pressing environmental issues, be it climate change, plastic pollution, harmful chemicals, biodiversity loss, or the decline of ocean fisheries, our only hope is that science, social movements, and the judiciary form an interesting coalition to ensure that we prevent the most dangerous changes that threaten human life and health and, at worst, could render the planet uninhabitable.

We have witnessed some groundbreaking rulings, such as the cases brought against the Dutch government and Shell. At the same time, we're witnessing the troubling rise of SLAPP cases (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). Earlier this year, for instance, Greenpeace was ordered to pay $660 million to Energy Transfer Company in the US.

You've been a leading voice in climate justice for decades. How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In the early days, focusing on equity and justice was often seen as 'normative' rather than 'scientific'. I was advised to frame my work around empirical data, making justice issues visible through evidence, without necessarily labelling them as such. That approach has served me well. It allowed me to center justice in my work while meeting traditional scientific expectations. Still, funding for justice-oriented research has always been limited. I've often had to fit these themes into broader calls for proposals that weren't explicitly about justice. If I'm not mistaken, the EU only recently released its first dedicated call for climate justice research. The number of social movements and court cases on climate, environmental, and water justice have increased over the years. Moreover, the organizations that invite me to talk about justice issues more recently are more mainstream than alternative. I'm now discussing issues like the rights of rivers or environmental justice at places like the World Economic Forum and the UN, rather than only at alternative or activist venues. This marks a real shift in how central justice has become over the past 35 years.

At the same time, the backlash has grown stronger. Populist governments that dismiss environmental issues are gaining ground. Companies are using SLAPP lawsuits to intimidate and silence NGOs. And perhaps most worryingly,

we're seeing the rise of misinformation and disinformation, which some have identified as the top global security threat today.

Your early work, such as *The Climate Change Convention and Developing Countries*, examined equity in climate law from the outset of your career. How has your understanding of equity in international climate governance evolved since then?

In my first article, I wrote about the North-South aspects of the Global Environment Facility; I remember that the reviewers rejected the paper as being biased towards the Global South, but the editor encouraged me to ignore the reviews and to instead frame the writing better. That decision proved valuable, and the paper was later selected as one of the best published in Environmental Politics over the decade.

My book, *The Climate Change Convention and Developing Countries* (1997), focused on how climate change adds to the existing North-South issues since the post-colonial global order. As co-chair of UNEP's Global Environment Outlook-6 (2017-2021), I was instrumental in including equity issues within the DPSIR (drivers, pressure, state, impact, and response) framework, as well as trying to ensure that the outlook implemented this framework. Over time, my empirical knowledge focused increasingly more on how wealth enhances average wellbeing but enables a greater and more efficient destruction of our environment, exacerbates inequality, and harms democracy. Today, I'm working on developing an open science justice lab aimed at designing a global Constitution, one that would institutionalize justice at the heart of the global governance system.

In your work with the Earth Commission, you advocate for 'safe and just' Earth system boundaries. What does this mean in practice, and how can this framing influence global environmental governance?

When I was co-chair of the Earth Commission (2019-2024), the focus initially was to argue that safe planetary boundaries are not necessarily just. Safe boundaries prevent tipping points and irreversible change; but just boundaries are needed to ensure that we do not cause significant harm to humans. For example, while 1.5℃ may preempt irreversible climate change, already at 1℃ there is significant harm to humans, and 70 million people are exposed to high wet bulb temperatures. Moreover, though there has been knowledge on this in the pre-1990 period, the adoption of the long-term objective was delayed till the Paris Agreement in 2015. This initial thought led to the development of Earth System Justice, a systemic approach to justice issues, which was based on the justice scholarship and workshops. It asked in terms of ends: are safe boundaries just? Can we meet minimum needs within just boundaries? In terms of means, it asked: how do we address the drivers of environmental problems *and* poverty/inequality? How can the remaining resources (after deducting that which is needed for meeting minimum needs from the total just boundary) be allocated? How are risks/harm distributed? And how are responsibilities allocated between different actors?

Our Nature paper concluded that we have already crossed all identified *safe and just* boundaries, with the exception of aerosols at the global level, though even this threshold has been breached in many urban areas. This reality means we must not only reduce emissions but also preserve sufficient environmental space to meet basic human needs.

This introduces the idea of *limited ecospace*, which is likely to be interpreted differently by various schools of thought. Neoliberal capitalists may advocate for market-based allocation, where access depends on purchasing power. Hegemonic powers may seek to exert territorial control over resources, as reflected in the full territorial sovereignty principle in the 2030 Agenda. Polycentric governance models, by contrast, favour experimentation and decentralised solutions.

In my view, none of these models adequately address the challenge of managing shared, finite planetary resources. That's why I'm now working on a new project focused on developing a form of global constitutionalism, one that embeds justice in the foundations of global governance.

You've written extensively on climate-induced displacement. What legal or governance innovations do

you believe are most urgently needed to address the growing number of people displaced by climate impacts?

Although I fully value the need to focus on adaptation, loss and damage, and migration frameworks, I strongly believe that the only way to preempt long-term (hundreds of years of) structural local to global climate displacement is by mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. If we do not successfully mitigate these emissions, the disruption to the global water cycle will be profound. We'll see more people displaced by extreme heat, increased evaporation, melting glaciers, weakened groundwater recharge, and increasingly violent weather events.

I see addressing these long-term issues as critically important and an urgent priority. On top of that, I think it is vital that we address all victims of climate change, whether it is those who are displaced or those who suffer as a consequence of changing climatic patterns; in particular, prioritizing those people who did not contribute to the problem of climate change. A recent WRI report suggests that a $1 investment in adaptation could yield multiple benefits of $10, justifying such investments.

You have highlighted the structural barriers that limit meaningful participation of communities in the Global South. What kinds of reforms (legal, institutional, or financial) are needed to ensure inclusive climate governance?

Everyone is affected by climate change, but the poorest communities and countries in the Global South are hit the hardest. What we need, in many ways, is a "COVID-like" moment: a collective pause to reflect on how our relentless cycles of investment, production, and consumption are harming the planet.

Let me offer a few concrete areas for reform. First, while we already have legal tools, like strategic environmental assessments, social and environmental impact assessments, and emission and ambient standards, governments around the world have largely failed to develop these and enforce them effectively, despite the availability of scientific inputs. Science is no match for the lobbying power of business in parliaments. As a result, pollution continues unabated. We need long-term accountability structures for elected officials and executive decision-makers, grounded in inclusive, science-based governance to ensure that they can explain how and why decisions were taken that went against the science and harmed society and the environment.

Second, investment agreements and investor-state contracts often stand in the way of closing down polluting industries or limiting their access to natural resources. Moreover, institutional investors (e.g. pension funds, banks, insurers, and philanthropies) tend to favour high short-term returns, which are easiest to achieve when environmental standards are weak. These agreements and institutions must be revised/modified to reflect current scientific knowledge and human rights considerations.

Third, most businesses focus narrowly on shareholder returns, lobbying for favourable policies and managing public perception through PR, often at the expense of the people and ecosystems they impact. We need new accountability frameworks that consider the rights of all stakeholders, not just shareholders.

Fourth, we must rethink the role of wealth. Today, wealth often enables consumption and investment patterns that far exceed any sustainable environmental footprint. A concept like *limitarianism*, setting a maximum allowable footprint per person, could help align economic and financial power with local to global boundaries and quality standards.

Ultimately, efficiency has consistently been prioritised over equity and effectiveness in environmental governance. We've become remarkably efficient at destroying the planet in pursuit of short-term profit and GDP growth. Now, we need to become effective, and true effectiveness demands a just approach.

On a practical level, I've addressed some of these governance challenges (e.g. negotiation challenges) in my guide for negotiators, *On Behalf of My Delegation*, which offers strategies for delegates from developing countries and new negotiators (originally published in 2000/2001 and updated in 2023/2024).

With increasing attention on climate finance, how can we ensure that funding mechanisms genuinely support those most vulnerable to climate impacts, instead of reinforcing existing inequalities?

We need climate finance for the energy transition, for adaptation and loss and damage. There is increasing attention to climate finance in the negotiations (COP 29) calling for $300 billion annually by 2035 and a total finance of $1.3 trillion annually by 2035 from all actors. At the same time, many western countries have reduced their development cooperation budgets significantly, with the US and the Netherlands as two examples. This creates a serious gap between what's needed and what's currently available.

In recent discussions I've been part of, the emphasis has been on inviting the private sector to step in and help fill this gap. But private investors tend to favour "bankable" projects, those that generate clear, short-term returns. That might include financing for renewables, but also still for oil and gas.

They are far less interested in "non-bankable" projects, like closing fossil fuel operations, ensuring just transitions for workers, or rehabilitating degraded land. And when they do consider such projects, they often demand that governments de-risk the investments. This becomes especially challenging in a context where public funds for development cooperation are shrinking.

In your book *The Evolution of the Law and Politics of Water* (2009), you explore water governance in depth. What lessons from this area are transferable to broader questions of climate justice and resource management?

I've worked on climate change and water as separate fields for nearly 35 years, but the two are deeply interconnected. Most climate impacts manifest through water, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and altered hydrological patterns, for example. That's why climate-proofing water policy is not optional; it's essential.

My work on Earth System Justice has also evolved into a framework for Water System Justice. One of the most important lessons water governance offers to climate justice is the principle of *equitable and optimal allocation*. The International Watercourses Convention outlines six criteria to guide equitable sharing of water among riparian states, an approach that has not yet been mirrored in the climate regime.

Even more crucial is the *no harm* principle, a cornerstone of international law. It obliges states to avoid causing significant harm to other states. Strikingly, this principle wasn't adopted in the Climate Convention, which instead focuses on avoiding harm to the climate system, often overlooking harm to humans, which occurs well before damage to the system becomes measurable.

Water governance also offers practical insights into how resources are allocated between different users, uses, and regions. Right now, we have a complex mix of legal frameworks, property rights tied to land, and quasi-property rights allocated through permits, concessions, and contracts managed by the state. My colleagues are currently mapping these systems, and their findings are likely to shape how we approach climate-proof water governance in the years ahead.

You've worked across academia, multilateral institutions, and high-level policy advisory roles. In your view, how can scholars effectively influence policy while maintaining critical distance and academic integrity?

As scholars, it's not enough to simply publish, we also have to communicate. If I'm speaking at the World Economic Forum, I might frame the message as "No business without water" or highlight the importance of safe and just Earth system boundaries. At the UN, the message might shift to "No healthy society without water" or concerns around the socio-environmental risks of AI. At a planetary health conference, the theme might be "Healthy planet, healthy people."

When speaking to scientists, I can dive into the technical details of why justice matters for effective outcomes and

share the empirical evidence behind it. For environmental NGOs, the conversation focuses more on actionable insights, how they can use scientific findings to support their advocacy.

Ultimately, it's about using the same research but adapting the framing to resonate with different audiences. There is some strategizing needed to figure out what might work in a given context – after all, you want to take the audience with you in your thought process. But it has to be based on scholarly work.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

By historical circumstance, I found myself at the intersection of economics, law, and international relations, while also working across the Faculty of Earth Sciences and the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences in the Netherlands. At first, I worried I might fall between the cracks of these disciplines. But instead of choosing just one, I deliberately sought out journals across each field and published in all of them, even in *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth*.

That decision gave me both depth and breadth in understanding environmental issues. More importantly, it taught me how to communicate across disciplines. I didn't fall through the cracks, I learned to bridge them.

So, my advice to young scholars is: go interdisciplinary. It broadens your toolkit, deepens your understanding, and allows you to see problems from multiple perspectives. You might even find yourself emerging not just as a disciplinary expert, but as an international interdisciplinary voice. And frankly, without inter- and transdisciplinary thinking, we won't be able to tackle the socio-environmental and economic challenges we face today.