



# TIBET IN COPENHAGEN

Number 1 in a series of 10 briefings on climate and Tibet

This series of briefings is about why Tibet matters, in the Copenhagen negotiations for the planetary climate. Because the six million Tibetans are silenced, forbidden to form their own organisations, people think Tibet is small and unimportant on a global scale. Actually, of every square kilometre of land on earth, 17 hectares are Tibetan. Climate scientists have recently realised the Tibetan Plateau is the planetary Third Pole, an island in the sky so vast it deeply affects circulation, draws the Asian monsoons deep inland, affecting even storm tracks of the north Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Tibet matters, because not only are its glaciers melting fast but the Plateau is warming faster than other areas on earth, resulting in more extreme and unpredictable weather across Asia. If the most glaciated part of the planet may lose its glaciers in decades, the whole of Asia, downstream and downwind of Tibet, will suffer more extreme weather.

Climate change is not an impersonal, inexorable force of nature. It has known human causes, and available solutions. But the biggest emitters continue to avoid taking effective action, each arguing that first the other must do more.

At Copenhagen, the biggest greenhouse gas emitters are China and the US. China argues quite rightly that it took centuries of industrialisation in the rich countries to build CO<sub>2</sub> levels to where they are now. But does that mean China should be largely exempt from the binding carbon emission reduction targets which should come out of Copenhagen? The US argues, rightly, that all industrialised and rapidly industrialising countries should contribute to the carbon emission reduction, because the problem is now so serious.

So it goes round and round, each major emitter making valid points to avoid doing much, even to claim the right to massive payments to do anything. While the major emitters argue, the losers are those who never emitted much, who persist with a sustainable subsistence economy, a modest way of life that does not demand ever increasing production, pollution and consumption.

This includes the six million Tibetans and the 2.5 million sq km Tibetan Plateau, in the heart of Eurasia. The nine briefings in this series assess what is at stake at Copenhagen, from a Tibetan angle. They explain the impacts of climate change on Tibetan lands and livelihoods. They look at what climate change in Tibet means for Tibet's neighbours in coming years, from failed monsoons to extreme floods. They look at the Tibetans who have long cared for the land, the farmers and pastoral nomads and at new Chinese policies which expel nomads from their lands, as if this is the only way to conserve watersheds. This series of nine briefings offers a complete picture, including alternative solutions which include rather than exclude the nomads as part of the solution, rather than labelling them mistakenly as a cause of the problem.

Each Briefing stands on its own, with a list of sources of further information and data validating the assessments presented. Taken together, the nine Briefings, with little overlap, offer a rounded picture of how the latest science understands the Tibetan Plateau and the Tibetan people.

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Climate change in Tibet is a human rights issue, because, in the name of climate change adaptation, China forces Tibet's nomads to lose their lands and livelihoods. It is a development issue, because Tibetans are poor, and disempowered, with little opportunity to repair their damaged grasslands or slow the melting of the glaciers. Skilful inclusive development that engages Tibetans as active partners, versus unskilful top-down statist exclusion of nomads, are among the development choices facing Tibet now.

Tibet is not a remote area, of little significance. It is the size of western Europe, 1.7 per cent of all land on earth, and cannot be spoken for by those who lack intimate knowledge of how to live extensively, sustainably and productively on the plateau surrounded by snow mountains.

Tibetan voices must be and will be heard in the negotiations for a liveable planet. This is not a demand for independence of Tibet, or an attempt to politicise the climate debate. Tibetans want to be part of the solution to climate change, working with the international community to rehabilitate the rapidly degrading rangelands, so Tibet can once more be a natural carbon sink, a capacity that is fast disappearing right now.

If the viability of life on earth is at stake, all lives, in all areas, must be included, must be present in the debate, and heard as legitimate voices speaking up for their land and people. Tibetans come to Copenhagen with this basic stance, and unique perspective.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has frequently expressed his deep concern at the deteriorating climate, soils, rivers, lakes and human livelihoods in Tibet and therefore downstream also. Tibetans have little opportunity to protect this natural heritage, and are not even allowed to form their own NGOs for environmental protection.

The world comes to Copenhagen willing to assist China meet its goals, even though China refuses to be bound by specific emission reduction quotas. China asks for large sums to protect its watersheds from the effects of climate change, but is less willing to act decisively to reduce the basic causes of climate change.

When the world assists China it can also assist Tibet, but only if the money allocated is very carefully targeted, and implementation in Tibet is directly supervised by international NGOs or development agencies. On the basis of long experience, this is the way to ensure China's clean development finance does not in reality, on the ground, evict Tibetan nomads from their land.