The world used to be divided into developed countries and developing countries, but a third group has now taken the stage: emerging economies like China, India, and Brazil that are growing very rapidly but haven't yet attained developed country status. But development in these countries is uneven. In China, for example, there has been explosive economic growth in urban areas but the countryside still remains very poor.

International climate law has long had the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities, meaning that developed countries and developing countries both have obligations but of different kinds. Emerging economies in a sense of have both quasi-developed and quasi-developing countries within them. By analogy, we could speak of those regions as having common but differentiated responsibilities. In particular, there would seem to be a responsibility for the more developed region to assist the poorer region with adaptation to climate change.

In a recent paper in the Review of European, Comparative, and International Law, I argue that these internal divisions are distinctive to emerging economies and provide a basis for differentiating the responsibilities of emerging economies from the developed/developing country situations. Internally, populations within emerging economies have common but differentiated responsibilities themselves, and emerging economies have a duty to use national resources funded by the more developed portion of the society to assist with adaptation in less-developed areas. I also argue that international aid should also focus on the less-developed areas within emerging economies, to the extent such aid is provided to emerging economies.

Current international agreements do not explicitly provide special treatment for emerging economies, but they do refer to "common but differentiated responsibilities" for adaptation. That term is broad enough to justify separate consideration for emerging economies. In addition, international human rights law provides some support for a duty to protect vulnerable populations from severe climate impacts through adaptation. In short, in thinking about climate change adaptation, we need to keep in mind that there is not just one China but two, and that the richer one has a duty to assist the poorer one deal with the threat of climate change. And the same is true for Brazil, India and other emerging economies.