



The Quest for Climate Justice in an Unequal World

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Disparities in power, wealth, and privilege are central to understanding the causes and impacts of climate change. The human actions that spur greenhouse gas emissions are woven into the fabric of global systems of production and consumption. Although China and a few other industrializing nations now account for most of the growth in emissions, nearly three-quarters of the world's annual carbon dioxide emissions still come from the advanced industrial nations of North America and Europe, the so-called Global North that makes up only 15% of the world's population.

Greenhouse gasses cause climate changes that affect regions, nations, and communities around the world – but less privileged groups and regions are especially vulnerable to harm from the hazards unleashed by climate change. People of color, Indigenous Peoples, and women are disproportionately affected by extreme heat, drought, food and water shortages, and increases in air pollution, infectious disease, storms, and floods.

Environmental Inequalities and Disparate Impacts

Economic development in the Global North has been supported historically by ecological degradation, social upheavals, and economic underdevelopment in the poorer countries of the Global South. This relationship continues even now because wealthier nations have disproportionate access to capital and often externalize the costs associated with their own development by exporting human and environmental costs to poorer nations. As they enjoy a higher standard of living, wealthier nations are the largest users of energy and emitters of greenhouse gases per capita. “Ecological debt,” or more specifically “climate debt,” is a concept used by climate justice scholars and activists to express the idea that today's rich countries owe compensation to the Global South for earlier acquisitions of the South's natural resources – and also in return for current disposal of toxic wastes, including greenhouse gases, harmful to the global environment.

Many current examples underline the need to understand complex social and historical forces that cause climate-related changes to pile new injustices on top of entrenched inequalities:

- Large numbers of people around the world are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change because they live in places that are exploited to supply cheap fossil fuels and electricity to feed the world's growing energy demands. Especially in Asia, Africa, and South America, many communities are exposed to health hazards from producing and consuming coal and oil energy – and of course the same is true for many poor and minority communities in advanced industrial nations where “cleaner” energy technologies are available to many citizens. Decades of research provide evidence of inequalities by race, economic status, and age in exposure to energy pollution in the United States.
- Weather disasters hit already vulnerable groups with special force. African Americans concentrated in the southern United States are at disproportionate risk from hurricanes on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. And most deaths during heat waves occur in central cities, where people living in poverty and people of color are more likely to die or suffer from heat-related stress and illness.
- Everywhere, exposures to water-borne diseases during floods and hyperthermia during heat waves, disproportionately affect female caretakers, children, and the elderly. For example, Bangladeshi women were especially vulnerable in floods after the 1991 cyclone, one of the deadliest storms on record, because their responsibilities of caring for children, finding food, water, and fuel; cooking meals; growing crops; tending livestock tied them to low-lying residences. Cultural limits on women's dress, demeanor, and visibility in public also trapped many women.

Searching for Equitable Ways to Manage Climate Change

How should governments respond to the challenges of human-caused climate change that are inextricably tied up with underlying social inequalities? What kinds of actions might redress past wrongs and improve the environment for those with less power and wealth? Whether they talk about “climate justice” or not, each government, organization, and activist group with a stake in climate change has either an explicit or implicit position on this central moral dilemma.

Conflicts over methods and goals have stalled responses to calls by the United Nations for international cooperation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. After 25 years of attempts, agreements are flawed and constrained, as nations pull in different directions, arguing about specific national and global policy approaches and disagreeing about whether various countries and regions are doing their “fair share.”

Many poorer nations and non-governmental organizations reject the idea of creating a system for trading emissions permits. Critics believe this would allow industrialized nations to buy the right to spew dangerous emissions without guaranteeing that benefits or compensation reach the most vulnerable countries and people. Controversial proposals about engineering the atmosphere – for example, by managing solar radiation or removing carbon – arouse equally strong arguments.

New directions are possible, however. A growing coalition of organizations and social movements, joined by many scholars, wants to place the priority on fashioning ways to help countries and communities reduce their vulnerability to harmful climate changes. This approach is grounded in a radical critique of the reigning idea that economic growth solves all problems. It calls for grassroots-driven adaptations and envisions a worldwide transition to renewable, safe energy, with underrepresented groups taking part in negotiated shifts. Climate justice is a central goal – to be pursued through local, democratic decisions about resource production and use. The priorities are fairness in the treatment of all people and furthering healthy and sustainable social and natural environments.

Read more in Sharon L. Harlan, David N. Pellow, and J. Timmons Roberts with Shannon Elizabeth Bell, William G. Holt, and Joan Nagel, “Climate Justice and Inequality,” in *Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives*, edited by Riley E. Dunlap and Robert J. Brulle (Oxford University Press, 2015), 127-163.