

Climate Justice

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THIS SPECIAL ISSUE EDITED by West Harlem Environmental Action (WE ACT) highlights climate justice: The need to develop studies, policies, and interventions that address the ethical and human rights dimensions of global warming, the disproportionate burden of legacy pollution, the unsustainable rise in energy costs for low-income families, and the impacts of energy extraction, refining, and manufacturing on vulnerable communities. Climate change is the most significant social and political challenge of the 21st century. Carbon dioxide emissions caused by human activity are and will continue to impact the earth's natural systems through global warming and sea level rise for generations to come.

Climate researchers report that vulnerable communities, even in the most prosperous nations, will be the first and worst hit. In this country, the most impacted areas will be communities-of-color, Indigenous Peoples, and low-income communities that are socio-economically disadvantaged, disproportionately burdened by poor environmental quality, and least able to adapt. They will be the first to experience extreme heat events, respiratory illness, vector-borne infectious diseases, food insecurity, and natural disasters.

WE ACT issued a Call for Abstracts that produced the articles published here. We are aware that there is scant literature on climate change and vulnerable communities here in the United States. We want to highlight the need for residents and advocates to work with researchers and practitioners. We know that it is critical to define a community-based research agenda and translate findings into strategies and interventions that address the impacts our most vulnerable communities will and are experiencing. The time to act is now.

Locally and globally, these vulnerable communities are the ones that have produced the environmental justice movement of which WE ACT is an active partner. The multi-ethnic, multi-racial, grassroots movement is one that understands the importance of science in advancing its community-driven goals. Over the years, movement groups have waged evidence-based campaigns, engaged in community-based participatory research (CBPR), and

translated research findings into policy and interventions that help build sustainable communities. As a result of global warming, we will experience impacts to key areas like water, ecosystems, food, and health. Vulnerable areas face multiple stresses that affect their level of exposure, sensitivity, and capacity to adapt. Currently, the American Lung Association reports that 71 percent of African Americans and 80 percent of Latinos live in areas that fail to meet air quality standards set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In the era of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we continue to bear witness to an increase in the number of severe weather events impacting communities in the United States. Whether it is the mighty Mississippi River rising along the shores of the Midwest, the melting permafrost creating displacement in the Arctic, out-of-season record-breaking tornadoes in Mississippi and Kentucky, the burning hills in Sacramento and San Diego or the droughts experienced in Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama, all of these events can be linked in some way to climate change. In the end, we are likely to implement a portfolio of adaptation and mitigation measures that can reduce the risk of climate change. As some regions begin to realize the negative impact, they will compete for power to control the diminishing resources, especially agricultural and grazing land, water and food: Conflicts which can result in violence, displacements, migrations, and death.

This is our current and future challenge, expressed well by Dr. Wangari Maaathai, founder of the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya, as she accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004:

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has challenged the world to broaden the understanding of peace: there can be no peace without equitable development; and there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space. This shift is an idea whose time has come ... I call on leaders, especially from Africa, to expand democratic space and build fair and just societies that allow the creativity and energy of their citizens to flourish. Those of us who have been privileged to receive education, skills, and experiences and even power must be role models for the next generation of leadership.

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Since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's first report in 1990, and its receipt of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, which it shared with former Vice President Al Gore, the political environment has changed, and the debate by the public, media and Congress on climate change has deepened. The new Obama Administration has expressed its commitment to developing U.S leadership on this issue at home and abroad, while the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES) is pending further action in the Senate and possibly in a conference committee of the House and Senate. The proponents of ACES, which focuses on a cap and trade mechanism, say that it is more important to have some legislation on climate even though it is flawed. Conservative opponents of the bill say man-made climate change is not real. It is a hoax, and we should not take action because high-energy-intensive and manufacturing jobs will be lost, they say. The environmental justice movement argues that the legislation will raise energy costs to the consumer without offsetting those shocks, create windfall profits to polluters, fail to generate enough revenue, fail to meet scientifically established targets for carbon emissions reduction targets, and continue the legacy of pollution in communities of color and low income. The environmental justice movement believes a cap and trade mechanism will hurt the most vulnerable communities by creating hot spots and the trading of co-pollutants. Many environmental justice advocates, scientists, and economists believe that the best mechanism for establishing a price on carbon is a tax on the polluter.

As WE ACT deepens its involvement in the climate debate, its executive director has accepted an appointment as a member of the National Academy of Science's (NAS) Committee on America's Climate Choices. In response to Public Law 110-161, the NAS is conducting a series of coordinated activities to study the serious and sweeping issues associated with global climate change, including the science and technology challenges involved and also to provide advice on the most effective steps and most promising strategies that can be taken to respond.

To provide detailed analysis of important technical issues, focused panels will be convened to address four questions: What can be done to limit the magnitude of future climate change? What can be done to adapt to the impacts of climate change? What can be done to better understand climate change and its interactions with human and ecological systems? What can be done to inform effective decisions and actions related to climate change?

The Committee on America's Climate Choices will write a final, integrated report that answers the overarching questions: What short-term actions can be taken to respond effectively to climate change? What promising long-term strategies, investments, and opportunities could be pursued to respond to climate change? What are the major scientific and technological advances (e.g., new tools, research priorities, etc.) needed to better understand and respond effectively to climate change? What are the major impediments (e.g., practical, institutional, economic, ethical, intergenerational, etc.) to responding

effectively to climate change, and what can be done to overcome these impediments?

These important questions confronting nations and vulnerable communities must be answered if we are to have effective response. To respond to this challenge and to provide voice and perspective of underserved communities, WE ACT and environmental justice groups across the country have come together and initiated a campaign to impact federal climate change policy. The Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change calls for democratic dialogue on climate change that is inclusive of all communities and sectors of our economy.

The Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change recognizes that crucial voices have been absent from the urgent, essential debate on how to achieve carbon reductions quickly, efficiently, and with equity. We have come together over the past two years as a coalition of environmental justice organizations, long-term and emerging leaders, and advocates to acknowledge and communicate the impacts that already New Orleans and Alaska communities and tribes are experiencing and to participate in determining the future of our economy and our environment.

From the cities of Oakland to New York, to the farms and bayous of the Deep South, to the indigenous communities of the southwest and Alaska, we have spent years working to protect the health and environment of our communities. Some of us have worked over decades and others are new but we are all committed social justice activists working to transform the environmental decision making and policy paradigm that results in communities of color and low income that are disproportionately burdened by pollution and resulting health disparities.

The Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change is working to educate and mobilize members, residents and policymakers to affect just policies and legislation that:

- Achieves significant, identified reductions in carbon emissions
- Protects the most burdened and vulnerable communities
- Reduces co-pollutants that exacerbate adverse public health outcomes
- Promotes the reduction of hotspot pollution in overburdened communities
- Offsets higher energy costs to low-income consumers
- Transitions from a fossil fuel economy ensuring just transition for workers and job training for the new green economy

To further advance our perspective and engage diverse, national participation, WE ACT and the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change hosted a conference, *Advancing Climate Justice: Transforming the Economy, Public Health & Our Environment*, January 29-30, 2009, at Fordham University Law School in New York City. The goal was to present research that addresses the disproportionate impact of climate change on communities of color and low income that have historically borne

the burden of pollution and health disparities; to educate and engage a broad range of stakeholders; and to propose global warming policies aimed at mobilizing grassroots activists, engaging policymakers, and securing climate action legislation that is effective and equitable. The event convened 400 grassroots activists, environmental justice leaders, environmentalists, scientists, students, academics, and business; most of whom had never come together to dialogue on this set of issues. The conference, which participants have called historic, mobilized and focused our efforts to positively transform the political will of the grassroots and grasstops.

A Call for Abstracts was issued for the conference, and most of the articles presented in this issue are the result of those submissions. The papers explore a variety of conditions. They highlight the need for more study and research on strategies for adaptation in low-income communities, educational campaigns to engage residents in building sustainable communities and a new energy economy, and ways to protect the most burdened and vulnerable among us.

On the path toward a renewed environment, there have been many winners and losers. Our communities have generally been on the losing side. As a nation, we cannot embark on climate action legislation and policies anchored by the notion that there will always be winners and losers. We have the vision, commitment and opportunity to lift all boats. As the debate deepens, we must mobilize the will to support, develop and implement effective climate and energy policies. Let's promote opportunities for a more sustainable and healthy social, built, and economic environment.

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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP FORUM ON CLIMATE CHANGE PRINCIPLES OF CLIMATE JUSTICE

1. **Establish** a zero carbon economy and achieve this by limiting and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with the levels advocated by the scientific community (25% by 2020 and 80% by 2050) through mechanisms that are controlled by the public sector, generate revenue, are transparent, easily understandable by all, can be set-up quickly and have a track record of improving environmental quality;
2. **Protect** all of America's people—regardless of race, gender, nationality, or socioeconomic status—and their communities equally from the environmental, health and social impacts of climate change. Ensure that any solutions implemented to respond to or mitigate climate change do not violate human or environmental rights;
3. **Ensure** that carbon reduction strategies do not negatively impact public health and do not further exacerbate existing health disparities among communities. This includes crafting strategies that prevent the creation of pollution hotspots, eliminate existing emissions hotspots in vulnerable communities, and reduce the emissions of greenhouse gas co-pollutants in and near communities-of-color, Indigenous, and low-income communities;
4. **Require** those most responsible for creating the impacts that arise from climate change to bear the proportionate cost of responding to the resulting economic, social and environmental crisis. In setting the proportionate cost of climate impacting activity, the full environmental, health, social and economic cost of energy use from extraction to disposal must be included to accurately reflect the cost that energy use has on our environment, our health and our communities;
5. **Develop** a national goal supported by legislatively dedicated resources to transition us from the fossil fuel economy to the green, clean renewable energy economy by 2020;
6. **Position** the public sector to be a catalyst for change in the transition to the green, clean renewable energy economy by dedicating some of the revenues generated by carbon reduction strategies to support green clean renewable energy initiatives;
7. **Create** the opportunity for all Americans, especially people-of-color, Indigenous Peoples and low-income Americans, to experience a just transition as well as participate in the creation and operation of a new green economy by creating a workforce development program to grow living-wage, clean, safe, green jobs in the energy sector and beyond;

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8. **Provide** an economic and social safety net for low-income, people-of-color, Indigenous Peoples and those vulnerable in the middle-income from the structural adjustments in the economy as we transition from the pollution generating fossil fuel economy to the green, clean and renewable economy;
9. **Ensure** that the green economy has enough jobs for those who need to be retrained and those who historically have been chronically underemployed, unemployed and/or excluded from unions; and
10. **Ensure** that people-of-color, Indigenous Peoples and low-income communities, who are and con-

tinue to be disproportionately impacted by climate change, have the inalienable right to have our voices shape what is the most significant policy debate of the 21st century.

The Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change believes that climate change policies that incorporate these principles are the way forward for the United States of America to restore our credibility nationally and globally on the issue of climate change while preserving the livelihood, health and safety of all Americans.