

Confronting Climate Change

A Moral Imperative for Diversity & Inclusion

By Christina Woodrow

At its most fundamental level, climate justice aims to empower vulnerable populations and effectively address climate change by “putting people at the heart of the solution.”¹ In other words, climate justice is about creating a culture of empathy, where society acknowledges the suffering of those who disproportionately bear the brunt of climate change. Prioritizing the needs of marginalized communities and giving them a platform in policy will lead to great progress in resolving social inequalities related to climate change, as these direct climate witnesses will likely have the best insight into creating realistic, feasible solutions for their people.

The underlying problem that ultimately limits many vulnerable groups’ involvement in international climate change dialogue is their lack of education. This in itself is an indicator of social inequality, as people who are directly impacted by climate change are often not even familiar with the concept. For instance, Constance Okollet, a farmer from Uganda, only learned the real cause of the nation’s recent volatile weather after attending a meeting on climate change. Until then, she had believed “that God was wreaking revenge on her people for some mysterious wrongdoing.”² Similar beliefs reign in the African Sahel, where elders of the M’bororo people “do not see

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any solution coming to them. They just believe in God, and that God will bring a solution.”³ Unfortunately, this external locus of control and lack of knowledge about climate change science seems commonplace among rural people. Women like Constance struggle to educate their community members, and in patriarchal societies, it is especially difficult to be taken seriously by males in power; many women are likely dissuaded from speaking up because of gender expectations, self-consciousness, or both. An important solution to this problem is thus investing in grassroots leaders and empowering women with the skills necessary to confidently challenge established government officials. The kind of first-hand perspective that climate witnesses can offer serves as a “much-needed dose of reality” and a “powerful reminder of how lost decision makers can become in the inaccessible jargon of ‘international development-speak.’”⁴

International negotiations are also crippled by the social stigma surrounding a lack of higher education. As Jannie Staffansson, a member of the Saami people in the European Union says, “For people in society to believe you, you need to have a higher education, and we don’t have that.”⁵ Vu Thi Hien, an activist in Vietnam, expresses a similar challenge, emphasizing that “when you work with vulnerable and poor people, you must believe them.”⁶ As she succinctly says, “poverty does not equate with stupidity.”⁷ It is crucial to allow those who are suffering to contribute their own thoughts and solutions because they are ultimately the ones who are in need and will be the beneficiaries. In the words of Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, another activist from Africa, “people don’t need to go to school to show the government their own environment.”⁸ All these statements seem obvious, yet society somehow does not understand that these are real, fellow human beings who are threatened by climate change every day. Small countries like

Kiribati in the Pacific have been undermined at international negotiations, and the 2009 COP15 in Copenhagen is particularly infamous for the lack of progress made and the poor treatment of vulnerable nations as “collateral damage.”^{9, 10} Even with the 2015 Paris Agreement, small populations like those of indigenous peoples were almost completely overlooked. At the conference, Jannie said, “We are the persons who are dying. [...] How can the purpose of this negotiation not be people? How can our voices be silenced multiple times, and then again?”¹¹ These words ultimately reinforce the importance of adopting a people-focus with regard to climate change response; Jannie managed to help secure a Platform for Indigenous Peoples, and without determined women like Jannie fighting for their rights, the provision likely would not have even been included. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the mental and emotional exhaustion that these women experience as they fight to get a seat at the negotiating table and be heard. Women like Hindou “know how slowly the fight against climate change is going and that a solution is not coming tomorrow,” and the same can more or less be said about resolving issues surrounding climate justice.¹² More work can always be done to empower individuals, self-governing groups, and nations as a whole in their fight for equality.

Many environmental activists suggest that the ideal solution to climate justice issues is creating a global shift in culture, where everyone takes as much ownership for their actions as the aforementioned grassroots leaders. The wealthy elites possess the greatest carbon footprint and need to do more to help those whose livelihoods are devastated by the developed world’s carbon emissions. While it is a nice sentiment that the wealthy often wish to “give back” to the world in a variety of ways, the journalist Anand Giridharadas asserts that instead of “giving back” and crowding out the

government, the advantaged should give up their lavish lifestyles and “crowd in” the government to truly enact widespread social change.¹³ However, it is impossible to tell how much people will sacrifice their material best interest. One scientific writer writes, “I’m feeling quite gloomy about human nature these days and have less faith than ever in our collective foresight. I don’t see the wealthy – and most people reading this likely count among the global wealthy – agreeing to forego their pleasures of a wealthy lifestyle on behalf of future generations, at least not at any real scale, any time soon.”¹⁴ The author literally calls out readers for their inaction and also suggests that individual behavioral changes will have minimal impact in the big picture. This attitude is incredibly detrimental, though, because any effort put forth by the citizen base may force government and corporate entities to do better themselves. Given that 17% of greenhouse gas emissions are the product of 1.5 billion households around the world, any small changes by consumers are much better than doing nothing.¹⁵ It is humbling to realize that many of the world’s poorest countries have pledged to receive most of their energy from renewable sources by 2030 while more developed countries like the United States treat climate change like a lost cause.¹⁶ There is a great disconnect from the consequences of their actions; therefore, finding different ways to frame climate change issues is vital for ensuring the success of climate change justice solutions, such as the spread of new climate technology. If we frame this technology as “enlightened self-interest” instead of “aid or charity,” developed countries will be more willing to provide much needed technology to the developing world.¹⁷ Furthermore, within developed countries that are heavily reliant on the fossil fuel industry and slowly adopting renewable energy, it is important to ensure a just transition for workers. Prominent economists like Lord Nicolas Stern

emphasize the importance of this concept, asserting that large changes in economic structures in response to climate change must be managed by all stakeholders together.¹⁸ As Ken Smith, a former coal miner says, “people will not resist change if they know that their families will be protected,” and tangible solutions to this climate justice issue include wage and benefit insurance, income support, and health care for displaced employees.¹⁹

Overall, solving climate justice issues requires much more than just scientifically curbing climate change. In the words of Richard Branson, a British magnate and environmental philanthropist, “the climate crisis is a crisis of humanity, requiring far more than mitigation and adaptation, but a renewed sense of shared destiny.”²⁰ Climate justice can offer a “narrative of hope” if appropriate climate solutions are created with all humans’ well-being in mind.²¹ By including vulnerable and marginalized communities in the development of these solutions, we can simultaneously confront both climate change and inequality, thereby ensuring climate justice for all.

¹ Robinson, M. (2019). *Climate justice: A man-made problem with a feminist solution* (p. xii). London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

² Robinson, p. 16

³ Robinson, p. 60

⁴ Robinson, p. 12

⁵ Robinson, p. 62

⁶ Robinson, p. 82

⁷ Robinson, p. 82

⁸ Robinson, p. 67

⁹ Earth Institute. (2019, April 8). *Nick Stern - Inclusive growth story of the 21st Century: The drive to the zero carbon economy*. [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkdbSV6wkWE>

¹⁰ Robinson, p. 91

¹¹ Robinson, pp. 64-65

¹² Robinson, p. 70

¹³ Klein, E. (2018, September 4). Anand Giridharadas on the elite charade of changing the world. *The Ezra Klein Show*. Podcast retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFGWnZwu980>

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- ¹⁴ Roberts, D. (2018). Wealthier people produce more carbon pollution – Even the “green” ones. In Kean, S. (Ed.), *The best American science and nature writing* (p. 137). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- ¹⁵ Robinson, p. 103
- ¹⁶ Robinson, p. 138
- ¹⁷ Robinson, p. 136
- ¹⁸ Earth Institute (2019)
- ¹⁹ Robinson, p. 122
- ²⁰ Robinson, p. i
- ²¹ Robinson, p. 9