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Climate justice in the US

Gopal Dayaneni

Between a rock and a hard place, or the global trash compactor

Most readers are probably familiar with the 1977 science fiction blockbuster movie, *Star Wars*. Remember the trash compactor scene? That scene provides a nice metaphor for the state of global economic and ecological crisis. We are all trapped in a global trash compactor. The walls are closing in. On one side, we have climate chaos with all its myriad consequences. On the other, we have the wall of racial, gender, economic and environmental injustice also closing in on us. In the middle, we have us – everyone. And as the walls begin closing in, what is the first thing you do? You try to push back. Many people concerned over the past 30-plus years with the rapidly increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have been pushing against the wall of climate chaos. Armed with the best science, they have been demanding, and sometimes taking real action to slow the release of carbon into the atmosphere and/or get carbon out of the atmosphere.

Up against the other wall are the communities attempting to push back against the advance of ever increasing inequity, poverty, violence and injustice. Those folks (for the



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sake of the metaphor, we'll call them the rebels) are primarily peoples in the global South and indigenous peoples worldwide and poor communities and communities of colour in the North. These are the people who have been the victims of colonisation, environmental racism, destructive development and economic impoverishment in the name of progress. The North (and elites in the South), instead of pushing back, are running to the centre, staying as far away from the walls closing in as they can, buying themselves some time, *but only time and not very much of it*. As they crowd the centre space, more and more folks are forced up against the walls, allowing those in the centre to ignore both the walls closing in and the folks getting crushed. But we are now at a place in which the walls are so close they can no longer be ignored. So what do we do?

We grab some big piece of metal and try to jam it up there, thinking that a system designed specifically to crush that stuff might be thwarted by it. Let's call these the false solutions. They are everything from the techno-fixes such as biofuels, 'clean coal' and geo-engineering, to the kinds of market-based climate policies that we know won't work, but might, at best, *slow* the rate of collapse. *Slowing down the collapse* – that is the best we can hope for from these false solutions. And the best evidence we have right now says that those false solutions will make the situation worse – accelerating both the ecological collapse and the inequity, thereby making mitigation and adaptation that much harder for the most vulnerable and least responsible.

So what do we do? We need to do exactly what they do in *Star Wars*. Shut the system

down. We need to go R2D2 on a systemic level and address the root causes of the problem. That is what climate justice is about. As David Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park (2009 forthcoming) of the University of Minnesota write:

People of color, indigenous communities, and global South nations bear the brunt of climate disruption in terms of ecological, economic, and health burdens. In addition, climate change infers a naturally occurring process rather than a disruption *created* by specific human activity. For these reasons, activists and scholars have developed the concept of climate justice, which recognizes that the struggle for racial and economic justice is inseparable from any effort to combat climate change. Climate justice begins with an acknowledgement of climate *injustice* and views this problem not as an unfortunate byproduct of climate disruption, but as one of its core elements, and one that must be confronted if climate disruption is to be reversed.

Rights-based climate justice

But what is the R2D2 of climate justice? Here is where the metaphor breaks down. Our solutions will not come from folks on the outside of the crisis, but from coordination of forces within the climate justice movement – where we recognise that we have multiple strategic points of leverage and that we must align these approaches. Currently, the term 'climate justice' is used in many ways, but without some level of strategic alignment in interventions, we will not achieve the level of impact necessary to lead us towards the real solutions we need.

While there is some alignment, and the different approaches to climate justice are in no way mutually exclusive, greater alignment is critical. Let's explore these different takes on climate justice.

As we approach Copenhagen, the question of what kind of global policy on the climate crisis can emerge has very much dominated the political imagination, and in this context climate justice refers to a rights-based/justice-based approach to climate policy. Organisations that take positions that are broadly in line with declarations and statements in the international context on climate justice such as the Bali Principles (2007), the Belem Declaration (2009) and others, are within the climate justice fold. Additionally, a key theme is the subordination of climate policy to UN rights declarations and conventions, such as the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Policy initiatives emerging from this approach include broad opposition to a markets-based approach to carbon (carbon trading), and even more adamantly, opposition to exotic market instruments, namely, offsets; ramp-down to low-carbon economies; a phase-out of fossil fuels; and, probably most importantly, an ecological debt-based mechanism for financing and technology transfer from the North to the South. In this category we include a broad range of groups who share positions, who work domestically and/or internationally and use a broad range of strategies, including research, international solidarity, analysis, public education, advocacy and organising. This approach to climate justice is also present in US climate policy.

In the US, the environmental justice movement has given rise to a climate justice movement that has simultaneously fought to raise

the voices of those communities least responsible for and most severely impacted by climate change, namely poor people of colour and indigenous peoples, and demanded that climate policy does not further exacerbate existing economic and environmental inequality, but redress it. According to Nia Robinson, director of the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative, in an interview with the author, 'the successful creation of climate policy can not happen without the input of communities that have suffered as a result of the US fossil fuel addiction. Our government must begin to recognize these communities as experts or run the risk of creating policies that will do as much harm if not more than climate change itself'. Just as the environmental justice movement transformed the environmental movement by repositioning human communities and equity at the centre of environmentalism and brought a racial and economic justice lens to that work, the climate justice movement has pushed the climate movement in the US. Through the movement's orientation embodied in this use of the term 'climate justice', we see emerging a 'popular movement of movements', led from the grassroots. A key issue for the climate justice/environmental justice movement in the US is articulating that even within the North, there is a South; that this 'South in the North' is owed the same ecological debt (to indigenous peoples, to African Americans for the legacy of slavery and others); and that there are communities disproportionately impacted due to race and class.

Struggles-based climate justice

In recent years, also stemming from the environmental justice and environmental health movements, the use of climate justice has

emerged as referring to the grassroots struggles of communities in the US and Canada who are fighting against the root causes of climate change in their own backyards/frontyards. Put another way, Fenceline and Frontline communities fighting oil, coal, gas, tar sands, incineration, deforestation, etc. Only more recently have these folks emerged on the scene as part of the ‘climate’ issue. For example, communities fighting refineries and power plants across the country as environmental justice struggles against point-source pollution have focused on health, poverty and environmental racism as the core themes of their struggles. Now, confronting the root causes of climate change has emerged as a critical, *unifying* theme. This started in the late 1990s, and really took hold after the 2nd People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC in 2002 (10 years after the 1992 Environmental Justice Leadership Summit). Examples are the struggle against ‘mountain top removal’ in Appalachia (the practice of blowing off entire mountaintops to reach underlying mineral deposits), coal mining on indigenous lands and tar sands development in Canada. These struggles have long been fought locally and are now flashpoints of climate justice as local fights to address the root causes of climate change, while fighting for concrete improvements in the daily lives of communities. There is a strong focus here on accountability to communities and on communities speaking for themselves, while there has been less emphasis, until recently, on the questions of climate policy.

Climate action as climate justice?

Also developing more in recent years is the conflation of climate justice with climate ac-

tion. Some of this is emerging from mainstream environmental organisations and some from the youth climate movement. While we see lots of young people holding posters that say ‘Climate Justice’, we did not see a clear articulation of a justice/rights-based agenda on climate. In fact, many groups that are driving the youth climate movement support policies that run counter to the established principles of climate justice. We are seeing more and more of this use of the term by a broad range of groups who are now using direct action in some form or other to address climate change. There is, again, overlap. Many groups that are engaging in creative direct action or civil disobedience as part of their strategy are also advancing a rights-based framework, are supporting the leadership of those most directly impacted and are attacking the root causes of climate change. But many are not, and differentiating between the two becomes critical. One way to think of this is that climate action is not always action for climate justice. Depending on the theory of change and strategies you are employing, the action must either, and ideally in combination advance a rights-based agenda consistent with the frameworks established collectively by the international climate justice movement; take leadership from and be accountable to those most directly impacted and least responsible; or engage in community struggles on the root causes of climate change.

The strongest movement for climate justice coming out of the US will be one where we have strategic alignment between these groups, and there are many organisations and networks that represent this alignment, particularly the Mobilization for Climate Justice, the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Environmental Justice and

Climate Change Initiative and the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change, among others. We need a rights-based approach to climate policy led by directly impacted communities and grassroots organising that takes direct action in support of and with leadership from communities on the frontlines of the chain of production of climate change. As Clayton Thomas-Muller of the Indigenous Environmental Network observed in an interview with the author:

In the US and across the globe, the movement for Climate Justice has been steadily growing, not simply demanding *action on climate*, but demanding *rights-based and justice-based action on climate* that confronts false solutions, root causes of climate change and amplifies the voices of those least responsible and most directly impacted. Not only are we the front-line of impacts, we are the front line of survival. As Indigenous Peoples, all of humanity is dependent on our traditional, sacred, evolved knowledge of Mother Earth.

If we can create a people-powered, inside-outside approach both in the US and internationally, we have a chance for a just transition to a sustainable future.

Literature

Pellow, D.N., and L. Sun-Hee Park (2009, forthcoming), 'From Climate Change and Climate Disruption to Climate Justice: Analysis and Policy Considerations for African American Communities', Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota.