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Climate Justice Advocacy

By Mary Finley-Brook

Creating international policy to combat climate change is one of the biggest public diplomacy challenges of our time. With slow progress in “state-led” forums such as the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), advocacy coalitions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are pressuring decision-makers and working to build global awareness. The power of NGOs is soft since state actors set emissions targets; nonetheless, climate justice organizations persistently broadcast several important messages, including: 1) industrialized nations along with private sector polluters have an obligation to remedy ecological debt; 2) low-income and marginalized populations are most vulnerable to climatic variations, even though they are generally not high greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters, and; 3) current policy needs to protect the well-being of future generations. This article explores how civil society has been spurred into action by weak state commitments as well as how web-based, bottom-up, and network approaches to influence policy-makers and implement climate change mitigation can broaden our understanding of public diplomacy.

CLIMATE JUSTICE

Climate justice links human rights and development...safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly.¹

...Climate justice is the fair treatment of all people and freedom from discrimination with the creation of policies and projects that address climate change and the systems that create climate change and perpetuate discrimination.²

Although perspectives on climate justice range, non-state approaches generally seek to address root causes, rights, reparations and restorative actions, participation, and empowerment. Marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as Indigenous Peoples and low-income women, are not well-represented in climate policy decision-making.³ Climate change, and sometimes even the policies supposedly aiming to mitigate it, can deepen poverty and inequality, particularly if there are restrictions on local access to resources.⁴ Because of the broad, long-term implications of climatic variation and GHG offsets, scientists and policy-makers should be cognizant of implications for international, intergenerational, and intersectional justice.⁵ Holistic climate justice encompasses the elimination of multiple social inequities while addressing non-human elements, such as watersheds and biodiversity, and considering future implications.

While non-state actors focus more on empowerment, advocacy, and representation of marginalized peoples, state actors approach climate justice as a utilitarian framework to define equity between countries at different stages of development in terms of responsibility for historical and contemporary GHG emissions. Is it fair to limit emissions in countries with robust economic trade, but where a large portion of the population lives in poverty? The BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) set the agenda to assure differentiated mitigation responsibilities “taking into account national circumstances, capabilities, population, development needs, in the context of equitable access to sustainable development.”⁶ Meanwhile, the 39-member Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a state bargaining coalition with less

economic weight but an urgent message about the ramifications of sea-level rise, advocates for large, swift emission reductions.⁷

The issue of climate change demonstrates the extent to which countries are interconnected. If one small country cuts emissions, it is not likely to be enough to alter how citizens of that country experience climate change; nevertheless Costa Rica, Iceland, New Zealand, and Norway have made major reforms to release fewer GHGs. Substantial reforms in China and the U.S. (the two highest GHG emitters, contributing 45% of total international emissions in 2012⁸) could contribute significantly to global mitigation, but getting either country to agree to binding targets has been a point of contention in international negotiations for more than a decade.

Climate justice goes beyond GHG emission allocations among states, since not all citizens of any particular country experience climatic variation in the same way. “Double exposure” is a phrase used to highlight how economic and environmental vulnerabilities interact and magnify: those hit hard by climatic variation were often likely to have lived in a precarious situation prior to extreme weather events and generally have the fewest economic means for recovery.⁹

HISTORY OF CLIMATE JUSTICE NETWORKS

Climate justice networks involve collaboration among hundreds of diverse social and environmental organizations with the common goal of combating climate change in ways that reduce existing economic and political inequalities. A key concern of these civil society networks has been limited and slow state responses within the UNFCCC. The UNFCCC was created in 1992 and the first COP occurred in 1995. At COP 3 in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol was established to create a binding structure to reduce emissions, largely through GHG offsets and technology transfer. In 2000, a Climate Justice Summit held parallel to COP 6 drew attention to the negative impacts of climate policy on local rights, livelihoods, and health.¹⁰ In 2002, social and environmental NGOs gathered in Bali and agreed on 27 Principles of Climate Justice; these were extended from the Environmental Justice Principles recognized since 1991.¹¹

By 2004, it was clear to climate justice activists that the diverse NGOs in the movement advocated different approaches. More radical groups called for “real” action on climate change, in contrast to “false” solutions like GHG emission trading, which they viewed as allowing the wealthy to “pay to pollute.”¹² Focusing on “system change not climate change,” anti-capitalism organizers in a coalition called Climate Justice Now! (CJN!) critiqued market environmentalism and the privatization of nature and the global and local commons in carbon trading schemes.¹³ Tension continues within the climate justice movement, as mainstream environmental groups are relatively comfortable with market-based approaches, but advocate for programs, projects, and policies to be fairer and more participatory.

Slow government progress to address climate change has increasingly spurred non-state actors to collaborate with old and new partners to broadcast demands.¹⁴ On December 12, 2009, at the UNFCCC’s COP 15 in Copenhagen, an estimated 100,000 people from around the world participated in a demonstration and at least 950, mainly youth, were arrested.¹⁵ A 12-day alternative to COP 15, Klimaforum, a people’s climate summit, hosted presentations, exhibitions, concerts, and films.¹⁶ In 2010, at Bolivia’s Cochabamba Summit, participants drafted a “Peoples’ Agreement on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.”¹⁷ This statement criticized state mitigation and adaptation efforts thus far and demanded commitment in future COPs.

A state-centered approach holds out hope that UNFCCC parties can advance change. In 2012, the Doha Amendments emerging from COP 18 led to an extension of Kyoto Protocol commitments to 2020, but this agreement has only been ratified by a few countries since, and thus has not entered into effect. By 2015, at COP 21, the UNFCCC proposes to finish a new universal climate change agreement. Success remains uncertain, leaving scholars like John Foran and Richard Widick to suggest that momentum for progress lies in the hands of non-state actors:

Our best hope is that global civil society organizations, and the movements of youth, indigenous people, labor, and environmentalists, will continue to converge at these [COP] talks, supporting those countries whose positions best address the magnitude of the crisis, and challenging those which do not. Under these conditions, there is a cautious basis for optimism.¹⁸

CLIMATE COALITIONS

Many organizations combat climate change outside the UNFCCC structure. Civil society advocates for climate justice practice action-oriented, people-to-people diplomacy involving cooperation and networking among hundreds of autonomous organizations.¹⁹ There is not one global climate justice movement, but rather many local and regional movements. Distinct foci such as gender, rights of Indigenous Peoples, forests, biodiversity, agriculture, energy, waste management, and green industry can mean a splintering of attention, but can also provide the basis for broad, populous coalitions working across the development spectrum. Climate justice objectives (Figure 1) are cross-sectoral, involving wide-ranging and comprehensive change with ramifications for transportation, energy, agriculture, and more.

Figure 1: Climate Justice Objectives

- Implement food and energy sovereignty
- Guarantee participatory, rights-based management of natural resources
- Enforce indigenous land rights and promote sovereignty
- Defend public ownership of energy, forests, seeds, land, and water
- Re-localize production and consumption
- End excessive consumption by the wealthy
- Protect workers' rights and health
- Eliminate racism and gender injustice
- Create democratically-controlled, clean, renewable energy
- Leave fossil fuels in the ground
- Invest in accessible and sustainable public transportation
- Eliminate climate debt and finance climate change adaptation\

Today's climate coalitions are vibrant due to the emergence of new actors, such as youth activists and grassroots organizations from the Global South, who have not previously collaborated on multiple political scales—from the local to the global. These coalitions put forth solutions that simultaneously reduce emissions and have the potential to narrow economic inequality. For example, the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), a network of more than 650 grassroots groups in 90 countries, argues that trash pickers who live from

recycling and re-using waste do more to reduce GHG emissions than waste-to-energy incineration.²⁰ Tying waste management to climate change mitigation, a central GAIA initiative called “zero waste for zero warming” is a campaign to support grassroots efforts for waste minimization.²¹ To scale up local initiatives, GAIA has created regional campaigns aimed at shifting policy and public finance away from incinerators and landfills, which disproportionately impact low-income communities of color.²²

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY 2.0+

Public diplomacy 2.0+ involves both face-to-face and on-line web 2.0 networking. Initially, climate justice groups relied largely on face-to-face meetings and trainings, such as in Climate Camps.²³ While there is still personal interaction, like at rallies and international meetings such as COPs, digital strategies widen opportunities to network across distances. Organizers do not have to wait for meetings or factor in transportation costs, meaning that they can reach more people with lower financial costs and fewer GHG emissions.

Public diplomacy 2.0+ is exemplified by 350, a network whose name refers to the need to decrease atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations to 350 parts per million to safely maintain life on earth as we know it. The organization creatively and strategically broadcasts through 350.org, an interactive website: a ticker on the bottom of the screen informs visitors of who has just completed a particular action, such as signing a petition. A series of network maps are informative tools, and an effort to make visitors feel like part of a growing international movement. In addition, 350 goes beyond digital communication, emphasizing public gatherings and personal encounters:

We think the climate crisis is about power... We believe that the only way we'll see meaningful action on climate change is if we can counter the power of the fossil fuel industry with the power of people taking collective action. We use online tools to leverage that power, to help those people see themselves as one movement, and to facilitate strategic offline action.²⁴

Website visitors are urged to partake in collective action by hosting meet-ups, workshops and events, starting petitions, organizing campaigns, or initiating a local 350 chapter. This sprawling organization, founded in 2008 by Middlebury College professor Bill McKibben and a group of college friends, has rapidly grown to an international network with over 500,000 supporters, including many youth, and 1,000 partner organizations in 188 countries. Although the strongest support is in the U.S., 350 has regional offices in Brazil and India and is expanding its global presence.

POWER OF YOUTH

Figure 2 illustrates two climate campaigns that receive support from 350, which are both primarily youth-led, and began in the U.S. before spreading to other locations. The first focuses on fossil fuels divestment as a tactic for reducing GHG emissions. Since 2011, nine U.S. colleges and universities have committed to pursue divestment, while dozens of others are considering it. The second, Powershift, is a youth movement which claims that because policy-makers are in

deadlock, youth need to instigate change to address climate change: the website states “This is our moment.”²⁵

Figure 2: Youth Climate Action

Diplomacy Tactics²⁶	Higher Education Fossil Fuels Divestment Campaign	Powershift
Exchange Diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapters on different campuses exchange information and tactics • Efforts in one location or institution encourage and inspire progress in others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth converge to construct coalitions • Training forums provide materials and know-how to take back to local area • Use of terminology of meme to encourage cultural shift
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generates organizing toolkit with sample resolutions, petitions, and support letters • Provides informational resources and mentorship program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizes rallies with motivational speakers
International Broadcasting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of eight international chapters and growing • Use of on-line petitions with real-time tracking to show progress in every institution in each region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of Global Power Shifts (GPS) • Creation of Powershift TV with edited speeches so people not present at live events can hear messages • Use of sophisticated websites: simple text and powerful visual images and

videos

- Use of Flickr photostream for postings from around the world

The Fossil Free Campaign's diplomacy focuses predominantly on industrialized countries, with chapter offices in Australia, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.²⁷ Organizers advocate for divestment on the part of universities, local governments, religious organizations, and other institutions with stocks, bonds, pensions, trust funds, mutual funds, or other fossil fuel investments. Divestment strategies target the top 200 fossil fuel companies based on proven carbon reserves, since these firms have produced the most emissions and are poised to continue to irreversibly damage the environment. Organizers argue that institutions with a mission to serve the public good have a responsibility to divest from companies that make profit from causing harm. Fossil fuel companies are commonly part of university endowments, but divestment provides educational opportunities for campus communities to learn about alternative technologies and shift to greener investment options.

Energy Action Coalition, a youth organization which combats climate change, started in 2005. In 2007, the coalition organized the first U.S.-based Powershift, an action-packed four-day conference for thousands of youth to converge in one location to exchange reasons and tactics for instigating change. With a message of "one movement, many fights," the Powershift 2013 conference linked social and environmental justice during motivational speeches from leaders of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, United We Dream, Dream Defenders, and the Indigenous Environmental Network.²⁸ Eight thousand young people who attended Powershift 2013 took what they learned back to their communities with the goal of advocating for environmental and social justice.

Single-country Powershifts have spread to Australia, Belgium, Canada, India, New Zealand, Sweden, Ukraine, and the U.K. In 2013, 350 organized a Global Power Shift (GPS) in Turkey. Organizers brought together youth leaders from all over the world, particularly focusing on representation from Africa and the Middle East, to provide training on setting goals, sharing compelling stories to inspire others, and organizing networks. Using 350's extensive web toolkit, technical assistance, media contacts, opportunities to apply for grants, and other support, these activists are now launching their own campaigns. This same GPS model was brought to Japan, the Philippines, and Kyrgyzstan and will reach additional locations over time.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Climate justice movements, with youth as some of the loudest voices and boldest actors, seek a cleaner and more equitable future. During the closing plenary of UNFCCC's COP 17, a student from Maine's College of the Atlantic accused delegates of betraying her generation: "You've been negotiating all my life. In that time, you've failed to meet pledges, you've missed targets, and you've broken promises."²⁹ Frustration due to weak state action increases the likelihood of civil disobedience, as seen surrounding COPs and at rallies protesting expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure. For example, the Keystone Pipeline has become a flashpoint to incite protest in Canada and the U.S., because it is perceived to represent on-going commitment to fossil fuels and an unwillingness to recognize and address climate change.

Advocacy for climate justice translates beyond the policy arena. As civil society organizations broadcast what they oppose, they also need to show what they support, such as alternative energy sources built upon new social, political, ecological, and economic relationships. Part of the long-term solution is for the poor, women, Indigenous Peoples, migrants, and other historically marginalized populations to participate in the decision-making process. Civil society networks reinforce, promote, and broadcast grassroots and multi-scale efforts to build low-carbon and sustainable lifestyles. As climate justice movements expand, activists gain power from collaborating to hold leaders accountable, while also working collectively to make change from the bottom upward.

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