

# Just Climate Policy — Just Racial Policy

By J. Andrew Hoerner  
and Nia Robinson

Everywhere we turn, the issues and impacts of climate change confront us. One of the most serious environmental threats facing the world today, climate change, has moved from the realm of scientists and environmentalists to the mainstream. Though the media is dominated by images of polar bears, melting glaciers, flooded lands, and arid deserts, there is a human face to this story as well.

Climate change is not only an issue of the environment; it is also an issue of justice and human rights, one that dangerously intersects race and class. This article focuses on the impacts on African Americans living in the United States. But a similar analysis can be made for many similar communities across the world.

In all cases, people of color, indigenous peoples, and low-income communities bear disproportionate burdens from climate change itself, from ill-designed policies to prevent it, and from the side effects of energy systems that cause it.

## African American Condition Predicts Outcomes

Widespread economic and environmental impacts tend to have concentrated or amplified effects on African Americans. Over a broad range of policy options, the policies that are best for African Americans are also best for the majority of people living in the United States. An effective policy to address the challenges of global warming cannot be crafted until race and equity are part of the discussion from the outset and an integral part of the solution.

African Americans are 13 percent of the United States population and on average emit nearly 20 percent less greenhouse gases than non-Hispanic whites per capita. Though far less responsible for climate change, African Americans are significantly more vulnerable to its effects than non-Hispanic whites. Health, housing, economic well-being,

culture, and social stability are harmed from such manifestations of climate change as storms, floods, and climate variability. African Americans are also more vulnerable to higher energy bills, unemployment, recessions caused by global energy price shocks, and a greater economic burden from military operations designed to protect the flow of oil to the United States.

## Storms, Heat Waves, and Health

The six states with the highest African American population are all in the Atlantic hurricane zone and are expected to experience more intense storms resembling Katrina and Rita in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Global warming is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of heat waves or extreme heat events.<sup>2</sup> African Americans suffer heat death at 150 to 200 hundred percent of the rate for non-Hispanic whites.<sup>3,4</sup>

Seventy-one percent of African Americans live in counties in violation of federal air pollution standards, as compared to 57 percent of the white population.<sup>5</sup> Asthma has strong associations with air pollution, and African Americans have a 36 percent higher rate of incidents of asthma than whites.<sup>6</sup>

A 25 percent reduction in greenhouse gases would reduce infant mortality by at least two percent, asthma by at least 16 percent, and mortality from particulates by at least 6,000 deaths per year.<sup>7</sup> Other estimates run as high as 33,000 fewer deaths per year.<sup>8</sup>



**Insurance and Relief**

In 2006, 20 percent of African Americans had no health insurance, including 14 percent of African American children—nearly twice the rate of non-Hispanic whites.<sup>9</sup>

In the absence of insurance, disasters and illness (which will increase with global warming) can be cushioned by income and accumulated wealth. However, the average income of African American households is 57 percent that of non-Hispanic whites, and median wealth is only one-tenth that of non-Hispanic whites.<sup>10</sup>

Racist stereotypes have been shown to reduce aid donations and impede service delivery to African Americans in the wake of hurricanes, floods, fires and other climate-related disasters as compared to non-Hispanic whites in similar circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

**Energy Price Shocks**

African Americans spend 30 percent more of their income on energy than non-Hispanic whites. Energy price increases have contributed to 70 to 80 percent of recent recessions. The increase in unemployment of African Americans during energy-caused recessions is twice that of non-Hispanic whites, costing the community an average of one percent of income every year.<sup>12</sup> Reducing economic dependence on energy will alleviate the frequency and severity of recessions and the economic disparities they generate.

**Cost of Wars for Oil**

Oil company profits in excess of the normal rate of profit for United States industries cost the average household \$611 in 2006 alone and is still rising. The total cost of war in Iraq borne by African Americans

Photo collage:

Hurricane Katrina survivors in Oakland, 2006 superimposed on a New Orleans street, 2005.

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### Cassandra Carmichael

The impending crisis of global climate change represents a moral failure on our part to be stewards of the Earth and harbingers of justice.

Climate change impacts and poverty are intricately connected. Studies indicate that people in poverty around the world will be the least able to deal with the effects of climate change. Increased drought, flooding, and disease will only exasperate the already dire conditions of those living in poverty.

By 2080, 1.8 billion people could be living in a water-scarce environment. Up to 330 million people could be displaced by flooding and 220-400 million people could be exposed to malaria. By 2020, crop yields will likely decline by 50 percent in Africa,

## National Council of Churches Calls for Climate Action

further exacerbating an already dire situation. With increased drought, rising temperatures, and more erratic rainfall, the UN Development Program predicts up to 600 million more people will face malnutrition.

In Ethiopia and Kenya, two of the world's most drought-prone countries, children age five and under are 36-50 percent more likely to be malnourished if they were born during a drought. In Ethiopia, an additional two million children were malnourished in 2005.

If rain-fed agriculture yields are reduced by 50 percent, 263 million people will be negatively affected. Seventy percent of Africa's population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Economists suggest that crop revenues could drop by 90 percent by the year 2100 as a result of climate change.

Global climate change will also be keenly felt by United States communities of color. For instance, asthma will increase and will disproportionately impact African Americans, who are nearly three times as likely to be hospitalized or killed by asthma than whites.

African Americans are also disproportion-

ately impacted by deaths during heat waves and from worsened air pollution. Future heat waves will be most lethal in the inner cities of the northern half of the country, such as New York City, Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia, where many African American communities are located.

Unemployment and economic hardship associated with climate change will fall most heavily on the African American community. According to a report from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, reducing emissions to 15 percent below 1990 levels would mitigate these adverse health effects of climate change, while concomitantly decreasing air pollution related mortality, saving an estimated 10,000 African American lives per year by 2020.

If we have a commitment to moral vision and justice, the reality of the growing global climate change crisis calls for us to respond with speed, justice, and proper stewardship. ■

*This article was adapted from the National Council of Churches' Climate and Church report. Carmichael is the eco-justice program director at the National Council of Churches.*

will be \$29,000 per household if the resulting deficit is financed by tax increases, and \$32,000 if the debt is repaid by spending cuts.<sup>13</sup> This is more than three times the median assets of African American households.

### A Clean Energy Future Creates More Jobs

Fossil fuel extraction industries employ a far lower proportion of African Americans on average compared to other industries. Conversely, renewable electricity generation employs three to five times as many people as comparable electricity generation from fossil fuels, a higher proportion of whom are African American.

Switching just one percent of total electricity generating capacity per year from conventional to renew-

able sources would result in an additional 61,000 to 84,000 jobs for African Americans by 2030.<sup>14</sup>

A well-designed comprehensive climate plan achieving emission reductions comparable to the Kyoto Protocol would create over 430,000 jobs for African Americans by 2030,<sup>15</sup> reducing the African American unemployment rate by 1.8 percentage points and raising the average African American income by three to four percent.<sup>16</sup>

### Combat Racism for Health and Efficiency

Racism, both institutionalized and individual, is a driver of sprawl, inefficient housing, and irrational transportation policy.

The senseless and wasteful energy, transportation, and housing policies that drive up energy use and

greenhouse gas emissions also damage the physical, environmental and economic health of the African American community.

Because racism causes bad climate policy, the two problems cannot be solved separately. Historically and currently, struggles of relatively powerless people to be free from environmental burdens have been catalysts for essential breakthroughs in environmental policy that benefit everyone.

### Climate Justice: The Time is Now

Ultimately, accomplishing climate justice will require that new alliances be forged and traditional movements be transformed. Global warming amplifies nearly all existing inequalities and injustices that are already unsustainable become catastrophic. Thus, it is essential to recognize that all justice is climate justice and that the struggle for racial and economic justice is an unavoidable part of the fight to halt global warming.

Sound global warming policy is also economic and racial justice policy. Successfully adopting a sound global warming policy will do as much to strengthen the economies of low-income communities and communities of color as any other currently plausible stride toward economic justice.

Domestic reductions in global warming pollution and support for such reductions in developing nations financed by “polluter pays” principles provide the greatest benefit to African Americans, the peoples of Africa, and people across the Global South.

Currently, legislation is being drafted, proposed, and considered without any significant input from the communities most affected. Special interests are represented by powerful lobbies, while traditional environmentalists often fail to engage people of color, indigenous peoples, and low-income communities until after the political playing field has been defined and limited to conventional environmental goals.

A strong focus on equity is essential to the success of the environmental cause, but equity issues cannot be adequately addressed by isolating the voices of communities that are disproportionately impacted.

Engagement in climate change policy must be moved from the White House and the halls of Congress to social circles, classrooms, kitchens, and congregations.

The time is now for those disproportionately affected to assume leadership in the climate change debate, to speak truth to power, and to assert rights to social, environmental, and economic justice. Taken together, these actions affirm a vital truth that will bring communities together: Climate Justice is Common Justice. ■

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*This article is excerpted from a comprehensive report written by J. Andrew Hoerner and Nia Robinson entitled “A Climate of Change” published by the EJCC Initiative and available in full at their website, [www.ejcc.org](http://www.ejcc.org).*

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ISSN#1532-2874

*RP&E* was first published in 1990 by Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation's Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. In the interest of dialogue, *RP&E* publishes diverse views. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors, Urban Habitat, or its funders.

This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



**Photos:** (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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