



Climate Inequality: Forgotten History



Even though you and I are in different boats, you in your boat and we in our canoe, we share the same River of Life. What befalls me, befalls you. And downstream, in this River of Life, our children will pay for our selfishness, for our greed, and for our lack of vision.

*Oren Lyons
United Nations, 1992*

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Introduction

Climate change has been put forth largely as a technological problem. That is, it is the coal plants, gas-guzzling vehicles and energy-intensive buildings that are the issue. The solutions being proposed are largely technological as well: carbon capture, nuclear power, “clean” coal technology, wind turbines, solar power, and geo-engineering. While perhaps useful from a particular perspective, those proposing these technological solutions rarely address the very real political and economic roots of climate change.

Instead of a strictly techno-fix orientation toward climate change, we suggest a more honest, and ethical understanding of the problem. In fact, climate change is the symptom of a larger crisis that has been in the making for a long period of time, but was ignored for the sake of wealth creation and economic prosperity for a privileged few. The problem is that all along this historical journey to plentitude, the realities of extreme social and economic inequality — both domestically and internationally were deemed acceptable by those benefitting from the wealth creation.

A Brief History: Creating Climate Change

The wealthiest nations, according to the Human Development Report, are responsible for “about 7 out of every 10 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) that have been emitted since the start of the industrial era” (1). Today, in the U.S. the average person is responsible for about 18 metric tons (1 metric ton = 1 tonne) of CO₂ per year (2). In contrast, those countries on the bottom of the U.N. Human Development Index emit less than 0.1 metric ton per year (3). This is directly attributable to the energy and economic infrastructure across societies. The human side of the climate calculus is equally stark. It is estimated that more than one-quarter of the population of developing countries, or 1.22 billion people, are living in extreme poverty making less than \$1.25 a day (4). According to the World Development Indicators (2008), 2.4 billion of the world’s population lives on less than \$2.00 per day (5). Clearly, Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, two leading researchers/activists from India, were correct when they stated that global warming occurs in an unequal world (6).

For some, the solution to these vast inequalities is to promote globalization and market liberalization (that is, the industrialized country model), to nearly every region in the world. Translated, this means using the market to solve the economic and environmental problem. Even as the issue



of rising CO₂ is dominant on the international climate agenda, the World Bank's International Financial Corporation (IFC) increased its lending for fossil fuel projects 165 percent in FY 2008. On the whole, the World Bank Group increased its fossil-fuel lending by 60 percent in the same year (7). Yet, these solutions and the condition of extreme inequality continue to be obfuscated as many in the industrial world dare not ask the critical question: emissions for whom and for what purpose? Can we really regard greenhouse gases (GHGs) emitted from subsistence farmer's livestock equivalent in nature to GHGs emitted for sports cars and 10,000 square foot single family homes? By focusing the conversation strictly on the global quantity of GHGs without regard for social realities, we reinforce inequality.

Of course, the idea that somehow, our development model ought to be transferred to the rest of the world only works if we forget history -- forget the degradation of air and water; the commodification of resources; the removal of Indigenous peoples from their homelands and appropriation of their lands; and the exploitation of people and their work.

The Forgotten History

Industrial development in the United States happened because of fossil fuels. The use of coal and petroleum was accompanied by exploitation of people and nature. On the human and environmental side, fossil fuel development went alongside the exploitation of people as slaves and low-wage labor; clearing of forests; removal of Indigenous populations; and environmental degradation resulting from heavy pollution of land, water and air. It changed the world.

As the politics of U.S. climate policy continues to unfold, the historical realities of unequal development are demonstrating that this nation is not yet ready to proverbially confront its own demons. While there is a certain proportion of the population in the United States, and among the global elite, that enjoy the fruits of highly resource-intensive energy and agricultural systems, the fact is that the social and physical infrastructures for such benefits were built on the backs of many. In nearly every sector, from housing and transportation to forestry and mining, the expansive growth in economic wealth has its dark underbelly.

It is in fact prophetic, that 150 years after the *intended* eradication of the Indigenous commons in the United States, the same philosophy underlies the elitist approach to climate change. Speaking of the primitive nature of Indigenous peoples, then Senator Henry Dawes proclaimed, "unless



some system is marked out by which there shall be a separate allotment of land to each individual [...] you will look in vain for any general casting off of savagism. Common property and civilization cannot co-exist” (8). With the transformation of nature from commons to commodity, the devastation that fell upon Native people and the ecosystem is all too clear. The expropriation of nature from Indigenous peoples was deliberate. By mid-19th century, 420 million acres of land (or 22 percent of the continental area) had been taken from Indian tribes (9). Clear cutting forests (now referred to as “carbon sinks”) for agriculture and mining of energy resources became the symbolic and material representation of modern civilization. Nature was re-constructed as natural resources, and these resources on Indigenous lands were immediately put into production. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Oklahoma territory alone produced “approximately 130 billion barrels of oil annually, and 39 corporations were extracting an average of 1.5 million tons of coal per year in the Choctaw nation” (10).

Ironically, no one is immune from the destructive tendencies of this development path. Yesterday’s beneficiaries become today’s victims. Agriculture and farming has been captured by big corporate agribusiness. Between 1940 and 1970, farmers went from 18 percent to fewer than 5 percent of the U.S. labor force. Anuradha Mittal of the Oakland Institute writes, that in “the 1930s, 25 percent of the U.S. population lived on the nation’s 6 million farms. Today America’s 2 million farms are home to less than 2 percent of the population. There are more people behind bars than behind the wheel of a tractor! Small family farms have been replaced by large commercial enterprises, with 8 percent of U.S. farms accounting for 72 percent of sales” (11). The trend continues: “between 1994 and 1996, about 25 percent of all U.S. hog farmers, 10 percent of all grain farmers, and 10 percent of dairy farmers went out of business” (12). In the globalized economy, small-holder farmers receive a miniscule portion of the international price of the commodity.

Marketing Nature

As the question of what to do in a post-Kyoto international policy arena continues to be debated, the implementation of market-based “flexibility mechanisms” remains a cornerstone of developed countries’ policy agenda. Déjà vu. For Indigenous peoples, the establishment of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) is a reminder that climate change is now the vehicle for global disenfranchisement and exploitation. The intent of REDD is to assist developing countries in reducing deforestation by creating a market of carbon credits generated



from activities that keep forests standing (13). Now proud owners of carbon credits, governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations who purchase these activities can claim the credits as reductions in their emissions inventories or trade them in an artificially created carbon market. This new market is created precisely because industrialized countries like the U.S. have denuded their landscape. Forests, on a global scale, provide for the livelihoods of 240 million people and this sector accounts for more than 8 percent of developing countries' GDP. This includes access to fishing, biomass for cooking and heat, and subsistence foods. Yet, global forest cover has dropped by at least 20 percent since the times of modern agricultural systems, with much of the historic deforestation having occurred in industrialized countries. Furthermore, while the forest area of industrial countries has increased over the past three decades it has declined by almost 10 percent in developing countries (14). This trend underlines the importance of how the global conversation around reforestation is framed and the necessity of acknowledging historic versus recent deforestation when formulating climate policy around land use. It is for these reasons that the Indigenous Environmental Network pursued eliminating REDD as an option. It is also why the Indigenous Peoples Global Summit on Climate Change produced the Anchorage Declaration, which in part states: "All initiatives under Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) must secure the recognition and implementation of the human rights of Indigenous Peoples, including security of land tenure, ownership, recognition of land title according to traditional ways, uses and customary laws and the multiple benefits of forests for climate ecosystems, and Peoples before taking any action." There is no doubt that reducing the destruction of forests is a valued goal. The issue is not whether or not to save the forests. Rather, the question is whether, given historical experience, the market is the proper vehicle for their global preservation and maintenance, and for the well-being of communities who rely on forests for their livelihood.

Urban Inequality

The inequity of our social and environmental history in urban development cannot escape the equality lens either. For this, it is instructive to look at the U.S. during the decades following World War II, when the economic engine of the nation was expanding at unprecedented levels. As we are now aware, this economic boon was accompanied by an equivalent increase in the emissions of climate inducing greenhouse gases. The infrastructure of two of today's major greenhouse gas emitting sectors — the building sector and the automobile-based transportation system — were built with massive public and private investment. Through the Federal Housing Administration, more than 35 million home mortgages and 47,205 multifamily mortgages were insured since



1934 (15). A massive system of roads and highways were also constructed, and in the process created metropolitan sprawl and converted prime agricultural land into suburban development. Undoubtedly, the post-War boom demonstrated extraordinary economic capacity but the environmental consequences of this public and private investment have become all too apparent.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, the building sector comprises more than 38 percent of the country's GHG emissions (16), and 28 percent (17) of its energy consumption, while the transportation sector accounts for approximately one-third of its GHG emissions and 34 percent (18) of its energy consumption. Between 1949 and 1970 energy for transportation doubled and residential consumption nearly tripled. This environmentally unsustainable infrastructure and the social investment that made it possible, was also responsible for substantial inequalities.

As the opportunities for some Americans expanded, and the Suburban house-with-a-picket fence ideal came within the grasp of the burgeoning middle class, other communities were deliberately segregated from these same opportunities. Blinded by the need for more is better, and newer is improved, public programs greatly expanded investment in new housing, diverting capital out of older cities and rural communities. Codes prohibited neighborhood “integration”(19) through racial covenants, redlining and housing regulation so that by the 1970s, less than 2 percent of publicly subsidized mortgages went to people of color (20). Redlining — where banks literally drew red lines around areas that, by their estimation, were not deserving of capital investment — further diverted much needed investment from city neighborhoods to suburban homeowners and businesses (21). The national highway system in city after city was planned and engineered directly through low-income and communities of color, not only destroying their homes and businesses, but the social networks that made them vibrant and resilient. In the end, this carbon-based transport system was also used as an effective segregation mechanism. Present today are the ramifications of policies that, in a critical way, created a high energy, carbon intense *and* class and racially segregated human settlement pattern.

What does this have to do with climate change? The issue of energy burden and vulnerability within poorer communities is a structural issue that will require structural solutions. Income plays a significant role in determining energy consumption and greenhouse gas contributions both within and across countries. In the U.S., the lowest-income households consume only a fraction of their upper income counterparts, and the energy consumption-GHG contribution gap is widening. Given these capital deprivation and historical segregationist policies, it should be of



no surprise that communities of color are now living in drafty inefficient housing that is highly energy intensive and which results in ever-increasing energy burdens.

While the suburban middle class may consume higher overall levels of energy due to the size of their homes, and therefore produce larger carbon footprints, low-income families actually pay *more* for using less. On average, about 16 percent of a low income family's income goes toward paying for energy, compared to the general population average of 5 percent (22).

Formulating a Comprehensive and Just Climate Policy Framework

At both a domestic and international level, there is extreme inequality in terms of who contributes to climate change and who benefits from the highly GHG-intensive development patterns. When we talk about climate change and equality, and issues of low-income communities and the poor, we need to replace the traditional charity model that conveniently forgets history. We must shift from viewing the government response to assist poor communities as a “handout” and subsidies to the wealthy and corporations as “development.” This requires acknowledging the historical structural policies that have created much of the disparities in development, energy use and greenhouse gas emissions we see today.

Many of the dominant climate policy proposals perpetuate the status quo. New climate solutions focus on technology-based greening. These include replacing coal with nuclear; replacing low-mileage SUVs with energy-efficient vehicles; and building large-scale wind and solar farms. Unfortunately, what remains is the unequal access to transportation; mining and degradation of Indigenous lands; energy intensive industrial agriculture; and new financial growth opportunities for large corporate investors. Drawing from the market-based policy regime, these responses to climate change generally rely on the mythic free trade rhetoric or the technofix approach. They also mask the true social and economic costs that belies these myths. While each American averages between 17 and 20 metric tons of CO₂ per year (depending on whether we are in a recession or not) to maintain the domestic economy, most have no knowledge of this fact. Our societal obligation has been denigrated to that of consumer, and we are largely unaware of the resource degradation, pollution, human toll and other structural ramifications of our purchases on other members of society.



If climate change is truly to be addressed, the extreme energy dirty economy that is based on wasteful and polluting activities benefiting the few, must be replaced with a green economy benefiting the many. Effective climate policy requires actions that result in real benefits at the local community level in housing, jobs, sustainable livelihoods and community infrastructure. This will require a realignment of public dollars (at all levels) towards localized initiatives and a move toward policy structures that are less market- and commodity-based and more regulatory and commons-based. Nobel Laureate economists now acknowledge, what Indigenous people have always known, that commons-based governance is more effective and successful in managing shared spaces and resources (23).

At their base, future climate proposals must acknowledge the historically unequal nature of past energy and infrastructure policies, and they must be evaluated through a justice lens. We must also remember that the two are intimately linked: the production of climate change and creation of social inequality went hand in hand; thus robust, long-lasting solutions to climate change must inherently be equitable in order to be sustainable. In current climate policy discussions, there are gaps between climate policy that incorporates social equality and climate policy that is acceptable by mainstream environmentalists. Justice advocates are often admonished not to challenge environmental policy with the phrase, “Don’t sacrifice the good for the perfect.” Unfortunately, as history has proven, those making the sacrifice within the space between our ideals of the “perfect” and the “good” are Indigenous peoples, people of color and the poor.



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