NGOs and the Climate Justice Movement in the Age of Trumpism

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Abstract The election of Donald Trump presents a new context for climate justice. Local and national fights have gained importance, and building a mass movement has become a major strategic priority. NGOs need to support grassroots, frontline, and social movement leadership, overcoming structural challenges and joining fights on issues not traditionally associated with stopping climate change. These alliances of movements and NGOs represent the best hope for people and the planet.

Keywords Grassroots organizations · Social movements · Paris Agreement · Solidarity · Frontline leadership · Philanthropy

What is Climate Justice?

Traditionally, climate change has been defined as an environmental problem. Images of polar bears and melting ice caps seemed to dominate when climate change first gained wide public notice several decades ago. In recent years, however, there has been a shift: as climate impacts have become more real, threatened communities and social movements around the world have organized and challenged the apolitical, environmentalist, top-down approach of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), pushing instead for a framework of ‘climate justice.’ Because of this political action, there is a growing realization that

climate change is a problem for *people* and that certain people are particularly vulnerable: namely, those who are poor, isolated, or marginalized, especially in the Global South.

The climate justice framework also draws attention to the fact that not only are the poorest and most marginalized the most susceptible to harm from climate change – they are also, by and large, the least responsible for causing it in the first place. Therefore, the industrialized countries that have benefited from large-scale emissions have a moral obligation to support those who are suffering from a problem they did not create.

In addition, mandates for climate action that do not carefully consider questions of global equity and fairness are likely to further harm the most marginalized. For example, demanding that a developing country immediately cease fossil fuel consumption, without financial and technological transfers to facilitate a transition to renewable energy, will mean leaving people without access to energy. This is an outcome that is both unjust and, in many countries, politically untenable.

For all these reasons, the climate justice movement has said for years that equity is a prerequisite for ambitious climate action. Only a global climate regime that is genuinely fair can spur the kind of international cooperation that is needed to solve the crisis. And only national level policies that ensure a ‘just transition’ to a sustainable world will enjoy the popular support needed to sustain this action. In other words, there is no easy technical fix to the climate crisis. Rather, sweeping social and economic changes are needed: not just a drastic and immediate reduction of emissions (itself a project that requires change at a revolutionary scale), but a restructuring of global and national power relations.

This will require a new level of progressive internationalism: unprecedented international cooperation between

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governments to dramatically reduce emissions as quickly and equitably as possible, and international solidarity between communities to ensure socially just policies and resist political interests trying to delay or weaken climate action.

Above all, we must all recognize that our struggle is a collective one.

Prospects for Progressive Internationalism After Trump

The Paris Agreement, the new global climate regime negotiated through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and agreed to in December 2015, was a sign that the international cooperation we need might indeed be possible. In and of itself, it did not represent a sufficient level of ambition, as it fell drastically short of being a fair and adequate solution to the global climate crisis (Harvey 2015). However, it sent an important signal that governments were willing to work together at least to some extent, while providing social movements and activists an important tool with which to bring forward demands for stronger climate action.¹

But the political world of 2015 looked rather different from that of 2017. The election of Donald Trump was part and parcel of a global rise in reactionary nationalism. The ideology of ‘us versus them’ – ‘America First’ and its other guises – has gained political traction around the world. Politics of hate, division, and fear are on the rise, with increasing rhetoric and policy directed against groups of people based on race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, gender identity and more. Trump’s rise must also be seen in the context of the political power of the fossil fuel and other industries whose only stake in the climate and environment is the extent to which they can profit off of its exploitation. This toxic blend of ugly right-wing populism and corporate self-interest unfortunately fits perfectly into a vicious cycle of crises brought on and exacerbated by climate change.

Author Christian Parenti refers to this phenomenon as the ‘politics of the armed lifeboat’ (Parenti 2011: 11). The wealthy, especially in the Global North, turn inwards, focusing on protecting what they have rather than getting behind global solutions to the climate crisis and increasing resilience and living standards everywhere. Often under false populist rhetoric – as demonstrated by Donald Trump in the United States – these politics leave behind not just those most vulnerable to climate change in the Global South, but poor and marginalized populations in wealthy

countries as well. As crises increase in intensity, more migrants are likely to seek refuge in the Global North. In a world dominated by reactionary politics, this increased migration could trigger increased xenophobia, further militarization of borders, and increased repression of those seeking to build a more just world.

In this context, traditional environmentalist narratives about climate change – which tend to appeal to the same liberal elites against whom the populist wave has arisen – seem virtually powerless. They interpret the threat of climate change, and the needed solutions, far too narrowly to address the real crises and confront these toxic political ideologies. Knowing that needed global climate action will only succeed if it is rooted in principles of equity and justice, we must then acknowledge that stemming the tide of climate change requires defeating reactionary politics. This can only be done by building alliances between environmental organizations and their supporters and frontline affected communities – people of color, people living in poverty, people who are disaffected and disenfranchised by the neoliberal economic order.

In some ways, Trump administration overreach has opened up the possibility for such broad alliances. The administration’s announcement that it would withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement on global climate action was followed by a noticeable spike in public interest and media coverage of climate change. Much of that media coverage focused on rebutting aspects of Trump’s speech in which he claimed that the Paris Agreement is ‘unfair’ to US interests – showing how US commitments are tiny compared to the global need and even compared to those of many other countries (Popovich and Fountain 2017). There may well be an opening in the US for mainstream framing of climate change as a global justice issue, thanks to Trump presenting a common enemy for NGOs, movements, and opinion leaders.

NGOs and the Climate Justice Movement in International Spaces

The long-standing critique of NGOs is that they speak *for* impacted people instead of providing the resources and holding space for the people most directly impacted to speak *for themselves*. By assuming the authority to speak about issues affecting other people, NGOs can block social movements from being included in decision-making and can censor the very voices of those they claim to represent when their demands fall outside of what is politically acceptable. Social movements and their NGO allies developed the framework of climate justice precisely to respond to this situation, and over the past decade, a slow shift *has* been taking place in how NGOs are addressing

¹ <http://www.actionaid.org/news/climate-agreement-falls-short-fair-deal-paris-only-beginning>, accessed 4 April 2017.

climate change and engaging with governments, communities, and each other. This shift has been happening on at least three levels: strategy, discourse and urgency.

Strategically, there has been an increasing recognition that traditional policy advocacy is no longer sufficient to effect social change, particularly at the scale demanded by the climate crisis (Skocpol 2013: 10–11, 116–118). More and more NGOs have begun speaking the language of mobilization and power building – understanding that external political pressure on decision-makers is needed to support insider policy advocacy.

NGOs have increasingly used narratives around climate impacts, tying the problem of climate change to effects it is already having on communities around the world. NGO advocacy and messaging on issues such as adaptation and ‘loss and damage’ (the UNFCCC negotiating track on dealing with climate impacts so severe that communities are unable to adapt to them) has intensified, although the focus for most northern NGOs remains on mitigation.

In terms of urgency, many NGOs – which are traditionally most comfortable pushing for incremental change that does not fundamentally challenge power, particularly at the global level (Fernando 2011) – are recognizing that the onset of the climate crisis is so imminent, and its roots are so deep-seated in the overall global economy, that much deeper and more radical change is necessary. This has caused a disconnect, however, as most NGOs are unable to advocate for revolutionary change given their funding and supporter bases; at the same time, this new recognition that radical change is what is needed has opened new possibilities for coalition building and partnerships that were not feasible in the past.

To be successful, NGOs need to continue to adopt a broader analysis and embrace working in connection with community-based organizations to build *legitimate* grassroots power. This requires recognizing, lifting up, and connecting local struggles – like the fight of communities in the South Bronx against air pollution that is causing some of the highest rates of asthma in the country – to the broader fight against climate change. NGOs also need to understand (and, ideally, act on) the need for radical rather than incremental change.²

Capitalizing on Growing NGO Unrest in the UN Climate Negotiations, 2012–2015

In 2012, the Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice (DCJ), a network primarily driven by organizations and social movements from the Global South, was launched

with a ten-point platform of people’s demands relating to climate change policy. These demands ranged from stopping fossil fuel projects and ensuring people’s access to renewable energy, to fighting for land reform and farmers’ control over seeds, to creating climate jobs to secure decent jobs for all, to stopping market-based instruments and free trade agreements.³ In the UNFCCC negotiations, climate justice policy groups distilled these demands into three primary buckets – energy, food, and justice for impacted people – that roughly corresponded to the core UNFCCC negotiation tracks of mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage, while being easily translatable into a set of people’s demands relevant to communities around the world.

This was a conscious attempt to bridge the NGO-dominated UNFCCC policy space with the concerns of organizations and people outside this space – making the UNFCCC relevant to these movements while simultaneously making popular demands visible and relevant to NGOs. Thanks to the aforementioned increased recognition among NGOs about the importance of connecting with everyday people’s struggles, growing support for robust policy demands going beyond incremental tweaks to an unjust system, and increasing disillusionment with the slow pace of international negotiations, a new constellation of civil society organizations began ramping up pressure on policymakers using the DCJ demands as a foundation.

The civil society walkout from the 19th session of the Conference of the Parties in Warsaw (COP19) in 2013 was an early manifestation of civil society’s new orientation. The particular nature of COP19, in which negotiations made little headway and the entire conference was overshadowed by corporate capture (including sponsorship of the event by big polluters and a ‘Coal & Climate Summit’ held simultaneously), was such that it was possible to build consensus among a wide swath of civil society to stage a highly public walkout. Though there was vocal opposition from some mainstream NGOs, 800 people representing NGOs, social movements, labor unions, women’s groups, indigenous peoples’ organizations, and more participated in the walkout, which set the media narrative about the COP and provided a taste of the power of collective action.

The walkout was empowering, but it was built on opposition to a particularly egregious COP. The next step was to build a politically relevant coalition around a set of positive demands. In early 2015, DCJ organizations and movements were able to do this, again by using the core people’s demands as a basis, creating a simple ‘People’s Climate Test’ against which the climate justice movement would judge the outcome of the international climate

² <https://medium.com/@DemandClimateJustice/negotiating-who-lives-and-dies-5d400021b860>, accessed 30 March 2017.

³ <http://demandclimatejustice.org/about>, accessed 3 April 2017.

negotiations – specifically, the agreement expected to be reached in Paris in 2015.⁴

The People's Climate Test was developed and endorsed by not only DCJ movement organizations but also by a handful of northern NGOs such as Oxfam, Greenpeace and CIDSE (the network of Catholic development agencies). This was a concrete manifestation of growing solidarity between some mainstream NGOs and the climate justice movement. It was quickly followed by a much more robust policy document created by an expanded alliance of NGOs and social movements: a 'CSO Equity Review' of country commitments to the Paris Agreement (the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions or INDCs).

Through this process, coalition members took climate justice principles and translated them into a powerful policy document with direct relevance to the Paris negotiations. The CSO Equity Review contained a quantitative analysis of each country's 'fair share' of climate action based on a range of assumptions that the entire coalition found agreeable, and an evaluation of each country's INDC relative to their fair share (Civil Society Review 2015: 1–36). This was no small achievement, as the coalition included mainstream NGOs like World Wildlife Fund, Christian Aid, and Oxfam; social movement groups from Asia, Africa and Latin America; the International Trade Union Confederation; and others. The CSO Equity Review is the most positive signal yet that NGOs can align with the analyses and demands of the climate justice movement.

However, the *resistance* to the CSO Equity Review is as important to note as the review itself. Many northern NGOs were uncomfortable with the Review, as its policy implications (for instance that most developed countries would need to increase their commitments fivefold or more in order to meet their fair shares) were seen as unrealistic and untenable. This remains the key flashpoint in considering how far NGOs are able to go in standing in solidarity with social movements and frontline communities: to what extent can they take principled positions even if it means short-term sacrifices in access to and credibility with decision-makers and funders?

Confronting Trump: NGOs and the Climate Justice Movement in the US

In the US, as elsewhere, the fight for climate justice is increasingly taking place at the local and national level, led by social movements and NGO allies. Protests and civil disobedience stopped the Keystone XL pipeline in 2015, and the historic encampments at Standing Rock stopped the

Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016, inspiring solidarity actions across the country and around the world. Even though these pipeline decisions have been reversed by the Trump administration, frontline communities now know that when they fight to protect their land, their water, their territory, and their families from climate and environmental injustice, they can win. Moreover, groups recognize that insider approaches will be much more difficult under the Trump administration, so achieving climate justice will require more local organizing and direct action. The leadership of community-based organizations will be needed more than ever before, and it is imperative that NGOs find new ways to support and respect that leadership.

It is important to understand that many community-based climate justice organizations in the US come out of the earlier Environmental Justice Movement. That movement emerged because pollution and contamination severely impacted people of color and working class people, yet their struggles against the injustices of poverty and environmental racism were rarely recognized by or included in mainstream environmentalism. Working class communities of color are much more likely to be situated near a coal plant or a trash incinerator, and those communities have higher rates of asthma or cancer, but when members of those communities fought back against this environmental injustice, they were seen as racial or economic justice activists rather than as fellow environmentalists.⁵

In many ways, the struggle for climate justice in the US is a continuation of the struggle for environmental justice, which means that many community-based, grassroots organizations see the struggle against climate change in their local fights to clean up contaminated water, stop air pollution, and abandon the use of toxic pesticides. For these communities, the impacts of climate change are not just the abstract, global dangers of rising temperatures, floods, or droughts; they are the immediate impacts of being poisoned, sickened, exploited, and abused. However, the difficulty that these communities have had in getting recognition for their struggles points out that the fundamental problem is that our society makes working class communities of color and their struggles invisible, not just that we have an economy that runs on dirty energy. Stopping climate change also means stopping the racism, the sexism, the homophobia, the exploitation, and the oppression that renders people voiceless and without rights.

For these reasons, frontline climate justice organizations argue that stopping climate change means more than just transitioning to 'clean' or 'carbon neutral' technologies; it also means a transition from the broader model of

⁴ <http://www.commondreams.org/peoples-test-climate-2015>, accessed 2 April 2017.

⁵ http://www.ucc.org/justice/advocacy_resources/pdfs/environmental-justice/almost-everything-you-need-to-know-about-environmental-justice-english-version.pdf, accessed 7 April 2017.

destructive extraction, exploitative production, and excessive consumption – what the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) calls the ‘Dig, Burn, Dump’ economy⁶ – which is the root cause of the climate crisis that is impacting people and the planet and is connected to centuries of structural oppression and colonialism.

CJA is an alliance of community-based climate justice organizations representing working class and queer communities of color in the US. As one of the leading grassroots movements for climate justice in the US, CJA is importantly raising up the idea of ‘just transition’ and emphasizing how many communities across the United States need good, ‘living’ economies that are fair and ‘provide community wellbeing, democratize decision-making, and promote local control of resources.’⁷ This type of broad analysis will be especially important when confronting Trump, who has repeatedly presented his assaults on environmental protections as ways to get people back to work. The fact that Trump was able to capture the votes of coal miners and others who viewed stopping climate change as a threat to their livelihoods and the future of their families points clearly to the need for the climate justice movement, led by working class frontline organizations, to be able to articulate how good jobs and livelihoods go hand in hand with taking care of the earth.

Centering the fight against climate change in the views, the needs, and the concerns of working class communities and people of color is a major task and will require broad collaboration between frontline communities and social movements with NGOs, based in solidarity and accountability. CJA was one of the core organizers of the People’s Climate March (PCM) in 2014, along with many allied environmental NGOs. One of their main contributions to the PCM was ensuring that the organizing process was based on and in the Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing, a set of principles laid out at a convening of environmental justice activists and environmental health advocates in 1996 in Jemez, New Mexico.⁸ The Principles laid the groundwork for how middle class, largely white, professional activists at larger environmental NGOs could work in solidarity with, and be accountable to, working class organizations based in communities of color who were the ones actually facing the direct environmental harms.

Because of these Principles – which emphasize inclusivity, bottom-up organizing, letting ‘people speak for themselves,’ solidarity, and self-transformation – the PCM organizers asked frontline communities and constituencies

to lead the March with a banner that said ‘Frontlines of the Crisis, Forefront of Change.’ By putting indigenous peoples facing pipelines; black, Asian, and Latino communities fighting incinerators; Kentuckians trying to stop strip mining and restore rural economies; and many other communities ‘born into struggle’ at the front of the largest climate change march in history, the organizers sent a clear message that stopping climate change requires the leadership of historically marginalized and oppressed communities (Kohn 2014).

Following Trump’s election, CJA emphasized the need to continue to organize with communities as well as ‘have difficult conversations about privilege, class, and race with our allies for greater alignment’ and ‘put forth a call to philanthropy and responsible investors to join our efforts.’⁹ These are clear ways forward in the US. NGOs need to continue reaching out to and building relationships with grassroots organizations to increase accountability and consultation, and they must also continue having difficult conversations about social justice with their staff and their members. NGOs can play an important role by encouraging the philanthropic sector to join this effort to accomplish our collective goals.

What is the Role for Development NGOs Specifically?

As organizations that work directly with people from around the world who are most vulnerable to climate impacts, development NGOs have a unique role to play in this political landscape.

Many development NGOs can command substantial resources, political connections, media outreach capability, and more. Yet we also have a real connection with frontline communities in the Global South. Thanks to this positioning, we have the potential to engage in dialogue about climate justice with mainstream environmentalists, build solidarity and a sense of common struggle between frontline communities in the Global South and their counterparts in the North, and bring stories of climate impacts happening now into the sheltered offices of policymakers in the Global North.

Unfortunately, many of us are hamstrung by our funding sources or membership bases. But in the current political context there is a real opportunity for development NGOs to take a principled stand and actively take sides with the people they purport to serve. This must mean standing by their demands, even when those demands seem unrealistic or cause discomfort in the halls of power.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/cjaourpower/status/673084249906483200>, accessed 31 March 2017.

⁷ <http://www.ourpowercampaign.org/about>, accessed 7 April 2017.

⁸ <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf>, accessed 1 April 2017.

⁹ http://www.ourpowercampaign.org/the_end_of_the_inside_game, accessed 30 March 2017.

After all, causing discomfort in the halls of power is the absolute least we must do now if we are to preserve our vision of a just and sustainable world.

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