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12/05/2024
POSC 358AX
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Climate Justice Without Borders: The Need for Stronger International Governance

The concept of climate justice has emerged as a critical framework for understanding the intersected nature of social equity, environmental degradation, and political accountability on a global and transnational scale. Climate justice is grounded in the understanding that marginalized communities, who often contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions, bear the costs of climate change's impacts. This configuration accentuates the moral obligation to address these disparities by including diverse voices in decision-making processes and securing fair distribution of resources. As climate change transcends national borders, its impacts are not confined to the regions that generate the majority of greenhouse gas emissions. Rather, vulnerable populations in developing countries often suffer the consequences of environmental degradation, facing food insecurity, displacement, and health crises heightened by climate-related events. This transnational nature of climate change highlights the need for governance structures and robust international cooperation that prioritize the voices and needs of those most affected. This paper argues that climate justice is essential not only for addressing the ethical dimensions of the climate crisis but also for promoting effective transnational political action. By modifying climate action into a mechanism for social equity, we can combat the existential threat posed by climate change while cultivating a more sustainable and just future. The establishment of climate justice frameworks will require not only national commitments but also strong international collaborations that acknowledge and empower those disproportionately affected by climate impacts, thus reinforcing the necessity of a collective response to this global challenge.

The concept of climate justice has evolved significantly over recent decades, emerging as a vital framework within the global discourse on climate change. Historical movements advocating for environmental protection laid the groundwork for recognizing climate justice, marked by key milestones such as the Paris Agreement, which acknowledges the urgent need for fairness and equity in climate action. Central to this evolution has been the influence of indigenous and grassroots movements, emphasizing the rights of vulnerable communities disproportionately affected by climate change despite contributing minimally to the crisis. As articulated by the UN Development Program, "climate justice suggests that the responsibilities in addressing climate change should be divided according to who is contributing most to the problem, while addressing systemic, socioeconomic, and intergenerational inequalities" (UNDP). This principle stresses the need for reparative justice and accountability, recognizing the historical responsibilities of industries and nations that have benefited from industrial pursuits and fossil fuel consumption. Currently, global surface temperatures have increased by 1.1°C since the late 19th century, exacerbating the climate crisis and impacting an estimated 3.3 to 3.6 billion people who live in contexts highly vulnerable to these changes (IDPP AR6 Synthesis Report 2023). Theoretical frameworks surrounding climate justice draw from social justice theories, environmental ethics, and human rights perspectives, reinforcing the need to center equity and human dignity in climate action. By addressing systemic inequalities and holding responsible parties accountable, the climate justice movement strives not only to mitigate environmental degradation but also to foster a more just and sustainable world for future generations. In this context, climate justice becomes not just an environmental concern, but a comprehensive approach to addressing the interconnected social, political, and economic dimensions of the climate crisis, ultimately advocating for a more equitable distribution of

responsibilities and resources on a global scale. This multifaceted approach also emphasizes the necessity of integrating indigenous knowledge systems, which offer sustainable practices and ethical frameworks often overlooked in mainstream climate strategies. Indigenous environmental knowledge “is a complex knowledge system deeply rooted to a place and based on a unique set of experiences. This view of indigenous knowledge focuses on the plurality of ways of knowing the environment and explores the importance of understanding how knowledge production is tied to place and culture” (Doolittle, 287). By valuing these perspectives, the climate justice movement enhances its capacity to create solutions that are both culturally resonant and ecologically effective. Furthermore, climate justice underscores the interconnectedness of global systems, advocating for policy frameworks that account for transnational ripple effects, such as how emissions reductions in one region can alleviate environmental pressures in another. Recognizing these dynamics ensures that climate action fosters cooperation rather than perpetuating competition or inequality among nations.

The political dimensions of climate justice reveal an intrinsic link between environmental challenges and entrenched social inequalities. Climate change exacerbates vulnerabilities within marginalized communities, such as indigenous groups and low-income populations, who are disproportionately affected due to socioeconomic factors and a lack of political representation. These groups are often situated in areas most susceptible to climate-induced crises, including droughts, floods, and extreme weather events, yet they lack the economic resources and infrastructure to effectively adapt. The inequities they face are compounded by national policies that prioritize industrial growth over environmental and social protections, effectively reinforcing existing disparities. Michele Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, articulated that “states have a human rights obligation to prevent the foreseeable adverse effects of climate

change and ensure that those affected by it, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have access to effective remedies and means of adaptation to enjoy lives of human dignity” (Chapman & Ahmed, 84). On the global stage, climate justice is further shaped by power dynamics in international negotiations, where wealthier nations, historically responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions, frequently dominate the agenda. These nations often advocate for measures that secure their economic interests, leaving developing countries with limited recourse to secure equitable climate action. In response, advocacy and activism have emerged as vital forces within the climate justice movement, spearheaded by youth, indigenous groups, and grassroots organizations calling for systemic accountability and the inclusion of vulnerable communities in policy discussions. Such activism has begun reshaping the climate justice discourse, pressuring both national and international leaders to recognize climate change as not only an environmental crisis but also a profound moral and political challenge. Consequently, addressing climate justice requires transforming existing structures to account for and rectify social inequalities, ensuring that those most impacted by climate change are at the forefront of decision-making processes. Climate justice becomes essential not only for addressing the ethical dimensions of the climate crisis but also for promoting effective transnational political action. By framing climate action within a justice-oriented approach, nations can foster collaborative solutions that uphold the principles of fairness and equity, establishing a foundation for collective and resilient global responses to the escalating climate emergency.

The intersection between climate change and social inequality illustrates how environmental crises often amplify existing disparities within marginalized communities. Indigenous groups, low-income urban populations, and rural communities are frequently situated in regions vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, including floods, droughts, and extreme

weather events, which not only disrupt livelihoods but also exacerbate food and water insecurity. For instance, indigenous communities in the Amazon and small island nations face existential threats from climate change, yet they contribute negligibly to global greenhouse gas emissions. A decade ago, the Amazon was “disappearing at a rapid rate, making Brazil the leader in deforestation worldwide at the time and the world’s third-largest source of global warming emissions, after the United States and China” (Boucher et al., 7). These communities also suffer from a lack of political representation and limited access to resources that would facilitate adaptation, effectively trapping them in cycles of vulnerability. Socioeconomic factors compound these inequities, as lower-income households have less capacity to withstand and recover from environmental shocks, making them disproportionately reliant on public infrastructure that may not be resilient to climate impacts. National policies often exacerbate these issues by prioritizing economic growth over environmental protections, thereby neglecting the rights and needs of marginalized populations. Two-thirds of the 30 Kenyon Environmental NGO directors that supported climate justice expressed a punitive, polluter-pays view of climate change, expressing that “compensation is important because [industrialized nations] are the main influence damaging the globe... so, if you damage you pay” (Beer, 91). In many cases, states’ decisions favor extractive industries or infrastructure projects that encroach upon vulnerable communities’ lands, further intensifying their exposure to environmental hazards.

The intersection of climate change and social inequality underscores the need for justice-oriented frameworks to address the compounded vulnerabilities of marginalized communities. Retributive justice calls for holding those most responsible for emissions—primarily industrialized nations and corporations—accountable, emphasizing their obligation to fund adaptation and reparative measures for the communities most impacted.

Meanwhile, restorative justice focuses on repairing harm by prioritizing the needs and rights of these affected communities, advocating for sustainable development and resilience-building initiatives; however, “a core component of transitional justice is navigating the elastic tension between past injustices and a future of coexistence” (Klinsky, 5). This approach highlights the disproportionate burden borne by vulnerable populations, such as indigenous groups and low-income areas, who contribute minimally to emissions but face severe climate-related risks, and the tension that this may create. On the global stage, power dynamics often favor wealthier nations in climate negotiations, limiting meaningful progress on justice. However, a growing movement of activists and advocates continues to press for a climate justice agenda that centers equity, urging leaders to recognize climate change as not only an environmental issue but a profound moral and political challenge that demands both retributive accountability and restorative support.

Transforming climate action into a mechanism for social equity requires a comprehensive understanding of the synergies between climate justice and broader social movements, recognizing the shared goals and intersecting challenges of these efforts. Climate justice extends far beyond environmental concerns, deeply entwined with social justice, human rights, and economic equity movements. Marginalized communities, which are often on the frontlines of climate change impacts, simultaneously face systemic inequalities rooted in historical and structural injustices. It’s crucial to acknowledge that “when considering the impact of climate change, it is important to recognize that the vulnerability of people of color and low-income residents may be increased because they live in racially concentrated areas of poverty and/or in substandard housing vulnerable to extreme weather” (PRRAC, 5). These intersecting vulnerabilities, whether stemming from racial discrimination, economic disenfranchisement, or

political underrepresentation, create a profound need for solidarity between movements. For instance, alliances like the collaboration between the Black Lives Matter movement and climate justice advocates highlight the overlapping injustices of environmental racism and socio-economic disparities, where predominantly Black and low-income communities are disproportionately exposed to pollution, lack access to clean energy, and face greater risks from climate-induced disasters. Still, in the 21st century, “segregation practices continue with expulsive zoning, in which facilities that pollute the environment are intentionally sited in or near areas inhabited by people of color, guided by the NIMBY (not in my back yard) stance held by those living in more desirable areas in suburbia, where the educational system is better, as is access to healthy foods and greater economic wealth” (Patel & Hollis, 49). Such cross-movement solidarity underscores the potential of collective action, demonstrating that the fight for climate justice cannot be separated from the broader struggle for equitable access to resources, rights, and representation.

By embedding social equity into climate policies, nations and communities can achieve transformative, long-term benefits. In vulnerable areas, “residents are less likely to have the capacity to adapt to climate change, and also pointed out that such areas are more likely to rely on federal assistance” (PRRAC, 5). One critical advantage is building resilience and adaptive capacity within disadvantaged populations, enabling them to withstand and recover from climate-related shocks such as floods, hurricanes, and heatwaves. Investments in community-based adaptation strategies, such as restoring natural ecosystems to buffer against extreme weather or constructing resilient infrastructure in underserved areas, can empower marginalized groups, providing them with tools to thrive amidst a changing climate. Moreover, prioritizing climate justice in development initiatives promotes sustainable growth that benefits

all layers of society. Unfortunately, “too often, the government prioritizes the profit-driven concerns of industry over the health of environmental justice communities (Desikan et al., 3). For example, transitioning to renewable energy sources not only reduces emissions but also creates economic opportunities in disadvantaged areas, offering jobs, reducing energy costs, and improving public health outcomes through reduced pollution. These initiatives address the root causes of inequities while fostering inclusive development that ensures no one is left behind.

A justice-oriented approach to climate action also safeguards the rights and wellbeing of future generations, highlighting the principle of intergenerational equity. By prioritizing the sustainable management of natural resources and addressing systemic inequities in their distribution, current generations can ensure that future societies inherit a livable planet with equitable access to essential resources such as clean water, fertile land, and stable climates. This vision requires the active participation of marginalized voices in decision-making processes, ensuring that climate policies reflect the lived realities and priorities of those most affected, especially since “globally, climate change is projected to push 132 million people into extreme poverty in less than a decade, according to the World Bank” (Patel & Hollis, 55). For example, indigenous groups, who have long been stewards of their environments, possess invaluable knowledge of sustainable practices and must be recognized as key partners in global climate governance. Similarly, youth movements such as Fridays for Future emphasize the urgency of climate action through an intergenerational lens, advocating for immediate reforms to prevent irreversible harm to future societies. These climate justice focused movements represent “an emerging alignment among progressive nations, youth movements, and global civil society organizations [that] may represent a way out of the stalemate” (Foran & Widick, 36). Embracing climate justice is not merely an ethical imperative, it is a pragmatic strategy to address the most

pressing environmental challenges while fostering global solidarity. By centering equity and inclusion, these approaches ensure that solutions are comprehensive, sustainable, and deeply rooted in fairness. Without prioritizing climate justice, the world risks perpetuating cycles of inequity, leaving marginalized communities disproportionately vulnerable and future generations burdened by the consequences of inaction. Only through a justice-oriented framework can climate action truly achieve the transformative impact necessary to create a resilient and equitable future.

Climate justice provides a critical framework for fostering transnational collaboration, uniting nations under the shared objective of addressing the climate crisis through equitable and inclusive means. At its core, climate justice demands that developed nations, which have historically contributed the majority of greenhouse gas emissions, take on a greater responsibility for mitigation and adaptation efforts. This principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" is not only a moral imperative but a pragmatic necessity, as the failure of wealthier nations to lead in climate action undermines global trust and the efficacy of international agreements. In the global South, "it is not only about environmental justice but also an uneven development process" (Fisher, 73). Mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) exemplify how resource redistribution can operationalize climate justice by supporting vulnerable nations in building resilience and adapting to climate impacts. By directing financial and technical resources to developing countries, the GCF acknowledges the systemic inequities that have left these nations disproportionately affected by climate change while lacking the means to respond effectively. This approach not only addresses the immediate environment challenges but also aims to foster long-term sustainable development by empowering these nations to create their own solutions. Additionally, it underscores the importance of global

solidarity in tackling climate change, recognizing that true climate justice involves both environmental protection and equitable development outcomes for all nations.

This approach not only addresses historical injustices but also reinforces the interdependence of global actors in tackling a crisis that transcends national borders. By framing climate action through the lens of justice, nations are compelled to recognize that no single country, regardless of its resources or political power, can address the climate crisis in isolation. This interconnectedness underscores the necessity of collective action, where the success of one country's efforts hinges on the participation and cooperation of others. It is stressed that "the case for strong and immediate action on climate change is ethically overdetermined and that there are multiple compelling arguments for the same conclusion – that the United States and other rich industrialized countries have a moral obligation to take the lead in what ultimately needs to be a global effort to reduce emissions" (Frisch, 225), connecting back to the idea of retributive justice. Climate justice enhances global governance by fostering accountability, creating mechanisms that encourage nations to meet their commitments under agreements such as the Paris Accord. Transparency measures, such as reporting frameworks and peer reviews, ensure that nations remain answerable for their pledges, building trust within the international community. These measures not only promote fairness but also facilitate the sharing of best practices and resources, making collective progress more achievable. As nations collaborate more effectively, they build a sense of shared responsibility, reinforcing the idea that climate justice is a global imperative requiring active participation from all.

Simultaneously, climate justice cultivates solidarity by framing the crisis as a shared challenge rather than a zero-sum competition. This solidarity pushes nations to move beyond fragmented and self-interested policies, such as prioritizing national economic growth over

global stability, to embrace policies that consider the broader implications of their actions. For example, wealthier nations providing financial and technical support to developing countries through initiatives like the Green Climate Fund not only rectifies historical imbalances but also strengthens collaborative ties; however, the “commitment to mobilize \$100 billion per year [for the Green Climate Fund] by 2020 does not say anything about which nations should pay or in what proportion” (Sadat, 23), displaying the challenges of transnational challenges such as climate change. The lack of clarity on responsibility complicates efforts to ensure equitable contributions from wealthier nations, potentially undermining the effectiveness of such initiatives. Without clear guidelines on funding obligations, the risk remains that the burden of addressing climate change may fall disproportionately on those least responsible for its causes. As nations work together within this framework, they lay the foundation for a more cohesive, equitable, and effective global response, where all parties share in both the responsibilities and benefits of climate action. Thus, embedding climate justice into international efforts is not merely aspirational but essential for achieving a durable and inclusive solution to the escalating climate crisis, ensuring a sustainable future for all. By integrating principles of justice into climate policies, international frameworks can foster trust and cooperation, essential components for navigating the complexities of transnational challenges. Additionally, centering equity in climate negotiations not only addresses historical grievances but also incentivizes innovative solutions, as nations recognize the mutual benefits and the collective goods of a united approach to combating the climate crisis.

In conclusion, climate justice is essential for addressing the ethical dimensions of the climate crisis while promoting effective transnational political action. By centering equity and inclusivity, it transforms climate action into a mechanism for advancing social justice and

fostering global solidarity. The disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities highlight the urgent need for governance structures that prioritize fairness and shared responsibility. Mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund and the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" demonstrate how climate justice can operationalize equitable solutions, addressing historical injustices while reinforcing interdependence among nations. By placing the voices of those most affected, indigenous groups, low-income populations, and nations of the Global South, at the forefront, climate justice fosters collaboration and strengthens the legitimacy of international climate efforts. Without this framework, the world risks perpetuating cycles of inequality and undermining collective progress. Ultimately, climate justice integrates ethical accountability with practical governance, transforming the climate crisis into an opportunity to build a more just and resilient global community. This approach ensures that climate action is not only effective but also deeply rooted in fairness, paving the way for a sustainable and equitable future.

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