

OUR SHARED ENVIRONMENTS: DOCUMENTING EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Climate change has emerged as the most crucial challenge for nation-states in the twenty-first century. This paper has examined the increased susceptibility of marginalized communities to the practical consequences of climate change. Inequalities within nation-states have been analyzed and this paper concludes that marginalized communities, including women and immigrants, lack the resources to prevent harm or recover from it in case of disasters or crises that are a result of climate change. The literature surrounding the adverse impacts of climate change on marginalized groups has been examined with conclusions suggesting the existence of pervasive inequalities across diverse geographic contexts. The differential causation and impact of climate change have also been examined, and this paper has sought to emphasize the need and justification for governments to urgently and actively address adverse consequences on communities that are most vulnerable. To that end, targeted insurance schemes, combined with an increase in focus on affirmative action on part of the state have been discussed. It has been found that these initiatives contribute to social mobility and emancipation in the long run in addition to addressing more urgent consequences.

Introduction

Environmental justice has progressively occupied a more important and central position in the discourse surrounding climate change. The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (EPA, 2020). In a global economy plagued with structural inequalities and the lack of socio-economic mobility, environmental justice seeks to improve existing conditions to ensure that “enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work” (EPA, 2020). Inequalities exist both within and amongst nations. Whilst certain nation-states are better positioned to provide their citizens with access to a clean environment and a decent standard of

living, individuals within a nation-state also have differentiated access to a healthy environment by the virtue of their background and privilege. For example- Sweden is better positioned to create clean jobs, and cleaner and more efficient public health systems than Bangladesh, whose developing economy makes environmental protection more challenging and complex. Similarly, the economically privileged minorities of Bangladesh are able to create healthier environments for themselves, even more so than certain immigrant communities of Sweden. Whilst the formal inequality has been adequately addressed in policy (accords like the Paris Climate Deal are more lenient on developing countries as compared to developed ones), circumstances that create unequal access to environmental justice within a nation-state rarely occupy a space in global mainstream environmental discourse (Stern, 2018). This is not to say that inter-nation inequality is not a persistent issue in the field of public and environmental health (which has, most recently, been proven by the visceral inequality in Covid-19 vaccination access between developed and developing countries), but to shed light on existing adverse environmental conditions which only select marginalized communities are subjected to within modern nation-states (Islam & Winkle, 2017).

Marginalization and the creation of socio-economic inequalities happen because of the combination of interrelated inequalities: based on identity (social narratives around gender, physical constraints around sex and age, religious and cultural differences, and so on), economic background (net worth and income stability), and political power (differential abilities of people to translate their ideas into state policy and access public resources). Inequality hence is multi-dimensional and is a result of the interplay between social, political, and economic capital and privilege held by different citizens in a nation-state (Islam & Winkle, 2017). Most activities that contribute to pollution serve the needs of privileged sections of society. Even though they have better access to sustainable alternatives, economic capital tends to be proportional to energy consumption and carbon footprint. Even if this could be attributed to the capitalist economic model and not an individual choice, the impact of these environmentally unsustainable activities and demand is felt by the marginalized, which strengthens the need for the inclusion of social justice in the fight against climate change.

Moreover, climate change and social inequality are dependent on each other. Whilst the worst impacts of climate change are felt by the marginalized, marginalized and the widening of inequalities contribute to climate change. If a proportion of the population is deprived of economic resources that are perquisites to switching to sustainable and eco-friendly lifestyles, the resulting environmental degradation worsens climate change for everyone. Addressing intra-national social inequalities and trends of marginalization and oppression at the community level is key: not only in the fight for equality and the actualization of fundamental human rights but also in the global fight against climate change that threatens all of humanity.

Background

Discourse and research surrounding the differential social impacts of climate change gained attention at the beginning of the 21st century. An early study in this regard was presented by the World Bank in 2002 at the 8th conference of the UNFCCC. It noted the public health implications of climate change, and its impact on food security, and access to clean drinking water. The Stern report, which was published in 2007 concluded that climate change would increase global poverty in the 21st century (Islam & Winkle, 2017). This was specifically attributed to the impact of the changing climate on agricultural cycles, flooding of inhabited and fertile farmlands, and decreasing access to water resources, all of which negatively contribute to public health conditions and malnutrition rates. Similar conclusions can be traced in the Human Development Report (published by the United Nation Development Program in 2007), the World Bank's Global Monitoring Report in 2008) (World Bank, 2008). More specifically, findings of research conducted by S. Khalil concludes that climate change has affected marginalized populations in south-east Asia most adversely by impacting employment and income opportunities (particularly in the agricultural sector which is disrupted by climate disturbances), creating stress on necessities like water, and increasing their vulnerability to natural disasters like floods and landslides (Khalil, 2016). The findings of Boyce (2003) reveal that inequality leads to public policies that leave the disadvantaged groups more exposed and susceptible to climate hazards (Boyce, 2003). One of the most crucial ways in which inequality makes marginalized groups more vulnerable to climate change, in the long run, is by damaging their health, which in turn reduces economic productivity and drains resources, hence reducing socio-economic mobility in the long run. The detrimental effect of climate change on agriculture, and on the livelihoods of economically vulnerable farmers makes concerns in rural areas more pressing despite the lack of focus on these regions in mainstream media. However, inequalities are persistent within urban areas too. Research suggests that slum dwellers in different parts of the world tend to occupy parts of the city that are most prone to natural hazards such as landslides and floods (Painter, 2007). These inequalities are reflected in cross-country data as well. Countries with a low human development index are at a higher risk of facing water scarcity. This is due to several factors, but the absence of resources prevents countries from innovating and introducing sustainable and modern technologies- trapping them in a vicious cycle similar to ones that marginalized groups find themselves in.

Discussion

The lack of attention attributed to intra-national inequalities to environmental justice and differential impacts of climate change within nation-states is because of the role of political capital in environmental discourse. Developing countries (primarily India and China) represent a

significant section of the world's population and a booming consumer market to the industries of the west. India and China's increased political capital at the international stage owing to their recent economic development and large populations has allowed them to gain favorable positions in international climate accords (Tooze, 2020). Whilst leniency towards developing countries is justified because of the history of colonialism and imperialism on part of the west, there is no reason why domestic issues cannot be looked at from a similar lens. Societies in most nation-states have been hierarchized historically, which contributes significantly to contemporary socio-economic inequalities (Stern, 2018). Nations that have had a dark history of identity-based discrimination (such as India with the caste system, the United States with slavery and racism, and South Africa with Apartheid) tend to have higher inequalities in the long run. Moreover, governments (which are often occupied by individuals belonging to dominant and privileged sections of society) have often turned a blind eye to or have promoted inequalities. The lack of economic and political capital with marginalized groups and immigrants in liberal democracies translates to their inability to influence public and environmental policy in their favor with the aim of creating better conditions for themselves. The recent prolonged water crisis in Flint, a town dominated by African Americans in Michigan, United States is one of the many examples of marginalized communities' inability to achieve environmental justice even in the most developed democracies, because of which they face worse impacts of climate change (Abouk & Adams, 2018). Several studies, including one by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, concluded that systemic racism and inequalities led to African-American communities facing worse consequences of water pollution as compared to white communities (Johnson, 2017).

Research indicates that socio-economic inequality aggravates the position of the marginalized communities with respect to climate change impact by increasing their exposure to climate hazards, increasing the susceptibility to damage caused by climate hazards, and decreasing their ability to cope with and recover from environmental and climate damage (Islam & Winkle, 2017). To understand this better, flooding- one of the most prominent impacts of climate change can be analyzed. Firstly, regions that are likely to experience higher levels of flooding tend to be occupied by socio-economically weaker communities (Neumann, et. al., 2015). Rent and land prices in the free market make those areas particularly undesirable and inexpensive, which forces the poor to reside there. Hence they are automatically more exposed to climate hazards. Secondly, the rich have the economic and social capital to build better houses, or even arrange for temporary accommodation for themselves and their families. Hence, even if they live in areas that experience high levels of flooding, they are better equipped to prevent a worst-case situation in comparison to economically vulnerable communities. Lastly, aspects like the ability to access insurance for health and property, access to public assistance and disaster relief, and other modes of recovery are also plagued with structural barriers. This creates a vicious cycle, the impact of which is correlated to social inequality and marginalization (Islam & Winkle, 2017). Poverty,

which is often correlated to religion, ethnicity, caste, and race is also a determinant of mortality rates of many diseases which are caused or propagated by effects of climate change.

Even amongst vulnerable social groups, women tend to face even worse consequences because of the patriarchal leanings of these communities. Women are forced to take up many responsibilities and tasks that are created as a result of climate change such as walking long distances to collect water and resources (Perez, 2015). There is also evidence of draughts creating poverty traps for women in Kenya (Sherwood, 2003). Similarly, other vulnerable demographics (the young and the old) have faced higher mortality rates due to illnesses associated with heatwaves and floods (Khandhela and May 2006).

The solutions to these problems can be either economic or political. Economically, marginalized communities can be given access to private resources so that they can protect themselves against climate change, or recover from its adverse effects. In the long term, this can only be achieved by alleviating high levels of poverty, a complex and daunting challenge from an economic perspective, especially in the developing world. The political channel involves reducing the influence of social inequalities on the political system so that it (and the people who run it) are accountable even to marginalized communities. Not only does this lead to a fairer distribution of resources (hence contributing to the economic channel) but also allows the state to take a more active role in protecting its weakest citizens during climate emergencies.

Conclusion

The first step in developing much-needed solutions to the differential impacts of climate change on marginalized communities is acknowledging that such inequalities exist within nation-states in the first place. This implies that equal relief at times of disaster and equal access to sustainable alternatives is a deficient policy as it ignores social differences and prevents marginalized groups from recovering and growing at the same rate as privileged ones. This has long-term implications on social ability which is crucially impacted by state assistance, especially in times of disaster and crisis (such as floods, heatwaves, or manufactured crises such as that in Flint). A comprehensive solution to vulnerabilities resulting from climate change would be instituting insurance schemes that seek to protect vulnerable groups that face or are likely to face specific consequences. Individuals should be indemnified against both foreseeable and unforeseeable losses. Hence, this would include not only ensuring fishing and agrarian communities, who are susceptible to loss of livelihoods due to changing climate but also providing robust and long-term assistance to communities affected by natural disasters. Research that is interdisciplinary and continuous is key in identifying these vulnerabilities, which must then be acted upon by efficient state mechanisms. India has already instituted mechanisms such as the BASIX program,

which measures rainfall to provide micro-insurance to farmers affected by droughts. There is a need to invest in specialized programs such as this since they enable states to counter specific causes of marginalization. Promoting affirmative action for women and other historically marginalized groups enables them to protect themselves against climate change. Hence, the state can also assume an indirect role and strengthen marginalized groups politically and economically (discussed above). Lastly, there is a need to improve access to common properties and public goods that enable people to live more sustainably or protect them from climate change and hazards. Presently, access (especially in developing countries) is hindered because of discrimination along socio-cultural lines (caste, for example, prevents certain communities in India from accessing resources as necessary as water). Greater and more progressive involvement of public agencies at the grassroots level who not only spread awareness but ensure compliance and prevent discrimination.

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