

# **Locating justice in a warming world: developing notions of climate justice in the UK and the USA**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the development and application of notions of climate justice by non-governmental groups (NGOs) within two Western developed nations. I argue that the development of the discourse of climate justice in each society is shaped by historical circumstances, existing discourses of environmental justice, and the political orientations of the society vis a vis, the international arena.

In the case of the United Kingdom, a strong, existing, shared understanding amongst NGOs around social justice predisposed civil society towards accepting the notion of climate justice. The societal understandings of social and environmental justice within the United Kingdom around social and economic disadvantage has shaped their interpretation of climate justice. Additionally, the outward looking orientation of UK civil society has influenced their conception of climate justice as being a predominantly international, rather than domestic, issue.

In contrast, the conception of climate justice in the United States of America has been interpreted quite differently. The understanding of environmental justice that underpins the discourse of climate justice in the USA is informed by the work of Bullard (Bullard 1983, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995), and others, on environmental racism. Thus, climate justice is shaped by previous understandings of environmental justice around the economic, social and health disadvantage suffered by peoples of colour in North America from environmental issues. Moreover, the inward looking orientation of US civil society has influenced their conception of climate justice as being a predominantly domestic, rather than international, issue.

## **Introduction**

In the context of a contemporary world that faces significant current and future challenges flowing from global warming, a distinctive politics has developed in Western states around this issue. In this paper, I address one sub-set of this political milieu: climate activism. In particular, I focus on the comparative development of notions of climate justice between two Western nations: the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). I argue that the development of the discourse of climate justice in each society is shaped by historical circumstances, existing discourses of environmental justice, and the political orientations of the society vis a vis, the international arena.

The paper begins by discussing the research methodology undertaken for the project, outlines the development and current state-of-play in UK climate activism, highlights the development and key elements of climate activism in the USA, and provides some preliminary concluding remarks.

## Research Methodology

These findings emerged from a research project on British and American climate change campaigns conducted by the author in 2006 and 2007. The project sought to investigate the understandings of climate change campaigners of UK and USA climate politics. The project began by establishing contact with groups involved in climate change campaigning in both countries. These organisations were identified through a survey of contemporary media commentary on climate change issues focusing on the non-governmental organisations involved in current debates around climate. From contact with the organisations, staff members involved in those campaigns were identified. The eventual interviewees were all full-time, employed campaigners within non-governmental organisations. Identified individuals were contacted to discuss the project and their potential participation; a total of 36 individuals were initially interviewed. Subsequently, interviewees were asked to nominate other campaigners involved in the climate change debate that they thought were important to speak to due to their involvement in the climate change debates in their country. This method is referred to as “snowball sampling”.

Snowball sampling is used in qualitative research design and method across a range of fields and disciplines. The most important advantage of the technique is that the approach enables the researcher to benefit from the participants’ understandings and knowledge of the target individuals and the community relevant to the research project.

Snowball sampling is a method that has been used in the social sciences to study sensitive topics, rare traits, personal networks, and social relationships. The method involves the selection of samples utilizing “insider” knowledge and referral chains among subjects who possess common traits that are of research interest’ (Kaplan, Korf, and Sterk 1987, 566).

Thus, as a method of selection of activists involved in climate change campaigning, snowball sampling is an appropriate and useful tool.

The primary research tool to identify, elaborate and capture campaigner views and knowledge was in-depth interviewing. The in-depth interview can be viewed as

a conversation between researcher and informant focussing on the informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words (Minichiello 1990, 158).

Those interviewed are able to express their ideas, thoughts and views in their own words, through conversations that take place facilitated by a structured, but open-ended interview process (Minichiello, 1990; Reinharz, 1992) using this research approach. A semi-structured approach to interviewing was used. This provides a guide for the conduct of interviews, while enabling free interaction between the researcher and the interviewee(s) (McCracken, 1988). Ahead of the interview, an interview schedule provided to participants listed issues and topics to guide the interview process. The intention was to provide an open and only loosely structured approach to each individual interview while maintaining a consistent focus in the discussions with each campaigner involved. The inclusion of broad open-ended

questions around climate campaigns enabled participants to discuss and explore their views at length, and to raise a diverse range of issues they considered pertinent to the research project.

The research project involved personal interviews with individuals from a range of environmental organisations within the UK and USA active in the climate change debate. The groups involved include a range of organisations from large, well known transnational environmental groups such as *WWF*, *FoE (Friends of the Earth)* and *Greenpeace*. Influential national groups in both countries interviewed includes *People and Planet*, *The Global Commons Institute (GCI)*, *COIN (Climate Outreach and Information Network)*, *NEF (New Economics Foundation)*, *Green Alliance*, *Worldwatch Institute*, *World Resources Institute*, *Sierra Club*, *Wilderness Defenders*, and *Christian Aid*. Also included was the student based organisations, *Rising Tide* and *Sierra Student Coalition*, regional groups including *Vote Solar*, *Acterra*, *The Pacific Institute*, the *Ella Baker Centre for Human Rights* and local community social justice group, *Capacity Global*. Each of the groups can be considered a professional organisation with at least one individual devoted to climate change and associated issues as part of their regular work duties.

### **Climate activism and climate justice in the United Kingdom**

NGOs' strategy, campaigning and activism operate against the backdrop of UK and EU climate policy. The UK, under EU climate policy and the Kyoto Protocol, is committed to an impressive 60% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. This reduction, and a more immediate 20% reduction on 1990 levels by 2010, were recommended by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, and endorsed in the government's Energy White Paper in March 2003. Under the Kyoto Protocol, the EU will meet an overall -8% target, while under the EU burden sharing arrangement; the UK will meet a -12.5% target.

In the NGO arena, one of the most significant developments in climate activism was the inception of *Stop Climate Chaos* in September 2005. *Stop Climate Chaos* is a broad coalition of civil society organisations whose key organisational concerns intersect with climate change:

We believe that civil society organizations and environmental groups, faith groups, humanitarian organizations, women's groups, trade unions and many others are in a unique position to mobilize public concern, and through this, the necessary political action, to stop climate chaos (SCC 2006).

The membership of *Stop Climate Chaos* has expanded significantly since its inception, but key members include *Christian Aid*, *COIN*, *FoE*, *Greenpeace*, *Oxfam*, *People and Planet*, *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)*, *Tearfund* and *WWF-UK*. The organisation is funded by contributions from *FoE*, *Greenpeace*, *WWF* and *RSPB*.

### *A strong, shared environmental justice focus*

The first key element to observe about climate politics in the UK is the existence of a strong, shared environmental justice focus. This is demonstrated within British climate activism in two key ways: firstly the social justice orientation of the major British ENGOs, and secondly, the active inclusion and involvement of development, aid and faith organisations in the climate debate and climate campaigns. This produces a particular understanding of environmental justice within UK climate activism.

The environmental justice theme within British climate politics can be somewhat explained by the social justice orientation of the major British ENGOs, as well as a number of other smaller national and local groups. While Rootes (2006) argues that the operational commitment to environmental justice between the major organisations – WWF-UK, FoE and Greenpeace – varies, each expresses it as an organisational goal. This is also significant in the identities of other important UK NGOs working on climate change:

*Social justice, it's about equality and moral responsibility [and] can be quite powerful ... we've always had that focus on social justice (Thomas 2006; People & Planet).*

*And we decided years ago that we were never going to crack the issue of poverty unless you challenge the things that ... make and keep people poor. Climate change is increasingly one of those ... (Pembleton 2006; Christian Aid).*

*The debate about climate change is crucial to the debate on environmental equality (Adebowale 2006; Capacity Global).*

In the UK, communities characterised by economic depression and social dysfunction are those most affected by industrial pollution (Agyeman 2002, 40). This understanding shapes the application of environmental justice to climate issues in the UK. Thus, a distinct understanding of environmental justice is evident in UK environmental politics. This is reinforced by the inclusion of more traditional social justice organisations, including aid, development, and faith organisations, in mainstream climate change activism.

Integral to the nature of British climate politics is the inclusion and engagement of social justice organisations. This serves to shape the debate away from scientific or technical contests over reductions targets, and instead to embrace a range of the themes including adaptation requirements, and the sharing and equity of such burdens, locally, nationally and internationally. The presence of these organisations within climate change debate in the UK gives its politics a particular thematic focus.

*I think what we see here is an opportunity to reinvigorate the debate about sustainable development which kind of died in the late 80s and 90s... here's an opportunity to say ... growth doesn't come at any cost, it costs the environment, it also costs people who are more immediately dependent on the environment... So, I think what the development agency can do is very*

*practically say there is a human face to this problem* (Pembleton 2006; Christian Aid).

*We're really uncomfortable about environmental NGOs working here and development NGOs working there and ... church groups working over there ... one of the reasons why we helped set up the Stop Climate Chaos coalition is because you ... can't have social justice without environmental factors and vice versa ... they are linked* (Davis 2006; WWF).

The dominant environmental justice theme within British climate politics shared between environment, development, aid and faith organisations also shapes the potential and reality of alliances between these groups within the climate change debate. These alliances can be exhibited in two key areas: those with other ENGOs and those with development or aid organisations.

NGO alliances, especially those that are not short term, or campaign specific, are not prevalent in environmental politics. This can be attributed to the range of ideological persuasions in the broader green movement, but can also be seen as a common theme amongst social movements generally, despite the possibilities presented by the anti-globalisation movement (Gould et al 2004). The different nature of British climate politics can be attributed to three factors – the actively exclusive nature of the British state with respect to ENGOs (Dryzek et al 2002), the unifying theme of social justice, and the longstanding personal connections amongst the community of professional activists (see Star 2007). Thus, a key element of climate activism and debate on climate change in the UK is dominated by a shared focus on, and understanding of, environment justice. Elsewhere I have argued that this provides climate activism in the UK with a strong advantage in campaigning (Star 2007). However, a second key element that provides a point of difference with climate activism in the USA is an international orientation in the campaigning work of UK ENGOs.

#### *International orientation of climate activism*

The work of UK ENGOs is shaped by an international orientation, rather than a predominantly national or domestic focus in their lobbying, activism and campaigning. There are two key factors that influence this orientation: a more general international orientation and engagement in UK politics and civil society; and the influence of the inclusion of aid and development organisations in the UK climate activism.

*If you ask my colleagues who work in the Phillipines and Thailand [about social justice and climate change] ... they absolutely see it as intrinsically linked* (Kronick 2006; Greenpeace).

*And actually what we want to do is convey to decision makers and the public at large that climate change is a moral issue, is a social issue, it's a political issue ... it will cause death and hardship for countries and ... people* (Sinha 2006; SCC).

*I think that has been coming more to the fore and I think that's particularly as development organisations that are seeing the effects of climate change on the*

*ground are therefore bringing that back to the UK ... and the campaigning work they do* (Thomas 2006; People and Planet).

This international orientation can be seen in the strong shared understanding of climate change amongst NGOs in UK civil society (see Star 2007). This shared understanding, and the involvement of international development, aid, and faith organisations, contributes to a complex civil society, and public, understanding of climate change, and the attendant social justice issues, including the international dimensions. In particular, the raising of the awareness of the public connection between development issues and climate change impacts through the field work of development groups based in the UK. This has played a large role in maintaining the UK's international engagement on the issue of climate change.

UK politics and civil society, on a number of levels, has a history of strong international engagement, in addition to their domestic focus. In particular it is important to highlight the influence of UK involvement in the EU and the British foreign policy. In addition, meaningful international engagement outside the EU was a cornerstone of the Blair government's manifesto before coming to office. The UK engagement with Africa under new labour can be characterised by 'development as foreign policy' (Porteous 2005). This new phase placed development as central to UK foreign policy concerns, ahead of more traditional preponderances, and placed this new focus at the cabinet level, with strategic importance and significant financial backing (Vereker 2002). This development highlighted a British role in Africa and international development, and thus provided a strong voice for those working in development and aid NGOs in Africa, many of whom have subsequently joined with other NGOs on climate justice issues.

Thus, the evolution of notions of climate justice in the UK has been shaped by two key factors: a strong, shared sense of environmental justice between ENGOs and other civil society groups; and, a clear international orientation within civil society and domestic politics. This interpretation of climate justice is distinct to the UK and contrasts with a different approach in US politics.

### **Climate justice and climate activism in the United States**

While the UK has a well-developed domestic policy agenda on climate change, engagement with the EU and agreed targets on emissions reductions, and is a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol, the same is not true of the US. In spite of some policy action and innovation at the state level, there has been no meaningful policy movement at the federal level, and the US remains intransigent on Kyoto.

#### *A weak history of environmental justice in the mainstream environment movement*

The US identification and development of the notion of environmental justice has produced a clearly defined discourse around racial discrimination and environmental health in particular. The discourse of environmental justice, earlier brought to bear on urban industrial environmental problems, including the siting of toxic waste dumps, polluting chemical industries and waste processing facilities in largely black and

Hispanic lower socio-economic neighbourhoods in the United States (Bullard 1983, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995).

Race was a predominant characteristic within the evolution of the environmental justice movement in the United States. It was the first movement to “link environment and race, class, gender, and social justice concerns in an explicit framework” (Taylor 2000, 42). Such is the focus on the race element, that much environmental justice literature in the US also refers to environmental racism (for example see Bullard 1999). As these connections became drawn, attention was also concentrated on the often unequal contributions of different sectors of society to the production and consumption that introduces environmental risks. The over-consumption by the privileged of those items that create these risks, and their ability to purchase “protection” from these risks through better housing, better medical care, and better nutrition is a recurrent theme.

Specific to this discourse on environmental justice is an implied and explicit critique of the US environment movement. Environmental justice theorists and activists are critical of US ENGOs on two counts: their lack of engagement with US environmental justice issues in their activism (Bullard 1994, 1993); and, the predominance of professional white, middle-class, male activists within the mainstream movement (Cole and Fisher 2000). In contrast, the more recently developed environmental justice movement is grassroots, coloured, working-class, and more frequently female-led (Krauss 1994).

In interviewing members of US ENGOs, their understanding of environmental justice in this context are clearly influenced by this specific understanding of the discourse:

*We have an environmental justice team here ... [it's important because] racial minorities for instance in the US are contributing proportionately the least amount of greenhouse gas emissions and yet they're going to be the most affected by global warming. For instance, if you look at the statistical correlation between race and homelessness. Obviously the homeless population is going to be tremendously affected by global warming (McLoughlin 2007; Sierra Club).*

*That concept [environmental justice] is not as well developed in our domestic policy advocacy ... for US communities and North American communities that are currently affected by climate change and will be affected by climate change ... We're trying to develop it ... But ... we are dealing with strategic organisational and funding priorities, that already exist, I think will take a while. ... there is ... a thriving environmental justice community in the US that we historically don't have strong relationships with (Horner 2007; FoE).*

*It [the environment movement] does tend to be college educated folk who are predominantly white and have very different membership than the environmental justice community ... there's a distinct lack of understanding about how some of the environmental justice issues will fit into mainstream environmental work (Chafe 2007; Worldwatch Institute).*

Thus, there is a clearly different understanding of environmental justice and climate justice amongst US ENGOs. This perspective on climate justice largely precludes the involvement of environmental justice campaigners due to existing tensions between the two movements. More significantly, it presents a barrier to the inclusion of aid and development groups that has proven to be a powerful coalition of groups elsewhere, particularly in the UK (see Star 2007). However, the failure of US ENGOs to embrace a climate justice with an international social justice element is unsurprising given the US's domestic political orientation in relation to environmental issues in general, and climate change specifically.

#### *Domestic orientation of climate activism*

Environmental activism in the US is much more domestically focussed than comparative groups and the movement in the UK. The focus of US activism particularly amongst climate focused ENGOs, is on domestic policy and political engagement, rather than public engagement, work.

*There are certainly ... individual Americans who focus on the international impacts but ... the great preponderance of the discussion and the debate in the US is on the impacts on the US (Closson 2007; Acterra).*

*I was hired ... to create the outreach department for Defenders. We've had for years a fantastic lobby team. They're engaged great DC lobbyists ... the outreach department was founded as a part of the government relations department to really help get people around the country politically engaged in our work [emphasis added] (Lesky 2007; Wilderness Defenders).*

*We have a fairly large team in the US on this issue... I'm the legislative coordinator for our campaigns ... we have a campaign that's called Project Hot Seat ... it is a campaign that focuses on congress ... we have organisers that we've hired out full-time that work specifically in individual house districts and they work to educate and mobilise citizens ... the house reps have to get elected every two years, so we use the elections ... to really get at them when they're vulnerable to their constituent pressure (Smolski 2007; Greenpeace).*

The influence of wider American political values and trends is clearly at work here, as well as the missions of the individual NGOs. Three particular wider issues are evident.

Firstly, US ENGOs, despite individual values or beliefs, are aware that engagement with arguments about the international dimensions of environmental climate justice are unlikely to gain any traction in the US political arena given the US position on Kyoto under George W. Bush and the US's post-September 11 unilateralism (Beeson and Higgott 2005). On the issue of climate change specifically, the US has rejected meaningful international engagement, opting instead for unilateralism and isolation, with this highlighted further by the election of the Australian Rudd federal government, that ratified Kyoto as one of its first acts in government.

Secondly, the US has a strong political history of valuing independence over interdependence. Dunlap (2006, 328) argues that ‘American orthodoxy rains down the anathemas of Communism or anti-Americanism on any suggestion that the world lives by interdependence rather than voluntary cooperation’. Conversely, arguments of international environmental justice not only assume interdependence, but also that developed nations need to be held accountable for their actions and the consequences of those actions. These assumptions are directly in conflict with orthodox American political values. Indeed, the assumption of interdependence is at odds with current dominant American approaches to foreign policy and international engagement.

Finally, of importance for US ENGOs has been the change in US international engagement during the Bush years. Evident during the election campaign, but rationalised post-9/11, current US foreign policy is now ‘predicated on a unilateral application of US power, a self-conscious linking of formerly discrete strategic and economic issues and the general securitisation of foreign policy’ (Beeson and Higgott 2005, 1180). For climate activism and US ENGOs, the implications of this have been significant. US climate politics is characterised by domestic activism at least partly due to the withdrawal of US national politics and foreign policy from constructive international engagement.

Thus, the discourse of climate justice in the US is fundamentally shaped and developed around the existing discourse of environmental justice and how it is engaged (or not) by the mainstream environmental movement there. Additionally, the potential international engagement inherent in climate justice is constrained by the split between the mainstream and environmental justice movements, the focus of the US movement on policy and lobbying work, and the US’s insulation and isolation on international climate issues. This produces a distinctive notion of climate justice in the US context.

## **Preliminary Conclusions**

In this paper I have argued that the interpretation and mobilisation of the notion of climate justice is distinct to different domestic arenas across different Western democracies. In this paper, the domestic interpretation of the notion of climate justice by ENGOs in the UK and the USA were interrogated. In comparing these cases, two key factors emerged. The first factor to shape domestic evolution of the notion of climate justice was the existing domestic understanding(s) of the discourse of environmental justice. The second key factor involved is the orientation of domestic politics and civil society vis a vis the international arena. While other factors also influence the evolution of notions of climate justice, these two key factors account for the major orientations within domestic discourses of environmental justice.

There are several important future research directions that stem from this work. It is not yet clear whether the level of openness of the society and the political system influence the way ENGOs interpret discourses into their domestic contexts. There is also no clear answer to the question of whether ENGO interpretations of climate justice are pragmatic, or, in line with domestic political culture and belief.

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