

# International Call to Address Inequalities and Social Justice in Climate Policy

October - November 2015

## Preamble

Socioeconomic inequality is now understood to be integrally linked to the climate crisis. Inequalities drive climate change, and inequalities result from climate change. Climate change is an injustice to the underprivileged and aggravates inequality. Inequalities, both within and among nations, block agreements and pathways that could lead to sustainability. This vicious cycle of climate change and socioeconomic inequalities must be broken. As we engage in mitigation, adaptation, and the transition to a low-carbon economy, we must ensure that inequalities are substantially reduced.

### **I. Climate change affects people in very unequal ways, thus compounding inequalities.**

Poor and marginalized people suffer the consequences of environmental degradation more directly and severely. Those most likely to bear the brunt of climate change are those who suffer from disadvantage or discrimination, whether on the basis of income, wealth, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, health, ability, legal or migration status, or other characteristics or identities. Inequalities are compounded when poor and marginalized people are forced to live in locations more severely impacted by climate change, and vulnerable to storms, flooding, drought, landslides, or other environmental impacts. Inequalities are compounded when poor communities do not have the resources to respond to disasters or adapt readily to climate change.

Women and girls are particularly impacted. Women and girls are more likely to care for children, the sick and the elderly, to prepare food, to fetch water, to work the soil. All of these activities become more difficult as the climate degenerates. Furthermore, when climate impacts destroy economic opportunities at home, women and girls are less able to travel safely to seek new opportunities.

Despite suffering more severe impacts from climate change, poor and marginalized people generate significantly less impact on the environment as measured by standardized metrics such as consumption or carbon output. This is true for both poorer nations and for poorer socioeconomic classes within countries. It is unethical that those who do less harm should suffer more.

People who lack the necessary economic resources, knowledge, and political clout are disempowered and unable to demand necessary changes. Often, despite enormous and sophisticated grassroots or civil society efforts, the power differentials between those who stand to benefit from environmentally damaging economic activity, and those who are affected by it, are simply too great to overcome.

A vicious cycle exists. People on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder experience environmental disparities which perpetuate and compound economic difficulties. Environmental disparities may produce debilitating health impacts; economic and human losses associated with weather disasters; loss of agricultural capacity; the need to travel long distances to obtain suitable water resources; and the erosion of critical ecosystem services for resource-dependent and rural agrarian communities. People who have lost access to environmental resources have fragile livelihoods, and are less able to respond to shocks and environmental stresses.

The ongoing immigration crisis is also linked to climate change. The poor are more vulnerable to climate impacts, such as loss of water and land resources or soil productivity, and especially vulnerable to resulting conflict. It is the poor who are forced to migrate in search of survival. At the same time, the poor are least able to undertake the risky journeys required, and least able to navigate complex systems of migration law which permit them access to a new place to live.

## **II. Inequality is a key driver of the climate crisis.**

Inequality lies at the root of unsustainable behaviors. Inequality promotes overconsumption by making it socially acceptable for some people to have far more than others. Inequality provides incentives for overconsumption by tying consumption to social status. The greater the level of inequality, the greater the incentive to elevate one's status through consumption. Current consumption patterns put excessive pressure on the planet's dwindling resource base, as an elite minority unjustly appropriates ecological space. This excessive consumption usurps natural and economic resources, driving up prices for basic goods such as food, housing, healthcare and education, thus directly impacting those who do not have enough.

Our economic system drives the climate crisis, while locking in and aggravating inequalities. Its growth paradigm promotes ever-greater impacts on the environment; its short-term incentives and profit motives systematically contradict the sustainable satisfaction of human needs. Elites make decisions on behalf of their own interests rather than the public interest, while the benefits of development and climate adaptation aid and investment are often channeled to narrowly-held business interests. Financialization of the economy provides additional perverse incentives that run counter to sustainability. Commodification, both of nature and of people as labor, destroys emotional and social incentives that would otherwise serve to protect communities and their environments. Moreover, current economic pricing mechanisms fail to include "externalized" costs of social and environmental impacts. These distorted prices in turn distort consumption patterns, aggravating resource depletion and pollution. Meanwhile, the economic analysis of climate change focuses on aggregate costs and benefits, largely ignoring distributional implications.

## **III. Inequality blocks needed solutions to the climate crisis.**

Finally, inequalities block progress toward solutions and agreements to address climate change. Overwhelmed with social crisis, breakdown and conflict caused by inequalities, communities and societies cannot turn their energy and resources towards climate-friendly technologies and the transition to environmental sustainability.

Socioeconomic inequalities allow aid, resources, and other benefits to be diverted to elite families and business concerns, often fossil-fuel based. Meanwhile, the general public, including especially the poor, are often left suffering the social, economic and environmental consequences of profitable but unsustainable development. Adding insult to injury, the public is often left holding huge sovereign debts, resulting in the reduction of urgently needed social benefits. As inequality grows, there are many more people who do not have the resources to implement the needed conversion to sustainable economic activities.

Socioeconomic inequalities often complicate the implementation of local sustainability mechanisms, such as Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES), Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest

Degradation (REDD), and similar schemes. When inequalities are ignored in assessing the effectiveness and desirability of specific policy tools, unintended consequences may result. Rich and poor are affected differently, leading to altered community relationships and patterns of wealth. It is then much harder to find equitable and effective incentives for reducing carbon impacts.

Socioeconomic inequalities reduce cultural diversity by disempowering, displacing, or destroying the culture of various local groups. Embedded cultural knowledge, including indigenous knowledge, of local and traditional environmental practices is then diminished, thus depriving communities of potential models for more sustainable ways of life. Migration also leads to a loss of local environmental knowledge; moreover, migrants living in unfamiliar environments often lack the status and influence to push for needed environmental protections.

By creating lack of trust and social fragmentation, socioeconomic inequality blocks cooperation and collaborative problem-solving. Communities and nations are far less likely to make the necessary agreements to address climate change when they are aware that they do not share common interests, benefits, and responsibilities. Even if they were to make an agreement, the parties would not feel that the allocation of benefits and responsibilities was fair, thereby undermining cooperation.

Any initiative to address climate change and climate justice must place inequality at the center of the discussion. Current approaches to climate change have been largely technocratic in nature, and proposed “green economy” solutions which retain the same set of incentives and structures seem likely to worsen the existing scenario. Climate justice begins at the point where we recognize that current economic models, which generate ever-growing inequalities and look to more economic growth as a solution, will not provide transformative change. We cannot solve the climate crisis utilizing the same structures that created the crisis in the first place. Around the world, citizens sense the futility of “more of the same,” and governments are aware that they will face more protests and civil disobedience if they do not demonstrate their political will for meaningful transition.

**We call on the world’s governments, nations and communities to –**

\* Recognize the inequality dimensions of the climate crisis, including how inequalities contribute to climate change, as well as the injustice aspects of the climate crisis, particularly the fact that those who had the least role in precipitating the crisis are likely to be harmed the most;

\* Recognize that even with the most enlightened environmental policies in place, without social sustainability and social resilience, the societal foundations of sustainability will eventually erode away through instability, conflict and social breakdown;

\* Recognize that there will need to be new, more innovative, efficient and sustainable pathways to development, as the traditional fossil fuel-based route has failed humanity both socially and environmentally;

\* Recognize that, considering the tipping points ahead as well as the major destruction and misery

caused among the poor everywhere, and particularly in the Global South, “business as usual” is no longer an option;

\* Recognize the importance of common but differentiated responsibilities, whereby developed countries (synonymous with high emission countries) should have a moral and legal obligation to support developing countries in adapting to climate change, and all countries should support their own most vulnerable communities in adapting to climate change;

\* Recognize that any budget of allowed greenhouse gas emissions must take into account the following four points: historical responsibility, equitable ecological footprint, capabilities (technological and financial), and state of development (purchasing power parity);

\* Recognize the need for altered patterns of consumption, whereby those consuming in excess of what they need will reduce their consumption, while those without enough to meet their needs will consume more, achieving a net reduction;

\* Recognize within-country differences in greenhouse gas emissions, as measured by the carbon inequality index, as well as within-country differences in the extent to which people’s needs are met;

\* Commit to making the inequality and injustice dimensions of the climate crisis a central element of the COP 21 climate accords and subsequent policies;

\* Commit to ensuring that the full benefits of climate protection, technology transfer and CDM programs are being channeled to the appropriate people and communities – not to enrich particular business interests and contractors;

\* Commit to ensuring a more equitable global distribution of wealth and resources, including the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions budget, as well as the more equitable distribution of capacity to respond to risks;

\* Commit to providing the economic resources, technologies, and expertise that will empower developing countries, and less privileged communities within countries, to protect themselves from climate impacts, to adapt to a changing climate as necessary, and to move successfully along a new, more innovative, efficient and sustainable development pathway;

\* Commit to climate finance mechanisms that bridge the gaps in capacity between nations, and that empower marginalized communities to implement their own priorities in responding to climate change;

\* Commit to developing and implementing an urgently-needed global resettlement plan to take in all refugees of conflict and economic collapse – which are due, in part, to the impacts of a worsening climate;

\* Commit to fully respecting human rights throughout the process of responding to climate change, including but not limited to the fulfillment of various international conventions and declarations on human rights;

\* Commit to systemic social, economic and political changes towards more participatory societies in which incentives and decision-making processes allow citizens and communities to protect their own (and the world's) long-term social and environmental interests rather than being at the mercy of short-term profit incentives and decision-making processes;

\* Commit to ensuring workers' rights to a secure livelihood during the transition to non-fossil fuel based energies;

\* Commit to divesting from fossil fuel-based economic activity and redirecting such investment towards sustainable energy technologies;

\* Commit to greater transparency and democratization of decision-making processes, in which vulnerable communities most impacted by climate change are empowered to play a leading role in determining how best to achieve social resilience, mitigation and adaptation.

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*Adopted 28 September 2015 by Initiative for Equality (IfE) through a formal decision of the Board of Directors and the Board of Advisors.*

**Members of the ad hoc committee drafting this statement include the following:**

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- Dr. Roberto Guimaraes, IfE Director, and former Chief of Social and Policy Analysis at UN HQ in New York, during which position he authored the groundbreaking report "The Inequality Predicament – 2005 Report on the World Social Situation."
- Dr. Kavya Michael, IfE member, and author of the recent detailed study on "Class and climate change in post-reform India."
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- Dr. Deborah S. Rogers, IfE President, Affiliated Researcher with Stanford University's Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, and author of 2012 book chapter "Socioeconomic Equity and Sustainability," which details the links between socioeconomic inequalities and environmental problems including climate change.
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- Dr. Daniel Mathews, IfE Advisor, attorney at law, mathematics professor at Monash University in Melbourne, founding member of Wikileaks, and antiwar and inequalities activist.