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A social justice framing of climate change discourse and policy: Adaptation, resilience and vulnerability in a Jamaican agricultural landscape

Jeff Popke^{a,*}, Scott Curtis^a, Douglas W. Gamble^b

^a Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, 27858, United States

^b Department of Geography and Geology, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC, 28405, United States

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ABSTRACT

It is now widely recognized that climate change is likely to have detrimental impacts across the Caribbean region, with the burden likely to fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable segments of society. It is therefore an appropriate time to ask whether the frameworks that lie behind climate change discourse and policy are consistent with the demands of social and environmental justice. In this paper, we use climate justice as a lens for evaluating three prominent frameworks for addressing climate change, those of adaptation, resilience, and vulnerability. Each of these discursive frameworks, we argue, can contribute to our understanding of climate change, but they do not all incorporate justice concerns to the same degree. In order to illustrate this, we examine the justice implications of using each of the three frameworks to assess a case study of agricultural transformation in Southwestern Jamaica. Farmers in this region have adapted to changing climate conditions in a variety of ways, including the use of new agricultural technology. The ability of many farmers to take advantage of such innovations, however, is constrained by the underlying landscape of vulnerability within the region. After interpreting this example from the perspectives of adaptation, resilience and vulnerability, we conclude that all three paradigms are capable of calling attention to climate justice issues, but only in the vulnerability perspective are such issues intrinsic. We believe, therefore, that a greater attention to vulnerability within Caribbean climate policy holds the potential to advance the goals of climate justice within the region.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the issue of climate change has been placed squarely on the agendas of the countries and territories of the Caribbean region. It is now widely recognized that, as one recent policy document puts it, “the projected impacts of global climate change are expected to be devastating,” making it “the most serious threat to sustainable development facing [the region]” (Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre, 2009, 6). The nature of the impending threat is exacerbated by the particular challenges facing the small island developing states (SIDS) that characterize the region (Pelling and Uitto, 2001; López-Marrero and Scalley, 2012; Hay, 2013). These include threats to tourism and coastal ecosystems from projected sea level rise, the risk of increasingly common and severe tropical storms, and agricultural

sectors that are vulnerable to increased temperatures and more frequent drought (Taylor et al., 2012). Given the region’s existing development challenges, any reallocation of resources needed to address these and other climate-related impacts is likely to hinder Caribbean efforts to address long-standing problems related to poverty and social inequality (Bishop and Payne, 2012; Evans et al., 1998; Dodman et al., 2009). Furthermore, the burden of the disruptions caused by climate change is expected to fall disproportionately upon those who are already socially and geographically disadvantaged (Dow et al., 2006; Mearns and Norton, 2010; Füssel, 2012). In the Caribbean, this is likely to include coastal populations, groups that are dependent upon fragile ecosystems, and rural agricultural communities. The obvious conclusion is that, as Adger et al. (2006: 3) note more generally, “the distribution of climate change impacts is likely to be unjust.” For these reasons, we believe it is appropriate to characterize climate change as both an urgent policy concern and a matter of social and environmental justice. As far as policy goes, it is clear that climate issues have been on the Caribbean policy agenda for some time. Coordinated

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: popkee@ecu.edu (J. Popke), curtisw@ecu.edu (S. Curtis), gambled@uncw.edu (D.W. Gamble).

efforts to plan for climate change within the region extend back some two decades. One of the early catalyzing events was the UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, which took place in Barbados in 1994. Emerging from the conference was the 'Barbados Programme of Action', a 14-point program that laid out a number of specific sustainable development challenges faced by SIDS, including climate change and sea-level rise (United Nations, 1994). These concerns eventually led to the adoption of a series of large-scale, basin-wide initiatives aimed at enhancing the region's ability to cope with climate change. These initiatives have shaped the regional discourse about how to measure and respond to climate change and its impacts, and have also funneled significant resources toward particular sectors and projects in many Caribbean countries (Adaptation Partnership, 2011).

The extent to which the region's climate policy is consistent with the demands of social and environmental justice, however, remains an open question. As individuals and decision-makers across the Caribbean confront an increasing set of challenges related to a changing climate, the time is ripe, we feel, to examine how theories of climate justice can shed light on the region's climate dilemma. Doing so, we will argue, has implications not only for the ways in which we assess climate change, but also for how we evaluate the intellectual frameworks that shape the strategies and policies to combat climate change in the region. We refer here in particular to the three most prominent narratives within the literature on climate change impacts, those of adaptation, resilience, and vulnerability. Each of these theoretical constructs, we will suggest, foregrounds particular dimensions of the region's climate challenge while sidestepping others. For this reason, the choice of utilizing one theoretical framework over the others by academics, policy makers, and managers has implications for the region's climate policy, and for the potential to achieve some measure of climate justice.

In order to make this case, we present below an empirical case study of agricultural transformation in Southwestern Jamaica, a region that is experiencing challenges as a result of climate change. As we will see, farmers are confronting these challenges in a number of ways, but their ability to do so is often constrained by the underlying landscape of vulnerability within the region. Using a lens of climate justice, we suggest, can call attention to the social and economic inequities that hinder strategies of climate change adaptation, and can also point the way toward a more inclusive climate change policy in the Caribbean. Before turning our attention to Jamaica, however, we first offer a brief overview of climate justice concepts and explore how they might be used to assess different approaches to climate change research and policy.

Climate justice

For the most part, discussions of climate justice have evolved from broader theories of environmental justice (Schlosberg, 2013). Such theories commonly identify three different dimensions within which environmental issues have ramifications in terms of fairness or equity: distribution, procedure and recognition (Grasso, 2007; Burnham et al., 2013; Martin, 2013). *Distributional justice* refers to environmental outcomes, and considers the extent to which environmental assets, or conversely environmental risks or hazards, can be said to be distributed in an equitable manner. As applied to climate change, distributional justice concerns are evident in the fact that it is the world's poorest peoples in the most disadvantaged regions – precisely those who are least able to cope with and recover from climate-related disruptions – who are likely to bear a disproportionate share of climate change impacts. Questions of distribution also attend to considerations of inter-genera-

tional justice, which deals with the nature of our responsibility for the impacts of climate change on future persons (Page, 2007). *Procedural justice* refers to the processes that shape environmental outcomes, including the formation of public policy and legal frameworks, and asks questions about the extent to which those processes are open and inclusive, and subject to democratic accountability. In terms of climate change, there are clear questions of procedural justice at stake in the frameworks and institutions shaping climate change policy and action at both local and global scales. Finally, and relatedly, justice in *recognition* refers to the extent to which all groups with a stake in environmental processes and outcomes are granted the status, legitimacy and respect to be able to adequately represent their interests and positions. Such recognition is particularly important when there are significant epistemological differences that shape how the environment is perceived and defined.

These considerations of climate justice have generally been applied in two different ways to the inequities around climate change. The first focuses on the disproportionate causes of climate change, and the second places emphasis on its uneven consequences. The former seeks redress in a fair process of climate change mitigation, whereas the latter applies principles of equity and sustainability to assess and limit the negative impacts of climate change. Justice considerations as they relate to mitigation center on the fact that some countries, because of their historical development trajectories and levels of technology, have contributed much more than others to the increased greenhouse gas emissions that are driving human-induced climate change. Social justice approaches to mitigation therefore often emphasize the 'polluter pays' principle, as well as the well-known 'common but differentiated responsibilities' principle, which accounts not only for historic responsibility, but also the differential ability of states to pay resulting from global economic disparities (Caney, 2010a). Another approach that has been suggested is an 'equal emissions entitlement', which would grant each country (or, in principle, each individual) an equal share of some agreed-upon level of allowable emissions. While such an approach is appealing for its simplicity, it has been criticized for its lack of consideration of both historical trajectories and the differing local development needs that might justify variable emissions allocations (Moellendorf, 2012; Schlosberg, 2012).

While mitigation is undoubtedly important, most countries in the Global South, including those of the Caribbean region, have tended to focus on the negative consequences, rather than the causes, of a changing and more variable climate. As applied to the impacts of climate change, climate justice calls attention to who bears the burden of climate change and why, and seeks to ameliorate this burden through financial, technical, or other forms of assistance. In addition to asking questions about who should pay for such assistance, justice approaches have sought to articulate a basis for defining a set of rights or principles against which the harms of climate change might be judged. The framework of human rights provides one common entry point (Caney, 2010b; Kowarsch and Gösele, 2012). Another well-developed perspective is the 'capabilities approach', which seeks to identify, so as to safeguard, "the range of capacities necessary for people to develop free and productive lives they design for themselves" (Schlosberg, 2012: 452). Central to this conception is the fact that a dignified life must be self-defined and not imposed by others, reinforcing the importance of recognition and participation in ensuring climate justice.

In these and other ways, discussions of climate justice have played an important role in highlighting the inequities associated with global climate change, and in seeking to ensure fair and inclusive procedures for redressing them. And yet, there is no widespread agreement on what a just climate policy agenda should

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