Community-based political engagement for Climate Justice in Africa

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Climate Justice

Climate justice is based on the understanding that, while climate change requires global action, the historical responsibility for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions over the past 250 years lies with the industrialised countries of the North. Cheap energy – in the form of coal, oil, and gas – has been the engine of their rapid industrialisation and economic growth.

Communities in the Global South as well as low-income communities in the industrialised North have borne the toxic burden of this fossil fuel extraction, transportation and production. Now these communities are facing the worst impacts of climate change – from food shortages to the inundation of whole island nations. This is doubly unjust!

See the Bali Principles of Climate Justice: http://www.indiarestar.org/issues/energycc/2003/baliprinciples.html
African cities all face climate-related challenges. Community-based organizations are addressing these challenges at the grassroots level.

Extreme weather events and water -- both flooding and droughts -- affect housing, health, governance, infrastructure, urban planning, food security, and other traditional "development" concerns.

Low-income women, in particular, are "experts" on these impacts but are generally the least likely to be able to participate effectively in governance and policy institutions.
Community organizing and development, grassroots environmental education, and bridge-building with local government institutions are climate justice starting-points.

Local organizations can take advantage of academic support, both local and international, as they mobilize local assets and political power to develop resilience in the face of climate change.

This presentation describes some of the steps involved in building such activist-academic alliances and linking them internationally, based on experiences with partners in Toronto, São Paulo, Durban, Maputo and Nairobi.
Our project aimed at strengthening civil society’s role in urban water governance in low-income areas of Durban, Maputo, and Nairobi. At our first meeting, Mozambican activist Nilza Matavel explained her environmental education work with youth in Maputo.
Ester Uamba, an environmental education student from Eduardo Mondlane University, spoke about her research in a Maputo neighbourhood where storms are causing serious erosion.
In suburban Durban, periodic flooding affects sanitation, transportation, and quality of life.
Hand pumps give local people access to water in beyond-the-grid areas of Durban. During our visit, Nairobi activist Sadique Bilal tried it out.
Durban, where water is generally in short supply, is promoting “dry sanitation” by distributing urine diversion toilets rather than extending the grid of water infrastructure.
Durban civil society organizations like Umphilo waManzi help to promote rain barrels and “water harvesting” in off-grid areas.
In South Durban, huge oil refineries pollute both the air and the water. South Africa both contributes to, and suffers from, climate change.
South Durban Community Environmental Alliance activist Bongani Mthembu tells the environmental history of the community during a “toxic tour.”
An elementary school across the street from a South Durban refinery has a company-installed air quality monitoring facility, but 52 percent of the schoolchildren suffer from asthma.
Workers’ housing is located right next to the refineries.
Underground oil pipelines are leaking, forcing housing to be abandoned and monitoring wells to be installed in local parks.
Watershed perspectives on climate change in Durban

- People in upper reaches of the watershed don’t benefit from water/sewer infrastructure, and are more affected by droughts.

- Those downstream suffer water and air pollution from industry and upstream uses, as well as floods.

- NGO-run Water Dialogues can bring government, community and academic leaders together to share knowledge, reflect on priorities and brainstorm solutions.
In Maputo, environmental education student Francisca Caetano works with local residents near the university who have cleared trash and planted crops on the campus.
Increasing sea levels and storms are causing erosion along Maputo’s Indian Ocean coastline.
Mangroves are being destroyed for new construction along the coast in Maputo.
A railway drainage system in Maputo was built when rains were less intense.
Water rushing under the train tracks is causing serious erosion in this residential neighbourhood. Ester Uamba’s research with local residents investigates what can be done.
During a storm two years ago, about 20 houses were washed into this gulley. More are endangered.
Drainage ditches are being expanded in another area of Maputo, due to increasing rains.
University student Neima Adamo shows how local residents have tapped into a water pipe, binding it with plastic bags until dark, when people bring buckets to access free clean water.
Heavy equipment, in building the new drainage ditch while we visited, ran over the clean water pipe, causing several new leaks.
One local resident worked to clear out the plant-clogged drainage canal. In this neighbourhood, stand-up latrines have been installed.
Justiça Ambiental! (Environmental Justice!), a Maputo NGO, runs climate change education programs in local schools.
Watershed perspectives on climate change in Maputo

- Extreme weather events strain infrastructure of all kinds, putting people at risk throughout the city.
- Students working with local community members can spread awareness and build networks for research, communication, and action.
- Community-based organizing leads to government attention.
In northwest Toronto, activists are building a Centre for Green Change on the first floor of a low-income social housing building, to promote environmental awareness and green job training.
The Centre for Green Change includes a community kitchen, workshop and computer space, and a garden outside.
Watershed perspectives on climate change in Toronto

- Entire watersheds are affected by housing and infrastructure damage due to extreme weather events, (especially flooding), but low-income people are more severely affected.

- Climate adaptation and mitigation takes work and produces jobs.

- Green community development allows those in low-income neighbourhoods to train and gain experience for employment in climate adaptation and mitigation, which builds resilience throughout watersheds.
Climate Justice and Political Engagement, North and South

- Local people are the experts on what they need to deal with climate change, and on climate justice priorities.
- Community-based environmental education and organizing tend to produce government action.
- Green jobs / climate jobs provide an opportunity for local development, improvements in housing, recreation, sanitation, transportation, and watershed resilience.
- Global and local coalitions can create powerful synergies.
- Women’s participation and leadership is crucial!
Thank you! Please send your comments to:

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