



Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

2105 First Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404
USA
iatp.org
iatp.org/CEED

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems.

COMMENTARY August 7, 2009

Reflections on Climate Change and Social Justice

By Dr. Cecilia Martinez and Shalini Gupta

This introduction was written to provide context to the Principles of Climate Justice developed by the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change, led by WE ACT.



Dr. Cecilia Martinez

Shalini Gupta

In response to the political and economic mobilization occurring to address the problems of climate change, the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change fashioned a set of Principles of Climate Justice¹ that can guide effective action for the United States. A number of community-led groups in the U.S. are advancing concerns about both the process and goals being advanced by mainstream environmental organizations.

The Principles of Climate Justice were fashioned because of intimate knowledge of incalculable contributions, and historical sacrifices, already made by some communities in the political, economic and environmental evolution of modern society. In this, we are all too experienced. From eradication of the massive virgin forests that once covered nearly half of this country, to the near decimation of the buffalo and other animal life for the sole purpose of trade and profit. From the rivers that were dammed, and whole communities destroyed in the unceasing effort to constantly remake the natural ecosystem, to the human beings that were enslaved in the name of God and civilization. And from the land that was appropriated and transformed into a commodity—private property to be bought and sold. We are all too experienced in the violation of human and environmental rights.

This is our history.

This society was built on the values of individualism, expansionism and economic growth—and the “right” to pursue these at all costs. As a result, we find ourselves in the midst of a social and environmental crisis never before experienced in human history. Principled action is needed, whether it is in the corporate boardrooms, in the halls of government, or in the neighborhood centers in our communities. But unlike many policies being advanced by those concerned with maintaining the economic status quo, we assert that principled action is built upon the cornerstone of human and environmental rights.

It is time to live up to the challenge of the wisest statesmen and stateswomen in our communities. As the French philosopher Jacques Ellul warned: In our world “Unfortunately, efficiency is a fact and justice is a slogan.”² From the bumper sticker

jingles “Think Globally, Act Locally” and “Whirl Peas,” to “Love your Mother Earth,” we are a society adept at transforming the work of true social action into popular slogan resistance. True political action is in danger of being “green washed.” Unfortunately, as we parade in our t-shirts and decorate our offices with protest posters, the destructive actions and decisions that affect the daily lives of billions of people, and unknown numbers of species, continue. It is time to change that.

American Indian leader Oren Lyons, a traditional elder from the Seneca Nation, once counseled to non-Indigenous people that “Even though you and I are in different boats, you in your boat and we in our canoe, we share the same River of Life—what befalls me, befalls you. And downstream, downstream in this River of Life, our children will pay for our selfishness, for our greed, and for our lack of vision.”³ And while most signal the “I Have a Dream” speech as Dr. Martin Luther King’s pre-eminent call to action, his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” is just as eloquent and quite appropriate to our current times. The letter, written while in the jailhouse, was Dr. King’s response to the empathetic—but concerned—white clergy’s “Call to Unity” in which they admonished the actions of civil rights protesters as “unwise and untimely,” called for a retreat from civil disobedience, and appealed to “principles of law and order, and common sense.”⁴

The tactics have not changed. In nearly every law, policy and program, standards for equality and justice are devalued or discounted as problematic barriers to achieving consensus on action. This justification is as prevalent today as it was 60 years ago. There are constant appeals to “common sense,” suggesting that “some action is better than no action,” “the train is already out of the station,” and we are in the “eleventh hour”—all of which are jingoistic justifications for ignoring proposals for real change and for engaging democratic participation. The high stakes of climate change have only reinforced this prevailing attitude; but what these rationalizations fail to address is that the current political and economic structures have never adequately dealt with social inequities and environmental degradation—even in the best of economic times. We must be mindful in any efforts to address climate change, just as Dr. King cautioned decades ago, that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects us all indirectly.”⁵

This is our reality.

Remember the quintessential adage of the industrial wage labor system: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Symbolic of a time when there were no checks on worker safety, length of the work day, minimum wage, child labor and other exploitive practices, the old nursery rhyme was a reminder that good work is more than a paycheck. As the greening of our work force moves forward we must remember that just solutions to climate change exist within our own communities and in our own histories, not in mimicking a “green” version of the industrial growth model. There was a time when we conceived of work as the expression of our creativity. Work, we hoped, could have meaning and purpose—and we resisted the utilitarian notion that it was solely a means to an income. It is true; we have come a long way in creating massive numbers of jobs, and wealth—the media reminds us every day about the numbers of job losses and gains—and these numbers range in the millions in this country alone.

But a just economic transition also requires that we revitalize the true meaning of work. We must demand safe work places and livable wages as minimum standards only. We cannot abandon the visions we once had for ourselves and for our communities. Our task is to constantly create and re-create opportunities for meaningful work, creative work, work that contributes to the vibrancy of our communities, and work that excites our youth and honors our elders. Not work solely for the sake of pure profit, but work for the sake of a vibrant and full life. It is time to end “...servile work or slavery: those types of work that deform the body, cramp the mind, deaden the spirit,” as historian Lewis Mumford described the prototypical job of his time.⁶ Those types of jobs undermine the livelihoods and capabilities of communities and community members. We will not tolerate work that is servile or exploitive, and no amount of “greening” will make it otherwise.

It will not be green if people are paid less, with limited access to health care, and required to work more. It will not be green if the food is organic, but farm workers are exploited and land appropriated so that it can be affordable at the supermarket. It will not be green if the towering massive windmills generating huge amounts of renewable energy require higher and higher electricity bills for the poor and those with moderate incomes. It will not be green if the rights and traditions of Indigenous people are compromised to fulfill the massive need for new sources of renewable energy and offsets for dirty industries. And it will not be green if the photovoltaic panels are built by minimum wage workers exposed

to toxic working conditions, and imposed limitations to collective action.

Jobs are part of community—they are not the end, but a means. Jobs support families, help to create conditions of health and safety, and as importantly, they are the outlets for creativity and the foundations of generational community building. It is our fundamental human right to determine who we are and what we will become. It is certainly a time of possibilities and of new energy for communities to become involved in the fashioning of a new public agenda. For many families and communities, the sacrifices of the many who brought us to this moment are too well known; therefore we must also remember that along with opportunity comes responsibility. We are, indeed, at a crossroads. We must demand that our voices are heard, and accept responsibility for the hard work and sacrifice that comes with putting ideas into action. We cannot depend only on one man, woman or set of policies to result in real change—to do so would be to relinquish our own political agency. We must gather the voices of our communities and bring them forward. The beauty of our diversity has always been in our ability to create resilient communities that are changing, but also honor the history and traditions of our peoples. The activism being undertaken by women, Indigenous, and communities of color from around the world are leading the way in addressing climate change and development in just and sustainable ways.

This is our hope.

Dr. Cecilia Martinez is the Director of the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Shalini Gupta is a visiting Fellow-in-Residence with the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy at IATP.

Notes

¹ WE ACT, "Principles of Climate Justice," *Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change*, 2009, <http://www.weact.org/Portals/7/EJ%20Leadership%20Forum%20Principles.pdf>

² Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1964), 282.

³ Chief Oren Lyons, "December 1992 Address to the United Nations," (address, United Nations General Assembly Auditorium, United Nations Plaza, New York City, December 10, 1992).

⁴ C.C.J. Carpenter et al., "Statement by Alabama Clergymen," (April 12, 1963).

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," (April 16, 1963).

⁶ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, (New York: Harvest Books, 1963), 414.