

## Climate Justice Movements Gather Strength

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In Operation Climate Change, members of a Nigerian indigenous peoples' rights movement attempt to shut down oil flow stations in the Niger Delta. Ecuadorian environmental activists risk their lives to protest construction of an oil pipeline through the Amazonian forest that is home to the native Quichua, Shuar, and Achuar people. More than 200 farmers from 20 countries march in Bali, Indonesia, during a meeting on the U.N. climate convention to demand that food sovereignty be addressed by negotiators.<sup>1</sup>

These are just three of the many grassroots initiatives worldwide that are seeking to mobilize governments and the public to tackle climate change. In doing so, most groups argue that human rights include people's rights to a clean environment and access to critical natural resources. Many of them advocate the participation of marginalized communities in the U.N. climate negotiation process. Although their specific agendas differ, these groups are part of an emerging global movement for climate justice—an intricate web of grassroots initiatives from diverse regions calling for attention to the inequities inherent in climate change and the need to consider human rights when addressing this pressing global issue.

These grassroots groups tend to be self-organized and oriented toward visible action and advocacy rather than research. They typ-

ically define themselves as “economically marginalized” peoples, “disadvantaged,” or “poor.” The livelihoods of many members depend extensively on climate-sensitive sectors for their survival, such as farming, forestry, and fisheries. Others are union members seeking alternative employment opportunities within a growing green economy or young people concerned about their future.

Local struggles for climate justice connect at the international level with a shared understanding that in addition to accelerating environmental degradation and species loss, global climate change will jeopardize human rights and exacerbate socioeconomic inequities. According to a recent report by the U.N. Development Programme, climate change is “intensifying the risks and vulnerabilities facing poor people, placing further stress on already over-stretched coping mechanisms.”<sup>2</sup>

The first-ever Climate Justice Summit took place in The Hague, Netherlands, in November 2000 at the same time as the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). More than 500 grassroots leaders from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and North America gathered to build bridges across borders and thematic issues. Regional and international networks quickly merged, building the foundation of a global grassroots movement to tackle climate change.<sup>3</sup>

Members of international coalitions such as the Indigenous Environmental Network,

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the World Rainforest Movement, Oilwatch International, and Friends of the Earth International joined to craft the climate justice movement's initial guiding principles and to organize parallel events to the official meeting, such as cultural activities and mass mobilizations. "We affirm that climate change is a rights issue. It affects our livelihoods, our health, our children and our natural resources. We will build alliances across states and borders to oppose climate change inducing patterns and advocate for and practice sustainable development," proclaimed the summit's action statement.<sup>4</sup>

"carbon sinks" within the Clean Development Mechanism established in the Kyoto Protocol. According to the declaration, "licensing the burning of fossil fuels by financing tree plantations to 'absorb' carbon dioxide would expand the ecological and social footprint of the rich, making existing social inequalities worse." As an alternative strategy, the declaration recommended that local communities manage forest ecosystems.<sup>5</sup>

The global climate justice movement has since grown and evolved as a widening circle of civil society groups worldwide integrate climate protection objectives into their strategic agendas. At the Thirteenth Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC in Bali in December 2007, a diverse spectrum of social movement groups held street demonstrations, press conferences, and educational side events. An Asian Young Leaders Climate Forum brought together 35 young people from 14 nations who developed a regional climate action plan that was later presented to the official conference.<sup>6</sup>

Farmers from around the world filled the streets with bright and colorful banners, calling for small-scale, sustainable agriculture as an alternative to industrial farming. "Sustainable agriculture will cool the earth!" they cried. Oilwatch International activists demanded the redirection of financing from fossil fuels to emissions mitigation and clean renewable energy technologies. Numerous groups at the meeting decided to form the Climate Justice Now! coalition, demanding that industrial nations implement drastic emissions, increase financing to support adaptation programs in the developing world, and support rights-based conservation programs that promote community control over energy, forests, and water.<sup>7</sup>

Assessing the impact of climate justice movements on domestic and international climate governance can be a challenge, as



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*Representatives of indigenous peoples protest their exclusion from the UNFCCC meeting in Bali.*

In addition, individual international coalitions presented statements on specific issues of concern. Indigenous groups had collaborated on the Declaration of the First International Forum of Indigenous Peoples on Climate Change, calling for the creation of an adaptation fund with financing allocated for indigenous groups and the inclusion of indigenous peoples in all levels of decision-making in the UNFCCC process. The World Rainforest Movement presented the Mount Tamalpais Declaration, demanding deep greenhouse gas emissions cuts and an end to the inclusion of tree plantations as

these movements tend to participate outside of climate conventions, have no voting authority within official negotiations, and often use international conferences as an opportunity to strengthen their agendas through networking and alliance building. The movement's overarching principles—climate equity, inclusive participation, and human rights—play a limited role in the arena of global policymaking on climate change. The UNFCCC, for example, makes no mention of human rights.<sup>8</sup>

But those key principles are beginning to emerge in the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), some branches of the United Nations, and some intergovernmental organizations. International humanitarian organizations such as ActionAid, Christian Aid, Oxfam, and Tearfund have developed climate campaigns based on equity and human rights, often acting as a bridge between underrepresented communities and official policymakers. The United Nations is increasingly integrating the concerns of marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples into its program work on climate change. According to a recent U.N. report, “the proposals of indigenous communities to integrate their social, political, cultural, and economic rights and their aspirations into future development strategies must be considered so that the challenges they are facing are fully addressed, respect

for their rights and cultures is ensured, and their survival and well-being is protected.” And in mid-2008 the World Bank initiated a program on human rights and climate change, with a focus on developing policies and procedures that build resilience to climate change and reduce vulnerability by using a rights-based approach.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, climate justice movements collaborate closely with NGOs that in turn incorporate the movement's principles into proposals they submit to the UNFCCC Secretariat. Tearfund, for example, has submitted a proposal on disaster risk reduction that focuses on community participation within the context of adaptation planning. The Global Forest Coalition has presented a proposal addressing the need to involve indigenous peoples in policymaking programs to reduce emissions from deforestation in developing countries. And the Climate Action Network has put in a proposal calling for governments to initiate a collaborative dialogue on how adaptation of the most vulnerable groups of a population can be effectively supported. Thus although members of marginalized communities may not join in international climate negotiations at the official level, they have succeeded in making their voices heard by influencing more-established NGOs that work closely with the negotiators.<sup>10</sup>

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