Research to Practice Paper:

Social Isolation and Climate Change: An Inextricable Bind

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INTD 497
Lessons of Community and Compassion:
Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through Policy
and Program Development

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Introduction

As 2016 draws to a close, the correlation between human activity and the rising global temperature, which threatens the livelihood of the planet and its inhabitants, is indisputable. Now, the questions are: How soon? Who pays the price? And who cares? Over the past few decades, the international community has come together, with varying degrees of success, to try to craft and implement programs and policies that will ward off the projected 2°C increase by 2100 that will threaten the existence of life on many parts of the planet.[1] For those residing in high rises in New York, London, or Montreal, a two-degree increase (this being a conservative estimate) translates to concern for the futures of "our children," "our grand-children," and our "great-children." However, for those living on the tiny island nation of Kiribati, or in the coastal community of Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, the fear of climate change is today, yesterday, and every day going forward.

The immediate effects of climate change are extreme and relentless, taking place in the form of earthquakes, floods, droughts and tsunamis. Extreme weather has uprooted the world's first "climate refugees," breaking apart communities, families and destroying livelihoods. What is not as well documented as the impact of the "anthropocene" on climate change, however, is the close link between

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[1] "Why 2°C." http://www.cop21.gouv.fr/en/why-2c/.

climate change and social isolation. Those who are already socially isolated and marginalized due to a combination of geographic isolation, discrimination, persecution, a legacy of colonization, poverty, or inequality, are those who are most immediately vulnerable to the effects of climate related disaster, and thus exacerbated isolation. It is important to note that these individuals are also least responsible for the anthropogenic environmental degradation that results in the warming of the planet at alarming rates.

Yet, while the socially isolated suffer the most from climate change, they are also the least included or consulted in climate-related policy or program development.[2] Furthermore, they are rarely recognized as potential agents of change in mitigating environmental degradation.[3] This paper will argue that, to most effectively achieve the targets set by the Paris Agreement in April 2016, and to meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, which aim to "leave no one behind," it will be essential to: (a) involve marginalized populations in the processes of data collection and consultation that are informing policy and program development; and (b) empower the already socially isolated and marginalized to be agents of change in their own communities. In so doing, such policies and

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[2] Fatma Denton, "Climate change vulnerability, impacts, and adaptation: why does gender matter?" *Gender & Development* 10, no. 2 (2002): 10-20.
[3] Ibid.

programs will not only prevent against further climate-related disasters and reduce risks to vulnerable populations, but they will also build social connectedness.

A Disproportionate Burden

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #13 states that, "climate change represents the single biggest threat to development, and its widespread, unprecedented impacts disproportionately burden the poorest and most vulnerable."[4] These disproportionate impacts occur all over the planet. The effects of climate change heavily burden entire countries in the Global South, as well as marginalized communities within countries, and even marginalized individuals within communities in the most affluent nations. Those who feel the everyday impacts cannot afford to wait for another Hurricane Sandy to call the rest of the world to action.

In much of Latin America, parts of Asia, and Africa, the warming climate has a direct effect on the spread of certain infectious diseases, which is in turn exacerbating social isolation in poor communities. Because rising temperatures expand the area in which mosquitoes can thrive, mosquito-borne illnesses such as Zika, Dengue, and West Nile Virus — all diseases that primarily affect the Global

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[4] United Nations. "Sustainable Development Goal 13: Take Urgent Action to Combat Climate Change and Its Impacts." https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg13.

South — are becoming more difficult to control.[5] Shifting patterns of precipitation will also affect breeding sites, as mosquitoes tend to breed in standing water.[6] Since Zika causes babies to be born with microcephaly (enlarged heads), the stigma of this physical abnormality could further isolate the affected individuals and their families, not to mention the added burden of increased health costs. Interestingly, it was not until the threat of Zika reached the shores of the United States that concerted research for a vaccine began, perhaps because the poor women living in the favelas of Rio did not offer enough of a profit incentive to justify the cost.

Yet it is the increasingly large number of climate refugees from all over the world that perhaps best illustrates the disproportionate and immediate burden on the most marginalized, and the impact of climate change on social isolation. Over the last seven years, a startling average of 22.5 million people have been displaced by climate-related disasters every year, or 62,000 people every day.[7] As extreme weather events become more frequent and intense in the decades to come, this trend is expected to magnify.[8]

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[5] Mary Ann Benitez, "Climate change could affect mosquito-borne diseases in Asia," *The Lancet* 373, no. 9669 (2009): 1070.
[6] Ibid.
[7] "Global Estimates 2015: People Displaced by Disasters." Norwegian Refugee Council, Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2015: 19.
[8] Ibid.

A common thread among many climate refugees is a deep-rooted connection to the land from which they are being forced. Residents of a small island, Isle de Jean Charles, off the southern coast of Louisiana, are part of the first community of American climate refugees to be resettled.[9] The vast majority of these residents are hunters and fisherman from the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe and the United Houma Nation.[10] Since 1955, over 90% of the island's original land mass has been washed away due to severe hurricanes and channels cut by loggers and oil companies.[11] Heavy flooding impedes residents' mobility, often confining people to their houses for days on end and prohibiting children from attending school. There are few animals left to hunt or trap on the island. The United States government has now set aside federal funds to "resettle" the islanders to a yet-to-be determined location, but for the Native Americans that have lived on Isle de Jean Charles for generations, this is not a viable solution. "We're going to lose all our heritage, all our culture," one resident told the *New York Times,* "it's all going to be history."[12] This loss of a sense of belonging and detachment from their land and identity will result in further social isolation of this community.

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[9] C. Davenport, C. Robertson, "Resettling the First American 'Climate Refugees,'" *New York Times*, 2 May 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html?_r=0
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

The Uru-Murato people, who have lived off the waters of Lake Poopó in Bolivia for generations, comprise another group of indigenous climate refugees.[13] In December 2015, the last of the lake entirely evaporated, leaving just a dry, salty expanse, forcing the Uru-Murato to break with the fishing practices around which their lives had revolved for centuries. But the loss of the lake means more to the fishing families than the loss of their livelihood. The vanishing of Lake Poopó threatens the very identity of the Uru-Murato people, who make up the oldest Indigenous group in the region. Now, many of the families have to resettle to the salt flats, where they work as day laborers processing and packaging salt. "The Uru people aren't made for this," a once-respected Uru elder lamented.[14] Without this sacred connection to the land or their rituals and customs, the Uru Murato lose a central aspect of their existence, and face the risk of greater social isolation.

While it is evident that the poor tend to pay the most for environmental disaster, it is important to consider the acute vulnerabilities of those who occupy multiple marginalized identities. Women, especially poor women, and poor rural women, experience the effects of climate change in vastly different ways than do their male and urban counterparts.[15] In the 1991 Bangladesh cyclone, five times as many women as men died, despite a roughly equal number of each inhabiting the

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[13] Nicholas Casey, "Climate Change Claims a Lake and an Identity," *New York Times*, 7 July 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/07/07/world/americas/bolivia-climate-change-lake-poopo.html
[14] Ibid.
[15] Fatma Denton, "Climate change vulnerability, impacts, and adaptation: why does gender matter?." *Gender & Development* 10, no. 2 (2002): 10-20.

affected area.[16] When an earthquake hits, it is often women who stay behind to

ensure the safety of other family members. When floods or droughts come, it is

women who are raped at night while walking extra miles for water, and women

who are usually the first to abandon their education to help their communities to

recover from the effects of disaster.[17] A 2015 post-disaster assessment in Myanmar

revealed that, while women showed greater resilience to the devastation and a

stronger willingness to recover, their pre-disaster vulnerabilities, including

malnutrition, lower incomes, and higher food insecurity than men, were

exacerbated.[18]

Employing the Capabilities Approach to Include all Voices

In her book, *Creating Capabilities*, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum

advocates for a more human-centered way of measuring development and

progress: a measure of the degree to which a person is able to exercise the ten

central capabilities that define the human existence.[19] "A focus on dignity," she

writes, "will dictate policies that protect and support agency, rather than choices

[16] Sarah Bradshaw and Maureen Fordham. Women and Girls in Disasters, A review for DFID, (2013): 12. http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/climate-change#notes
[17] "Women Leading Climate Action," *UN Women*, 2016. http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/climate-change
[18] "Post-disaster assessment in Myanmar highlights disproportionate impact on women," *UN Women*, 17 December 2015. http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/12/post-disaster-assessment-in-myanmar
[19] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating capabilities*, Harvard University Press, (2011): 30.

that infantilize people and treat them as passive recipients of benefit."[20] With

climate related disasters growing more frequent every year, it is essential to

recognize the needs and interests of those who are affected most in moving

forward. To make progress on climate change, we must not only recognize, but, as

Nussbaum suggests, support the dignity and the agency of those for whom climate

change is a present and constant concern.

One potential avenue by which to do that is through empowering women to

be agents of change. UN Women points out that while women bear the brunt of the

burden of climate change, the critical role they can play in the management of

natural resources and as agents of change is often overlooked in climate change

negotiations, investments, and policies.[21] In an effort to incorporate the goals of

several SDG targets, namely Gender Equality (#5) and Climate Action (#13), UN

Women has launched programs in several countries that harness the power of

women to lead the sustainability movement, reduce the risks of post-disaster

devastation, and build capacity and foster a sense of belonging and purpose. One

such project in Laramate, Peru supports rural indigenous women in returning to

their ancestral techniques of choosing and conserving seeds and cultivating the

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[20] Ibid.
[21] "Women Leading Climate Action," *UN Women*, 2016. http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/climate-change

land.[22] The result has been a healthier and wider variety of crops, improved incomes for the women and their communities, and an increase in women's participation in public spaces and decision making by recognizing their unique role as holders of this ancestral knowledge and skills in agriculture.[23] Another program, facilitated by Share El Salvador, provides training to rural women to lead their communities in preparing for natural disasters.[24] This not only facilitates the rise of strong female community leaders, but trains women to train other women to advocate for their rights and become leaders.[25] The environmental preparedness plan, developed and implemented by the women in the program, ensures that the community is resilient to environmental shock. As such projects highlight, recognizing women's heightened vulnerabilities to climate change and their potential to affect change will be key in the implementation of future projects. It should be noted, however, that empowering women to be leaders in the climate change movement should not reduce the onus on the actors most responsible for environmental degradation.

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[22] "Indigenous women in Peru combat climate change and boost economy," *UN Women*, 09 Aug 2016. http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/8/indigenous-women-in-peru-combat-climate-change-and-boost-economy

[23] Ibid.

[24] "Women's Empowerment through Emergency Preparedness," *Share El Salvador*. http://www.share-elsalvador.org/our-work/community-development-projects/womens-empowerment-through-emergency-preparedness

[25] Ibid.

Beyond empowering those bearing the heaviest burden to participate in climate change efforts, climate-related policies should be driven by data that reflect the experiences of those individuals, and should be created in consultation with them. If the SDGs truly intend to leave no one behind (a marked shift from the Millennium Development Goals), we must ensure that the way in which their progress is tracked and measured is inclusive. The Environmental Performance Index (EPI), created by Kim Samuel, Dr. Angel Hsu and her colleagues at Yale University, is a biennial ranking of countries' performance on environmental issues in the areas of human health and the protection of ecosystems.[26] Instead of relying on government data, which can be patchy or skewed to protect the interest of the state or mask regional disparities, the EPI focuses on creating pathways so that citizen scientists, independent watchdogs, private corporations and third party organizations can participate in the process of data collection.[27] By ranking the countries on a variety of indicators, the EPI holds governments accountable to their constituencies and to their promises on climate action, highlighting where they are

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[26] "Global Metrics for the Environment: 2016 Report," Yale Environmental Performance Index, 2016. http://epi.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2016EPI_Full_Report.pdf

[27] Angel Hsu, O. Malik, L. Johnson, and D. Esty, "Development: Mobilize citizens to track sustainability," *Nature*, 30 March 2014. http://www.nature.com/news/development-mobilize-citizens-to-track-sustainability-1.14951

doing well and indicating where more work is necessary.[28] The ranking also facilitates competition between countries.

The EPI is a revolutionary tool, not only in fighting climate change, but also in building social connectedness. By including the voices of indigenous people, women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, older people and so many more in the data collection process, the EPI upholds the dignity of marginalized individuals and recognizes their agency. Through measurement, the EPI will illustrate for policymakers the disproportionate burden of climate change on marginalized communities. This nuanced picture can then be used to design climate policies and programs on local, national, and even global levels that will hold those destroying the environment accountable for their actions and ensure that climate change does not exacerbate the vulnerabilities of already vulnerable communities.

At all levels of governance, policymakers and global citizens alike should look to the approach embodied by initiatives like the EPI. To even have a chance at turning back the clock on climate change, individuals of every age, race, sex, gender, ethnicity, ability, and postal code must have a voice, and must be empowered to create change.

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[28] Ibid.

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