



Could Renewable Energy be a Key Driver for Economic Recovery from the COVID-19 Shutdown?

Social Equity and Environmental Justice (Article #4)

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Introduction

The Climate Crisis Action Plan makes a strong commitment to achieving environmental justice, which ensures that all people regardless of race, color, culture, national origin, or income enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards. On the very first page of the report, the authors state, “Climate solutions must have justice and equity at their core.” (1) These principles are woven throughout the report and highlighted specifically in Pillar 6, titled “Invest in Disproportionately Exposed Communities to Cut Pollution and Advance Environmental Justice.”

The Climate Crisis Action Plan acknowledges that low-income communities, communities of color, and tribal and Indigenous communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental crises, such as pollution and climate change. This reality has been made especially visible amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately claimed the lives of Black Americans who are exposed to higher levels of air pollution and therefore more likely to suffer from respiratory illnesses. (2) Indeed, the pandemic has drawn attention to environmental injustices that have long existed in the United States.

Environmental activists have been working for decades to advocate on behalf of environmental justice communities, defined as a community “with significant representation of communities of color, low-income communities, or tribal and Indigenous communities, that experiences or is at risk of experiencing higher or more adverse human health or environmental effects.” Research on disparities in exposure to environmental hazards has existed for years. A landmark report in 1987 called “Toxic Wastes and Race” found that “race was the single greatest determining factor of whether an individual lived near a hazardous-waste facility.” (3) Progress on these issues has been slow, and environmental justice communities have historically been excluded from the policymaking process.

The Climate Crisis Action Plan aims to correct these past policy failures and actively seek input from people disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change. In creating the report, the Select Committee on the Climate Crisis consulted organizations that created the [Equitable & Just National Climate Platform](#), which calls for a bold policy agenda to achieve climate and environmental justice. Representative Kathy Castor (D-FL), Chairwoman of the Select Committee and a senior member of Joe Biden’s climate task force, argued that policymakers “have to focus on environmental-justice communities. There is an awakening across the country to systemic racism, and this is a report that at its center, at its core, focuses on those communities.” (4)

Climate Crisis Action Plan Policies

The policies aimed at achieving environmental justice are woven throughout the 547-page report and highlighted in Pillar 6. These policies can be grouped into five broad categories:

- 1) Making environmental justice a priority in federal government decision-making
 - a) Example: “Congress should require employees from EPA, DOI, and other relevant agencies to participate in an environmental and climate justice training program. Trainings should focus on ‘educating officials and staff about the disproportionate impacts faced by environmental justice communities and stress the need to minimize harm to these populations.’”
- 2) Listening directly to environmental justice community members
 - a) Example: “Congress should direct EPA to hold high-level biennial public meetings on environmental justice issues at each regional office. Planning should include robust and inclusive outreach to communities in the region.”
- 3) Investing in and expanding access to resources in environmental justice communities
 - a) Example: “This report makes several recommendations for new federal investment and incentives for clean and resilient infrastructure. Congress should direct a significant percentage of this spending to environmental justice communities and communities most affected by the economic transition away from fossil fuel consumption.”
- 4) Strengthening the enforcement of environmental laws in environmental justice communities to cut pollution and eliminate other environmental hazards
 - a) Example: “Congress should double EPA’s enforcement budget and direct the agency to make environmental and climate justice one of its enforcement and compliance assurance priorities. EPA could begin by identifying 100 communities most overburdened by industrial pollution for a targeted enforcement surge, including enhanced additional air and water quality monitoring.”
- 5) Funding further research on disparities in exposure to environmental hazards
 - a) Example: “Congress should create a qualified environmental justice program credit in Section 36C of the tax code. It should be a capped refundable competitive credit of \$1 billion each year for institutions of higher education to develop and implement environmental justice programs as part of their curriculum.”

In addition to supporting environmental justice communities, the report outlines energy policies to support low-income communities in general. For example, one of the report’s recommendations states, “Congress should direct DOE to create financing programs to expand

energy efficiency across the country, particularly for low- to moderate-income households. These recommendations include:

- “Congress should expand and increase WAP [Weatherization Assistance Program] funding, with an aim of helping to facilitate the weatherization of every eligible home in the country. States should prioritize weatherization investments in communities that have experienced harm from the declining use of fossil fuels and environmental justice communities that have experienced disproportionate harm from pollution exposure. Before allocating WAP funds, states should identify the communities most in need of energy efficiency improvements, including low-income communities with high energy cost burdens, and distribute funds according to those needs.”
- “Congress should direct DOE to provide utilities with technical assistance to expand on-bill financing for energy efficiency.” The Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI) has been a strong advocate for on-bill financing, which “allows participants to pay back the cost of energy improvements over the course of several years as a line item on their utility bills.” (8) This makes energy efficiency upgrades more accessible to low- to moderate-income households that are unable to afford the high upfront costs of upgrades.
- “Congress should expand investments in public housing for weatherization, electrification, and onsite renewable energy generation. As part of these investments, Congress should establish a fund to electrify stoves, heating, and hot water in public housing nationwide to eliminate the respiratory triggers produced by fossil fuel use in public housing. Federal support for projects should be conditioned on recipients meeting strong labor standards (including Buy America/n and Davis-Bacon prevailing wage requirements), complying with all labor, environmental, and civil rights statutes, and signing community benefit agreements and project labor agreements, where relevant.”

These policies are a good first step towards improving the current stock of housing in the country, particularly in the Northeast Midwest region. The report also sets energy efficiency standards for new housing developments across the nation.

The next essay in this series will focus on the Moving Forward Act and presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden’s recently released climate plan. Once again, we will take a look at the policy proposals contained in both products, paying particular attention to energy policy and keeping in mind implications for the Northeast Midwest region.

Footnotes:

- (1) “The Congressional Action Plan for a Clean Energy Economy and a Healthy, Resilient, and Just America.” Majority Staff Report, June 30, 2020.
<https://climatecrisis.house.gov/report>
- (2) Justin Worland. “Why the Larger Climate Movement Is Finally Embracing the Fight Against Environmental Racism.” *Time*, July 9, 2020.
- (3) Justin Worland. “Why the Larger Climate Movement Is Finally Embracing the Fight Against Environmental Racism.” *Time*, July 9, 2020.
<https://time.com/5864704/environmental-racism-climate-change/>

- (4) Christopher Flavelle. “Democrats Detail a Climate Agenda Tying Environment to Racial Justice.” *The New York Times*, June 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/climate/house-democrats-climate-plan.html>
- (5) Ann Bartuska et al. “A Close Look at the New Report from the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis.” *Resources*, July 6, 2020. <https://www.resourcesmag.org/common-resources/close-look-new-report-house-select-committee-climate-crisis/>
- (6) “Could Lenders Hold the Key to the Aging Housing Stock Crisis?” Freddie Mac, August 28, 2019. <https://sf.freddiemac.com/articles/insights/could-lenders-hold-the-key-to-the-aging-housing-stock-crisis>
- (7) Na Zhao. “The Aging Housing Stock.” National Association of Home Builders, January 5, 2017. <http://eyeonhousing.org/2017/01/the-aging-housing-stock-3/>
- (8) Maeve Arthur and Maia Crook. “Energy Efficiency Recommendations in the Climate Crisis Report.” Environmental and Energy Study Institute, July 6, 2020. <https://www.eesi.org/articles/view/energy-efficiency-recommendations-in-the-climate-crisis-report>