



Combating and coping with climate change: A social justice perspective

Global warming is already affecting our planet and its people. Areas around the world are suffering from flooding, droughts, more intense storms, decreased food production, increasing water scarcity, and greater vulnerability to disease. Although wealthy countries like the United States are responsible for creating the climate crisis, the world's poorest people will be disproportionately affected.

The U.S. has less than 5 percent of the world's population, yet we have been responsible for 29 percent of the world's cumulative carbon dioxide emissions, largely because of our high energy use and our historic reliance on fossil fuels.ⁱ In the U.S. today, the average person emits 19.74 tons of carbon dioxide per year, compared to 4.92 tons in China, 1.38 tons in India, and 0.05 tons in Mali (West Africa).ⁱⁱ

Yet the poorest countries, which did so little to cause the crisis, will be most severely hit by the impacts of climate change. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that by 2020, crop yields in sub-Saharan Africa could drop as much as 50 percent, and that by 2050, up to 600 million more people on the continent could face water stress.ⁱⁱⁱ Even within wealthy societies like the U.S., the poorest, the elderly and people of color tend to have the least capacity to cope with the impacts of climate change, including drought, flooding, hurricane force winds, and sea-level rise.^{iv}

Many populations who are most vulnerable to climate impacts also suffer from energy poverty. Globally, 1.4 billion people, mostly those living in sub-Saharan Africa, lack access to electricity.^v Nine million households in the United States cannot afford the energy they need to keep their homes warm.^{vi} Almost 40% of the world's households rely on dirty fuel sources such as wood, coal, charcoal, or animal waste, creating particulate pollution that leads to nearly two million premature deaths per year -- most of them women and children.^{vii} These populations desperately need access to safe, clean energy.

An important starting point to combat climate change is to end subsidies for fossil fuels that are responsible for much of the problem. While ending subsidies to fossil fuels is an important goal, it cannot result in the denial of energy to the poor, people who are not largely responsible for the climate crisis, while allowing the richest to continue to pollute. Many existing fossil fuel subsidies are production subsidies for Big Oil or consumption subsidies for the wealthiest in society, and those should be eliminated immediately. Other subsidies provide energy access to those most in need, and for now should be preserved to safeguard the health, livelihoods and dignity of these populations. As soon as possible, every fossil subsidy should be eliminated and energy subsidies should instead be directed towards securing clean energy access for all.

Therefore, the U.S. and other industrialized countries must prioritize funding for developing countries to adapt to the costly impacts of climate change and transition to cleaner energy without compromising other basic development needs like health care and education. The health and economic advantages of clean energy are key to poverty alleviation; reducing poverty, in turn, also creates the ability to better cope with the ever-more-serious impacts of climate change. We have the moral obligation to protect low income and vulnerable populations while providing them with energy access.

ⁱ Baumbert, et al, *Navigating the Numbers: Greenhouse gas data and international climate policy*, World Resources Institute, 2005 at http://pdf.wri.org/navigating_numbers.pdf

ⁱⁱ United Nations Statistics Division, CO2 emissions per capita 2007 at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/environment/air_co2_emissions.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report on Climate Change, 2007 at http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/wg2/en/ch9s9-4-4.html

^{iv} *Exposed: Social vulnerability and climate change in the US Southeast*, 2007 at http://adapt.oxfamamerica.org/resources/Exposed_Report.pdf

^v *Energy Poverty: How to make modern energy access universal?*, International Energy Agency, United Nations Development Program, and United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, 2010 at http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/docs/weo2010/weo2010_poverty.pdf

^{vi} Testimony of Olivia Wein, Staff Attorney, National Consumer Law Center to House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, FY 2013 Appropriations for the HHS Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program at http://www.nclc.org/images/pdf/energy_utility_telecom/liheap/house-approps-2013.pdf

^{vii} “Universal access,” United Nations Sustainable Energy for All Initiative, at <http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/objectives/universal-access>