Building Power: The Potential of Digital Rights & Climate Justice Movement Collaboration

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Introduction

In order to explore potential points of collaboration between the digital rights and climate justice movements it is important to understand climate justice as framed by those most impacted by the climate crisis. Climate Justice calls for solutions led by people- for the earth and with an emphasis on justice. Without the lens of justice we see climate change solutions that benefit few and have little to no real impact. In some places climate solutions mean shifting to decentralized systems rooted in communities that are self-sufficient, and self-determining while in others, it is uplifting and implementing strategies led by Indigenous Peoples and those most impacted. For those facing the most devastating effects of climate change it is the right to exist -small island states and/ coastal communities. From stopping wars to ending poverty to migration to redefining wealth and equity, climate justice encompasses and touches every part of our lives.

Growing the Digital Rights Frame

Digital rights is framed in the literature as an advocacy movement, rather one that implements and applies rights. Climate justice solutions are just, do no harm and therefore have no negative impact on human rights. Understanding that the digital rights movement has developed with its roots in human rights, is there room to grow beyond a human rights framework? To one that includes the rights of Mother Earth?

The climate justice movement isn't limited to stopping injustice but one that is developing and implementing solutions.

> *"A Just Transition requires us to build a visionary economy for life in a way that is very different than the economy we are in now. Constructing this visionary economy calls for strategies that democratize, decentralize and diversify economic activity while we damper down consumption, and (re)distribute resources and power,"* *(www.movementgeneration.org, n.d.)*

As a global movement we are demanding climate justice while seeking a "Just" transition that we define for ourselves. Does the digital rights movement see itself as an active participant in the global movement to solve climate change? Can the digital rights movement adapt to integrating climate justice?

Cross Movement Building

> *"Since the Paris Agreement on climate change was signed in 2015, the organization says on average four activists have been killed each week,"* *(Marshall. 2021).*

From security, monitoring, and surveillance to digital policing and information gathering on activists; this is an existing site of collaboration globally from the Black Lives Matter movement, to the Standing Rock No DAPL fights, to the UK climate networks to assassinations of activists in the global south.

There has been some cross-cutting work through climate disinformation campaigns, and digital security, however beyond a few cross-sections our movements have yet to fully collaborate. As other authors have mentioned, the building of cross sector work could be really strategic between the climate justice and the digital rights movements. Hosting meetings with clear intentions to build relationships that challenge policies, structures and inequities but at the same time build solutions will be key for many climate justice movement organizations to enter into this work.

Decolonizing digital rights work could be a bridge for both movements, as it seeks to address structural changes, white supremacy, inequality and access within the digital sphere. Decolonizing digital rights work is especially critical when thinking about how power and privilege work within the digital world, what the impacts are across the sector and now are becoming entrenched in our ever changing digital society. Climate justice works on the same issues but in different areas with different methods; maybe this is a critical starting point for building alignment between both movements as there are more similarities than differences?

> *"When those designers are predominantly male, privileged, able-bodied, cis-gender, and white, and their views and opinions are being encoded, this poses serious problems for the rest of us…Technology based on data from a racist, sexist, classist, and ableist system, will provide outcomes that reflect that racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Unless a conscious effort is made to get the system to make different choices, systems built on such data will replicate the historical preferences it has been fed." -Nani Jansen Reventlow, 2020 Anthropology + Technology Conference, 9 October.*

Potential Strategic Collaboration

From one standpoint, it would seem that we are working in similar arenas in challenging state policies domestically and working at the global level through various UN mechanisms, yet both movements are still struggling to achieve their goals. Perhaps there are strategic points of intervention between the digital rights and climate justice movements that we could explore that would further our work in both fields effectively. Is it possible that we might need each other and not know it?

Moving towards the Conference of the Parties otherwise known as COP27 hosted by Egypt in November 2022, much of this year's United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) work is the implementation of the Paris Agreement and climate finance. Many different sectors are moving towards digitization within the implementation of the Paris Agreement, which can only mean more apps, algorithms, and tech services. As we watch the

merging of climate change and finance technologies, we know there are already deep inequalities existing in finance technology that are biased, racist and problematic. Could this be another potential point of intervention that could be effective for both movements?

One of the networks officially grown out of the UNFCCC COP process is climate technology, which includes tech policy recommendations, tech assessments, promising tech projects, and the climate technology centre that has a direct focus on the developing world. Beyond this network, we've seen extensive R&D investment and corporate funding for research into climate solutions. Could this be another point of convergence and intervention for both movements to strategize around, especially as we are watching the rise of "Green Capitalism," and false solutions to climate change?

Proposed false solutions to climate change include, "net zero" climate plans to unite a variety of risky technologies, including geo engineering, and deeply flawed carbon market schemes. The bottom line is that each solution allows for continued emissions, and, if deployed at large scale, will have significant detrimental social, equity, and environmental consequences. Equally fundamentally, they distract from the rapid implementation of real solutions that are needed.

- Carbon offsets - The idea that a polluting actor/industry can "cancel out" its emissions by investing in projects that store or reduce carbon, such as forest "conservation" schemes, that often displace communities, claiming to reduce deforestation that is usually insignificant, not permanent or verifiable, as well as monoculture plantations that once cut down for logging, re-emit the carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

- Nature Based Solutions (NBS)- This is a new name for the old idea of promoting large scale plantations and conservation projects as an "offset" for continued fossil fuel use. It is used to commodify nature, by allowing a corporation or government to compensate for their emissions by funding projects meant to absorb carbon emissions (by creating carbon sinks through, for instance, monoculture plantations and other forms of afforestation and agricultural practices) and claim that the carbon removal via these projects can balance out their continued high levels of emissions. Many of these schemes have been widely discredited and shown to not only fail to offset the emissions in question or only do so temporarily, but also often drive human rights abuses.

- Bioenergy- is energy derived from burning biomass (plant- and animal-based materials) taken from renewable sources. Evidence suggests that burning biomass (tree based biomass) emits more greenhouse gas emissions than coal or natural gas, when taking into account the lifecycle of the emissions and when implemented at commercial scale. If carried out at scale, burning biomass for energy is also likely to give way to land grabs, biodiversity loss, and rights violations for Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, and frontline communities.

- Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) -is the process of capturing and storing carbon dioxide (CO_2) before it is released into the atmosphere. However, nearly all existing

CCS is used in service of Enhanced Oil Recovery (EOR), a process developed by the oil industry to reach deep oil reserves that would otherwise be inaccessible and non-viable. Because of this, the rebranding of 'Carbon Capture and Storage' is misleading and because it portrays CCS as a net benefit to the climate when it is mostly used to exploit more oil and because the process itself requires fossil fuels to carry out and to power CCS, the consumption of fossil fuels could increase by up to 40 percent.

- Bioenergy and Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS)- A combination of two large scale theoretical technologies that involve growing and burning biomass, such as trees, to produce energy and then simultaneously sucking the emissions back out of the air and storing it underground with Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS).

- Direct Air Capture (DAC)- is a technological method that uses chemical reactions to capture carbon dioxide (CO_2) from the atmosphere. In order to store the carbon dioxide once it has been extracted from the atmosphere, DAC is dependent on more technologies to be effective.

- Hydrogen - Industry insists that hydrogen is 'green' and will be produced using renewable electricity, but globally less than 0.1 percent of hydrogen production is 'green,' with the rest coming mainly from fossil gas. (Corporate Accountability, n.d.)

Another sector that is closely aligned with tech is the energy sector, which includes climate solution projects, models and renewable energy. Climate justice understands that global access to energy and power are already deeply inequitable. Energy democracy is an ever growing arena globally from access to energy, to the life cycle of energy production. Is this another area that digital rights movements could insert themselves into? Could our movements create joint climate solution technologies that are just?

We know that one of the key points of advocacy in the digital rights movement is access for all and scaling up the internet. What does that mean when we understand that the internet itself is the third or fifth biggest contributor of carbon emissions beyond China and the United States, (Climate Care, 2021)? Could this be a site of intervention for both movements to grapple with and develop strategies together?

Open source was mentioned by another author in this series, could open source be strategic in working towards accessible learning platforms and championing climate justice? Joint collaboration could create new platforms where knowledge is respected and protected: envisioning new ways for knowledge creation, development, and solutions that aren't rooted in the exploitative nature of academia or corporations such as ownership, patents, etc. Could our movements evolve new methods for knowledge technology, transparency, and development?

Clearly this articulation is only the beginning of understanding potential collaboration across movements. As the digital sector continues to evolve and grow the potential is limitless. As the decolonizing digital rights movement has shown, we want to come together in ways that uplift

our beliefs, practises and understandings of justice not only as our area of work together but how we collaborate together moving forward.

Who is the Climate Justice Movement?

Digital rights organizations and funders can lead the charge on building the capacity of the frontlines to effectively develop strategies to fight the climate crisis as technology rapidly expands.

In order to better collaborate with the climate justice movement, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of groups that exist and do work under that umbrella.

<u>Grassroots Communities, Environmental Justice and Social Justice Organizations</u>
In North America, under the climate justice umbrella are groups that carry forward the legacy of Environmental Justice and Social Justice work into the climate justice movement. Born from grassroots community movements, Environmental Justice organizations have expanded their work to acknowledge and challenge climate change issues at the local, national and international level. These organizations continue to focus on frontline fights, challenging extraction, industry and environmental racism in their backyards and have added their organizing strength to larger issues in the climate sector. Critical to what is carried forward into the climate justice movement is the practice of acknowledging and organizing against racial, social and economic root causes as major drivers of climate change rather than just a focus on governmental or corporate practices.

Many of these groups have united in larger formations such as the Extreme Energy Extraction Collaborative or the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA). CJA,

> *"Formed in 2013 to create a new center of gravity in the climate movement by uniting frontline communities and organizations into a formidable force."*
> *(www.climatejusticealliance.org, n.d.)*

Significant in the formation of CJA is the paired organizing against root causes and solutions strategies that place impacted communities at the center of decision making and the proliferation of Just Transition as a strategy.

Across the Global South, community organizations, grassroots movements and Indigenous communities lead fights against their governments and multinational corporations who are threatening critical ecosystems and biodiversity necessary for the planet's survival as well as leading implementation of the "RIghts of Mother Earth." Much of this is accomplished with larger resource disparities than faced by organizations and communities in the global north. They also represent the loudest calls for governments of the global north to take on a larger share of responsibility for alleviating the climate crisis.

<u>Greens and "Big Greens"</u>
Organizations categorized as "greens" and "big greens" are well staffed, well funded- often in the millions, and more national and/or International in focus. They often have offices across the global north and south. They historically have less accountability to directly impacted communities. Additionally organizational staff tend to be more majority white or privileged. These organizations have also been known as environmental organizations.

Greens and big greens have largely normalized the term "justice" in the terminology of the climate movement but have yet to fully integrate the principles at all levels of their internal organization; structure, racial and privilege diversity among staff, operating methodologies etc, and their external work: policy orientations, access to power and decision makers, demands of corporations and government. Their access to a greater share of resources and power has resulted in compromises being made without the consent of communities on the frontlines of the campaigns these organizations work on.

Efforts have been made to align the strategies of Big greens and grassroots climate organizations through efforts like the Building Equity and Alignment for Impact (BEA) which include environmental justice groups, greens and funders.

> *"BEA's mission is to foster authentic cross-sector relationships to advance the progress of the environmental movement towards a just transition to equitable funding. We shift power and resources from institutions to grassroots leadership as we transform the environmental movement. BEA is a model for facilitating courageous conversations with and among three sectors: grassroots environmental justice organizations, national environmental organizations, and philanthropy." (www.bea4impact.org, n.d.)*

<u>Multi-Organizational, Community and Indigenous Movements</u>

There have been many frontline fights within the climate movements that have highlighted community leadership outside of the non-profit structure and the necessity of frontline (including Indigenous) communities to lead fights. While in many instances, frontline communities have been able to drive leadership and decision making within these fights as in the examples of Standing Rock and the mobilizations in defense of the Amazon, on other occasions tensions and power wielding by large non-profit organizations have left decision making and solution strategies out of the hands of those most impacted. The fight against the development of tar sands and its extended pipeline network highlight the imbalances of funding distribution and access to decision making which create unwanted compromises and further the disparities faced by frontline communities. Digital rights organizations and funders can lead by building the capacity of the frontlines to effectively develop strategies to fight the climate crisis as technology rapidly expands.

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