Climate justice: priorities for equitable recovery from the pandemic

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ABSTRACT
Climate justice provides a crucial framework to embed issues of equity and justice into COVID-19 recovery strategies. The pandemic, alongside climate change, is disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable and marginalized people across the globe, and particularly exposing Black, Brown, and Indigenous people to ill-health and economic hardship. However, there is a risk that economic considerations will take precedence over climate action in recovery strategies and avoid addressing climate and racial injustices. Yet, it is vital that climate and racial justice and just transition principles inform post-COVID-19 recovery strategies to avoid compounding inequalities. This paper unpacks the layers of injustice surrounding the pandemic, along with their relation to climate policy and finance. It advocates for policymakers to adopt climate justice and just transition principles as a framework for COVID-19 recovery strategies to ensure existing inequalities in society are recognized and addressed in the run-up to the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) in 2021 and beyond.

Key policy insights:
- The COVID-19 pandemic and climate change intersect to further compound inequalities between and within nations.
- Current vulnerabilities and historical racial injustices undermine the ability of individuals, communities and nations to cope with, and adapt to, climate change.
- Economic considerations have dominated climate and development policy, and this must change to include justice and equity as key criteria to ensure a green and just recovery.
- Policymakers should pursue climate policymaking designed with broad and diverse communities in mind, recognizing diversity and intersectionality, to empower marginalized groups.
- Just transition principles should be mainstreamed into investment and financing criteria for climate finance and recovery strategies to ensure funding reaches those who need it most.

1. Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused social and economic disruption on scales rarely seen in peacetime. A silver lining of this very dark cloud is that global carbon emissions fell briefly by 17% in early-mid April 2020 compared with 2019 averages, as a result of lockdown measures and the subsequent impact on industrial and consumer activity (Quéré et al., 2020). As factories closed, the cleaner air observed over China by satellite imagery was a bittersweet reminder that our high-carbon economies have consequences for the climate and our environment (Myllyvirta, 2020). The pandemic has also demonstrated that our governments and societies can exert influence over our polluting activities and consumption behaviour (Carbon Brief, 2020; DeAngelis, 2020; Tamma, 2020). This forced lesson on human capacity has naturally led to policy discussion on the lessons of COVID-19 for...
climate action, and specifically the incorporation of climate action and finance into post-COVID-19 recovery strategies in the run-up to the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Belesova et al., 2020; Farand, 2020; Hepburn et al., 2020; Klenert et al., 2020; Manzanedo & Manning, 2020).

However, the respite for the climate due to the temporary slowing down of economic activity was a pyrrhic victory at best as this pandemic has morbidly demonstrated that a crisis does not affect everyone equally. Black, Asian and Ethnic Minorities (BAME) in the United Kingdom were not only more likely to lose their job than their white counterparts (Hu, 2020), but also face a greater risk of exposure to the virus and death owing to a range of social and economic inequalities (Mamluk & Jones, 2020). In South Africa, a history of racial inequality has most notably manifested in the challenges faced by Black subsistence farmers, who not only earn less than 5% of the national wage and have poor access to healthcare, but also increasingly must contend with more frequent and intense droughts, alongside significant strain on their healthcare systems from the largest COVID-19 outbreak in the region (Tsakok, 2020). The exacerbation of food insecurity has emerged as a particularly dire consequence of the pandemic for communities already struggling to cope with climatic and environmental crises, particularly in Africa. Across East Africa, a food crisis emerged in the spring and summer of 2020, as heavy rains, floods, and locust swarms damaged crops (UNICEF, 2020), whilst COVID-19 restrictions prevented labour movement and delayed the delivery of agricultural equipment, pesticides, and fertilizers (Ayanlade & Radeny, 2020; Blanke, 2020). It was projected by the UN that a quarter of a billion people would face food insecurity by the end of 2020 because of global food shortages due to the pandemic (Harvey, 2020). A survey found two-thirds of people in 20 African countries feared hunger if forced to quarantine (PERC, 2020). Further, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic is the primary reason why extreme poverty in Africa is projected to rise by 8% to 520 million people – the first time a rise has happened since 1998 (Tong, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

This is to say, there is a growing body of work identifying an intersection of socio-economic, environmental and racial inequalities with regards to the impacts of the pandemic and climate change between and within nations. Climate justice scholars have long recognized the unequal burden placed on the poorest and most vulnerable people by climate change, despite their limited contribution to the problem, and therefore advocate for transformative approaches to address the root causes of climate change and inequality (Meikle et al., 2016; Pettit, 2004; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Given the underlying inequalities and vulnerabilities that have been exposed and often exacerbated by the pandemic, there is a strong case for climate justice as a relevant framework for policy discussion on incorporating social justice and climate action into post-COVID-19 recovery strategies (Schröder & Jafry, 2020). Relatedly, the concept of ‘building back better’ through a green recovery has also emerged as a key focus for policy discussion as the concept has commonly been sought as a goal by the UN’s disaster agency to improve livelihoods, economies and the environment following a disaster (OECD, 2020; UNEP, 2021; UNISDR, 2017).

Climate justice and the narrative of ‘building back better’ through a green recovery is linked to the broader concept of a just transition, which is gaining increasing traction in the policy arena. Not only have over 100 countries, representing 53% of global GDP, set or are in the process of setting a target of net zero emissions by 2050 (ECIU, 2021), there has been an increasingly strong policy focus on ensuring this transition to net-zero is ‘just’ (Muttitt & Kartha, 2020; Sabato & Fronteddu, 2020). The concept of a ‘Just Transition’ came to the fore in climate policy discussions following COP24 in 2018 with the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration, signed by 50 countries, in recognition of the impact decarbonization policies will have on fossil fuel workers and their communities (Jenkins et al., 2020). Notably, the European Union has announced the ‘Just Transition Mechanism’ with the aim of mobilizing €65–75 billion over 2021–2027 to alleviate socio-economic impacts and ensure a fair transition to a climate-neutral economy (European Commission, 2021).

There is no guarantee, however, that efforts to recover from the pandemic will be ‘green’ let alone ‘just’; a recent UN-backed analysis of the 50 leading economies found as little as 18% of rescue spending could be classified as ‘green’ (Harvey, 2021). Additionally, the economic fallout of the pandemic is expected to further restrict low- and middle-income countries’ access to climate finance to pursue sustainable development and climate action despite a pressing need to support mitigation and adaptation in such countries (Barbier & Burgess, 2020; Obergassuel al., 2020). In this regard, climate justice provides the framework to ask not only whether a proposed initiative is ‘green’, but also whether such an initiative seeks to address the root cause of climate injustices and the underlying vulnerabilities of the poorest and most vulnerable.
This paper advocates for policymakers to adopt a climate justice framework and just transition principles for climate action and recovery strategies. Firstly, we unpack the layers of climate and racial injustices surrounding both this pandemic and climate change that have undermined sustainable development and perpetuated inequalities and vulnerabilities between and within nations. Then, we proceed to reflect on the ‘fairness’ of climate policy and highlight recent initiatives that have sought to promote sustainable development and/or incorporate justice and equity into the decision-making process of climate action and finance. Through this discussion, this paper underlines why it is necessary to incorporate climate and racial justice, and just transition principles, into the goals of climate action and finance if a green and just recovery from COVID-19 is to be possible.

2. Unpacking layers of injustice

It should be recognized that the poorest and most vulnerable, particularly from the Global South, have been historically under-represented within debates on mitigation, adaptation and resilience-building to climate change (Atela et al., 2017; Gereke & Brühl, 2019; Madziwa et al., 2014; Roger & Bellieuthathan, 2016). This lack of representation of those most affected by climate change undermines the pursuit of sustainable development and, by extension, equitable climate action. Sustainable development is characterized by a pursuit of intergenerational equity through long-term equitable distribution of resources, and the intention to reduce poverty and provide adequate access to basic services (Fleurbaey et al., 2014). However, chapters from reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on sustainable development, livelihoods and poverty have demonstrated that mitigation and adaptation policies can have mixed or even detrimental outcomes for poor and marginalized groups, and that these structural inequalities must be addressed for climate-resilient development pathways to be effectively pursued (Olsson et al., 2014; Roy et al., 2018). Subsequently, efforts to achieve sustainable development have been marred by persistent inequality, with growing income and wealth disparity cited as a trend most likely to determine global development (WEF, 2017), and lack of representation and underserving of marginalized groups by climate and development initiatives (Arts, 2017; Bond, 2019; Mosberg & Eriksen, 2015; Stewart, 2008).

Yet, despite these social injustices, a systematic keyword search and meta-analysis of 25 UN Human Development Reports found economic perspectives dominated over sustainability and social perspectives, and the UN typically advocated economic growth as the primary pathway to sustainable development and poverty reduction (Luetz & Walid, 2019). This view of economic growth as a driving force for environmental and social protections, rather than as co-objectives, is not uncommon in sustainability discourse (Meckling & Allan, 2020; Purvis et al., 2019). Economic considerations, understandably, dominate UN climate summits as nations and other actors negotiate the mobilization of resources for climate action and sustainable development (Pidcock & Yeo, 2017). However, and consequently, environmental and social considerations, namely climate action and social justice, are relegated as conditional on economic growth in development and climate policy debates (Borel-Saladin & Turok, 2013; Degryse & Pochet, 2009; Ekins & Zenghelis, 2021; Elder & Olsen, 2019; Grimalda et al., 2016; Menton et al., 2020; Niekerk, 2020; Pacheco et al., 2016; Schor, 2015; Voigt, 2016; Wiedmann et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2020).

In essence, the relegation of climate action and social justice as secondary or conditional objectives mirrors attitudes held within the historically dominant model of development, that is, ‘grow now/clean up later’ (Ekins & Zenghelis, 2021). Yet, the pursuit of economic growth without environmental and social co-objectives risks irreversible environmental damage (Pegels & Altenburg, 2020), as well as perpetuating social inequality and undermining the pursuit of a just transition (Marpi & Erlangga, 2021; Mountford et al., 2018). After all, vulnerability to climate change impacts and access to resources to build resilience to such impacts cannot be decoupled from social inequalities and historical injustices (Mattar et al., 2020; Running, 2015). In this regard, it is important that such injustices are not relegated or ignored but feature prominently in policy discussions regarding the role and objectives of recovery strategies to bring about a green and just transition.

2.1. Climate justice

Climate justice can be regarded as an attempt to shift the policy debate to focus on the impact of climate change on the poorest and most marginalized, who are often inadequately recognized, represented and
supported by social, economic and political structures (Tagg & Jafry, 2018). Climate justice can be an approach to national and international policy that is designed ‘with’ rather than ‘for’, those affected by climate change (Mikulewicz, 2018). This approach is a move away from the top-down and heavily prescriptive approaches that have historically plagued international development projects with legitimacy, sustainability, and effectiveness issues (Jafry et al., 2019), while being a barrier to coherent international efforts to address climate change (Murphy, 2019). However, the realization of climate justice as a global rulebook for a new climate regime has consistently given way to ‘pragmatic arrangements’, that is, country-centred and voluntary commitments. Specifically, the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities’ was reaffirmed in the Paris Agreement (Pottier et al., 2017). This reflects the strong push back from industrialized nations to establishing liability and compensation for historical emissions in the UNFCCC’s Loss and Damage Mechanism (Kreienkamp & Vanhala, 2017).

The current international climate regime allocates resources to climate action through climate finance (UNFCCC, n.d.), but whether the criteria by which climate finance is allocated leads to, or aims for, equitable outcomes is a matter of debate. Least developed countries (LDCs) have historically struggled to access finance for climate action – with only 30% of international public climate finance reaching LDCs in 2015 (Steele, 2015). The Green Climate Fund (GCF), the UNFCCC’s largest yet still underfunded finance mechanism, also more often supports projects in middle-income countries, rather than the poorest, due to their ability to generate income and attract co-finance (Mattar et al., 2019). The criteria that climate finance must reach those who need it the most is not clearly established within climate finance structures under the UNFCCC (Sheridan & Jafry, 2019). The pandemic has further underlined an injustice in how climate action is financed, as it has been argued by representatives from the Global South that the impacts of the pandemic could have been lessened if investment in climate adaptation, namely water and sanitation, had been prioritized sooner (NAP Global Network, 2020).

This question of whether resources dedicated to climate action are adequately pursuing, or even aiming for, equitable outcomes is also highly relevant to post-COVID-19 recovery strategies. The European Commission’s intention to channel recovery funds towards meeting the ambitions of the European Green Deal (EGD) is an example of a ‘green’ initiative (Claeys & Tagliapeitra, 2020). However, whether the EGD is structured to deliver a ‘just’ transition will depend on the pursuit of wider social and economic structural changes, namely; technological and financial transfer across Europe and globally (Siddi, 2020), protection of worker rights (Bergamaschi, 2020), and a move towards industrial policy grounded in democratic processes and social justice (Planta & Lucchese, 2020).

### 2.2. Racial justice

Climate action is increasingly being viewed in the context of racial justice as climate change disproportionately impacts Black, Brown and Indigenous people, predominately in the Global South but also in marginalized areas in the Global North (Jampel, 2018; Khan & Robinson, 2020; Mersha, 2018). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has brought the realities of structural racism to the fore of public debate, while the COVID-19 pandemic has morbidly demonstrated how these stark inequalities in society can disproportionately expose Black and ethnic minorities to poorer health and economic hardship (Oliveira et al., 2020; Platt & Warwick, 2020). The debate on how to address the intersection of climate and racial injustices has also rekindled the debate on the whiteness of climate and environmental justice movements (Jones, 2020; Yassin, 2020). The representation of marginalized groups in climate movements and policymaking has been a longstanding racial issue (Curnow & Helferty, 2018; Gibson-Wood & Wakefield, 2013; Purdy, 2015).

The precedent for considering racial justice in conjunction with environmental objectives was catalyzed by the US environmental justice movement; a study in 1987 by the USA-based Commission for Racial Justice demonstrated that Black and Indigenous people were more likely to live near hazardous waste facilities in the USA. This finding became a landmark in scholarly inquiry into the connections between racial discrimination and environmental injustice, alternatively termed ‘environmental racism’ (Allen et al., 2019; Declet-Barreto & Carter, 2020; Kramar et al., 2018; Stretesky & Hogan, 1998). The funding of the US Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Environmental Justice has been viewed by some as akin to financing environmental
justice for Black and Indigenous people (Northey, 2020; Society of Environmental Journalists, 2017). Naturally, the concept of financing climate action with equity and racial justice goals in mind is increasingly being discussed as a mechanism to redress climate injustices experienced disproportionately by Black, Indigenous and other ethnic minorities (Biegel & Lambin, 2020; Climate Finance Advisors, 2020; Community Capital Management, 2020).

A commentary by an anti-racism scholar titled ‘We (May Not Be) In This Together’ illustrates the problem with the narrative ‘We are in this together’, given racial inequalities and a disproportionate death rate among African Americans from COVID-19 (Gherman, 2020). There are parallels to be drawn with the lack of acknowledgement and agreed responsibilities to address the uneven distribution of climate burdens in climate change negotiations, as industrialized nations have pushed for ‘common responsibility’ rather than ‘differentiated responsibility’ (Murphy, 2019). Yet, racial injustices, through white supremacy, slavery, and colonialism, have had a lasting impact on the capacities and vulnerability of individuals, communities, and countries to cope with climate change (Bernards, 2020; Mikulewicz, 2020; Peeters et al., 2019; Whyte, 2018). Throughout modern history, racial justifications for the exploitation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people have gone lock-step with environmental and climatic destruction in the name of industrialization and capitalism (Gonzalez, 2020; Grudin, 2020; Rohland, 2020).

Altogether, policymakers should acknowledge the significance of racial injustice, both as a perpetrator of social inequality and a driver of climate vulnerability and diminished capacity, and then seek redress, by incorporating social objectives into COVID-19 recovery strategies with specific reference to racial justice. The shift in discourse from ‘No Racism’ to ‘Anti-Racism’, catalyzed by the BLM movement, is a call for transformative action and this discourse mirrors the philosophical underpinning of climate justice that actively seeks to redress social inequalities and the consequences these inequalities have for the impacts of climate change on marginalized groups. In practice, this would mean moving beyond non-discrimination approaches and towards systemic changes within institutions to change recruiting practices, intended equity outcomes, and representation at decision-making levels and, crucially, financing programmes with these goals.

3. Ensuring a greener and just recovery from the pandemic

A recent working paper by Hepburn et al. (2020) argued that COVID-19 recovery strategies will shift economies towards net-zero carbon emissions if designed with climate action in mind – but that societal and political concerns will determine whether climate action is implemented within recovery strategies in the first place. As discussed earlier, there is a risk that recovery strategies are designed according to the orthodox view that economic growth is a precursor or condition for environmental and social protections. The EU’s Eco-Innovation Action Plan (Eco-AP) arguably exemplifies this view as the programme promotes business opportunities first and foremost, and this represents a weak approach to sustainability (Colombo et al., 2019). Private sector initiatives such as the ‘Great Reset’ by the World Economic Forum have stated a more socially transformative goal ‘to build a new social contract that honours the dignity of every human being’ (WEF, 2020). Whether such an initiative is truly transformative will require actively addressing climate justice concerns in the structure of recovery strategies.

At present, the call for a ‘green’ recovery has filtered into national and international policies to some extent. The 11th Petersberg Climate Dialogue, attended by 30 ministers, discussed incorporating climate action into recovery strategies (IISD, 2020). More than US$20.6 trillion in funding initiatives for recovery have been announced globally (Cornish, 2021) and the UN has sent a clear message that the COVID-19 recovery must drive a shift towards a green economy (United Nations, 2020). The ‘Next Generation EU’ recovery package is considered the greenest stimulus package within the G20 with 37% of the €750 billion (US$830bn) package directed towards green initiatives (Vivid Economics, 2020). However, the G20 is backtracking on fossil fuel funding phase-out in the recovery plans and still spending more than half a trillion US dollars on oil, gas, and coal each year (ODI, 2020).

In addition, the realization of climate justice will require going beyond green investments. Policymakers should be encouraged to adopt just transition principles and criteria for climate and development finance mechanisms, including recovery finance. The financing of a just transition is key for effective climate action,
not only to prepare financial markets for climate-related policy-risks, but also to address equity concerns (Robins & Rydge, 2019). For example, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) launched the Just Transition Initiative that aims to promote a green economy while protecting vulnerable countries, regions and people from falling behind in the transition (EBRD, 2020). The Financing a Just Transition Alliance (FJTA) was established in November 2020 as a new collaborative initiative of banks, investors and other stakeholders in the UK, to promote a just transition in financial decision-making (LSE, 2020). These initiatives stem from an understanding that a green and just transition will require financial institutions to be transparent and accountable on the intended recipient of finance, as well as align financing criteria with climate action and development objectives in response to the economic fallout of the pandemic. In this respect, Official Development Assistance (ODA) also has a crucial role to play to ensure a green and just recovery. It is important that climate and ODA finance commitments remain firm and avoid double counting climate finance as developmental aid (Harmeling, 2020). The cut to the UK’s foreign aid budget, from 0.7% of gross national income to 0.5%, is a concern for climate justice and short-sighted, as the cuts will fall hardest on the world’s poorest people already bearing the brunt of the pandemic and climate impacts on livelihoods (Bond, 2020).

4. Conclusion

Climate justice needs to be prioritized in the run-up to COP26, and then beyond. There are opportunities to advance climate justice through recovery strategies that finance mitigation and adaptation projects based on criteria aligned with the needs of vulnerable and marginalized people. In particular, racial justice should be pursued as an objective to ensure that any climate action and recovery initiatives do not further compound inequalities. There is an opportunity for policymakers to adopt climate justice and just transition as frameworks for post-COVID-19 recovery strategies to ensure existing inequalities in society are recognized and addressed. This will require climate policymaking designed with broad and diverse communities, recognizing diversity and intersectionality, as well as mainstreaming just transition principles into investment and financing criteria.

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