Climate Action Plans and the "Climate-Just" City

Cecelia Walsh-Russo

Unbearable, sculpture by Jens Galschiøt, exhibited in Paris during COP21. Photo © Cecelia Walsh-Russo.

In the face of major climatic changes, more and more US cities are developing climate action plans. But while these documents follow national and international guidelines, many fail to take account of the needs of the most vulnerable citizens. Cecelia Walsh-Russo contrasts four cases to show how cities can work towards becoming more "climate-just" places for residents.

To date, 2016 has been one of the hottest years ever recorded, if not the hottest.[1] Against the dual backdrop of rising inequality in the US and dramatic climate change, understanding climate-change planning from the perspective of the most vulnerable has never been more vital. City governments throughout the US have begun to engage in climate planning. Some American cities have begun

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[1] See, for example: www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/02/environment-climate-change-records-broken-international-report.

planning to protect energy and public infrastructure (Edenhofer *et al.* 2014). Too often, their plans are curtailed or limited by a lack of resources to develop or sustain long-term adaptation measures (Carmin, Nadkarni and Rhie 2012; Homsby 2014). Given the absence of federal-level policies or support, the UN-backed International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) has been working since the 1990s with local city governments to create climate "action plans." The organization's services include consultation, intern staffing, toolkits, procedures for calculating carbon-emission levels, and providing support for conferences and workshops. Climate action plans are crafted—often with ICLEI help—as official municipal documents offering administrators and citizens practical strategies to help cities of all sizes adapt to climatic changes.

But urban climate planning often fails to grant voice and visibility to cities' marginal, disempowered residents, such as communities of color, low-income neighborhoods, and the elderly. International and national organizations such as ICLEI and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) work to develop climate plans with cities. Crucially, the plans that get created often fail to fully engage citizens or speak directly to the needs of the most vulnerable community members.

The concept and model of "climate justice"

The role of "justice" in framing climate-change policies has been foundational for international organizations and policymakers (Bulkeley *et al.* 2015). The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), created by the United Nations to assess the multiple dimensions of global climate change, remains the most influential of international climate-change organizations. The IPCC argues that within climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, cities must delve into "ethical concerns, effectiveness, [and] sustainable development" (IPCC Working Group III 2001, §10.5 on decision-making frameworks). In addition, climate activists from organizations such as 350.org have pushed policymakers to think tactically about how climate change will impact different populations—particularly those with less access to resources—within a given community (Hadden 2015).

Planners, geographers, and urbanists have also begun to discuss what the "climate-just" city may look like. Inspired by the notion of the "just city" discussed by Susan Fainstein (2010) the "climate-just" city framework includes an emphasis on equitable protection from climate impacts, proactive inclusion of all citizens and sectors of a community in the planning process, and fair distribution of climate change adaptation information and education (Steele, MacCallum, Byrne and Houston 2012).

The global–local connection

Drawing from this model, I examined the climate plans of three small cities within the United States—Keene, New Hampshire; Emeryville, California; and Punta Gorda, Florida—for evidence of a "climate-just" framework. Two of them—Keene and Emeryville—worked directly with ICLEI in formulating their climate action plans during the past 10 years. I selected small urban clusters (ranging in population from 2,500 to 50,000) for this study because they are representative of the majority of urban areas in the US, and are located in regions that have experienced severe climate impacts: the southeast coast, interior far west, and interior northeast. Each of these local governments has a planning department responsible for their jurisdiction's comprehensive plan and climate action programs. In examining these three cases, I asked the following questions: How do the plans include the adaptation needs of marginalized citizens? What are the methods for citizen involvement in climate policy decision-making? How are the immediate and long-term adaptation actions designed to protect the interests of all members of the community? What are the decision-making structures by which adaptation measures are prioritized?

The climate action plans of the three cities revealed several key findings that speak to how climate plans are created and who they are meant to address. In using a technical, scientific

discourse, climate plans appear to speak to a targeted audience of policymakers, local government officials, and climate scientists. While city governments may have created plans that include specific programs and priorities to adapt to their communities' vulnerabilities to climate change, they nevertheless do not acknowledge or address the specific adaptation needs of vulnerable members of their constituents, preferring instead to focus on the needs of business interests. For example, Punta Gorda's planning document—while drafted with the EPA and with limited citizen participation—makes no mention of protecting marginalized community groups, and its climate action planning concentrates primarily on affirming the protection needs of local downtown businesses and waterfront sections of the city. In addition, the planning process is most often driven by organizations at the national (e.g. Environmental Protection Agency) or international (ICLEI) level. The plans are often steered by local-government planning departments that in turn leave little room for citizen involvement. Citizen participation is articulated indirectly in the form of stakeholder involvement at an institutional level. As a result, these local-government administrators do not seem to solicit direct concerns from neighborhood residents, making the lack of citizen participation a dilemma for all community members.

The concept of *climate justice* is not often an integral part of climate action planning documents. Keene, New Hampshire, for example, begins its report by noting its place as an early ICLEI adopter. As a planning approach, the ICLEI-based strategy offers key stakeholders some involvement in the planning process but does not afford the full participation of resident-citizens who may be most adversely affected by climate impacts due to low income, old age, ill health, hazard-prone geographic location, and other limiting conditions (Hoff and Gausset 2015). A citizen-participation process that seeks to actively involve underrepresented and marginalized populations appears not to be applied to the adaptation planning process of small jurisdictions in an intentional, proscribed manner. Within the three plans the term "vulnerable" was a category most often relegated to the natural environment, built environment and business interests. For Punta Gorda's plan, "vulnerable" is used over 40 times times in the 410-page report through phrases such as "vulnerable shorelines" (p. 44), " vulnerable natural systems" (p. 46) or "… coastal systems most vulnerable to sea level rise" (p. 58). In Keene, "vulnerability" is a description for the built environment ("the roofs of Keene's buildings may be vulnerable to collapse" (p. 25) and business interests ("the ski industry in the Northeast is vulnerable to a decline from climate change impacts", p. 53). Rarely are human populations referred to within the reports and, if mentioned ("Keene's citizens are vulnerable to more direct effects of climate change—especially the young, elder, and homeless population", p. 30), little or no elaboration or detail is provided. Emeryville's plan included the use of extensive scientific data. A significant portion of the report dedicated itself to the nuance of climate-change impacts exclusively to the natural environment. Emeryville's greenhouse-gas emissions analysis drew on ICLEI software and forecasted projections, with nuanced details on "bad air days" (p. 13) and "sea-level rise projections" (pp. 10–13). All of these projections provide a picture of climate change's impact on the natural world but not the potential impact to residents including community members who may require specific needs in adapting to changes in the climate.

Democratic strategies

The discursive and policy limitations of the climate action plans raise the question of how climate planning might begin to create more inclusive space for the experiences of vulnerable city residents. How might "climate justice" become part of the climate-change policy story on a local city-government level? Collaboration between policymakers and climate-justice organizations could further the development and implementation of climate-change adaptation policies and programs. In addition, establishing strong ties between administrators and climate-justice activists could further the practical application of climate-justice grievances. Climate-justice groups offer potential to

pressure local governments, recruit citizens (especially members of marginalized groups), and engage in their local-government climate action planning.

A recent example of activist-generated collaboration can found in Oakland, California. Oakland's local climate planning efforts have been led by the Oakland Climate Action Coalition (OCAC), a coalition organization of approximately "thirty community-based, faith, labor, and environmental advocacy organizations." As they describe themselves on their website, the coalition "sees low-income residents and communities of color as the main authors and architects of climate solutions." The coalition's efforts at climate-justice planning resulted in collaboration with the local city council and creation of the 2011 Energy and Climate Action Plan. Outcomes included greenhouse-gas emissions in Oakland now substantially below 2005 levels. In June 2015, Oakland City Council voted to adopt the coalition's "equity checklist" for future climate planning. The Energy and Climate Action Plan (ECAP) for Oakland included provisions for generating a "climate-just" city through its attention to severely curtailing greenhouse gases within a frame work that links "pollution and poverty."[2] The 2011 campaign to establish the ECAP plan worked to develop community input and strategizing. The campaign pledged to work with the city to create policies that enabled the public—and specifically low-income residents—to gain access to a range of provisions to help meet their specific needs. Among the resources the climate plan addresses is the need for housing. Under conditions of changing climate, the need for retrofitted and guaranteed affordable housing works to "ensure that low-income families can stay in their homes" (Ella Baker Center 2011) even as changes in the natural environment may render the built environment—and thus human populations—more unstable and vulnerable.

Oakland's model of the "climate-just" action plan explicitly targets the forecasted impacts of climate change on its most vulnerable residents with specific attention paid to housing and clear air: "we will advocate [in ways that] truly benefit the public good—for example, affording low-income resident free retrofits and weatherization for their homes."[3] Their climate planning was developed with attention paid to vulnerable residents and in collaboration with activists, activist organizations and local city-council members. These plans stand in contrast to the climate action plans that make little or no mention of the specific needs of the homeless, communities of color, the poor, or provisions for mental-health services. The "climate-just" frame provides a template to move a justice-centered approach into public discussion of climate change policymaking. Oakland's climate planning makes visible the myriad of ways climate change may affect all of us including those citizens with potentially the most to lose.

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[2]   Source: OCAC website (http://oaklandclimateaction.org).

[3]   Source: *ibid.*

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