



From rhetoric to reality: Achieving climate justice

BY ALICE KASWAN AND SHALANDA H. BAKER, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 01/04/21 04:30 PM EST
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The Black Lives Matter movement highlights long-standing inequities and amplifies the drumbeat for climate justice and an equitable transition to a clean economy. With the incoming Biden-Harris administration and a growing list of environmental justice advocates at the helm, it's time to move from rhetoric to reality. We offer concrete proposals to turn climate justice goals into climate justice policies.

The call for climate justice has multiple dimensions, from ensuring an equitable transition to clean energy for vulnerable communities and workers disrupted by the move away from fossil fuels, to extending the benefits of our economy-wide shift to those who have historically been left behind. Even more than past environmental challenges, decarbonizing will not be a narrow, technical undertaking. We need a holistic, justice-centered perspective to shape our vision for a green economy and meet the pervasive environmental and socioeconomic challenges and opportunities ahead.

From Kentucky to Louisiana to Arizona, communities and workers who rely on the fossil fuel industry are confronting [an existential shift](#), one that requires our collective attention and support. We recommend that the incoming administration and Congress assess these communities' needs and fund planning for and implementation of community-based economic development strategies. The highest priority should be supporting the communities of color, Native American nations and low-income communities that are most vulnerable to economic disruption.

Congress and the Biden-Harris administration must also address equity gaps arising from the clean energy transition. [Studies](#) show that communities of color, which are heavily burdened by the harms of fossil fuel generation and sky-high energy costs, have less access to new solar energy technologies. We urge Congress to prioritize these communities for local clean energy developments and opportunities to own clean energy assets, like solar panels, wind and water turbines and batteries. Such investments do double duty by reducing both the environmental and economic burdens associated with a fossil fuel-based energy system. Targeted investments will also make possible a lasting justice rooted in economic empowerment and climate resilience.

Transitioning away from fossil fuels will not only reduce the threats posed by climate change but also dramatically improve air quality. Communities of color have long endured disproportionate exposure to unhealthy air, a vulnerability that is now [linked to](#) the racially disparate health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, we recommend that policymakers prioritize climate strategies that improve air quality, like shutting down fossil fuel power plants in heavily polluted areas, investing in clean transportation in smog-choked cities and reducing diesel pollution in areas with heavy freight traffic. At the same time, we urge policymakers to avoid climate strategies that could increase emissions of other health-threatening pollutants.

The impacts of climate change — flooding, intense heat waves, economic disruption and more — already [hit disadvantaged communities](#) the hardest. Those with the fewest resources are the most likely to be in harm's way — and least likely to have the resources to cope and recover. Although state and local governments must confront climate impacts first-hand, federal adaptation measures are needed to ensure that all at-risk communities, including Native American nations, confront and plan for future risks and do not leave the most vulnerable groups behind.

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We elaborate on these recommendations in [Climate Justice and the Climate Crisis](#), an essay that is part of a larger [report](#), *Climate, Energy, Justice: The Policy Path to a Just Transition for an Energy-Hungry America*, prepared by 19 member scholars of the Center for Progressive Reform. The report tailors policy recommendations to particular economic sectors, [including](#) electric power, transportation and public lands. It also pans out to make cross-cutting, government-side recommendations, from funding research and development to pollution control mechanisms to enforcing environmental regulations. A [final paper](#) considers the critical question of how authority across federal agencies and between federal and state governments should be allocated.

The federal government must lead our nation's response to the climate crisis. We offer principled and pragmatic solutions on how it can do so. Good policy requires us to integrate three essential variables: energy, the environment and the economy. In doing so, we will achieve a just and inclusive transition.

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