1-2009

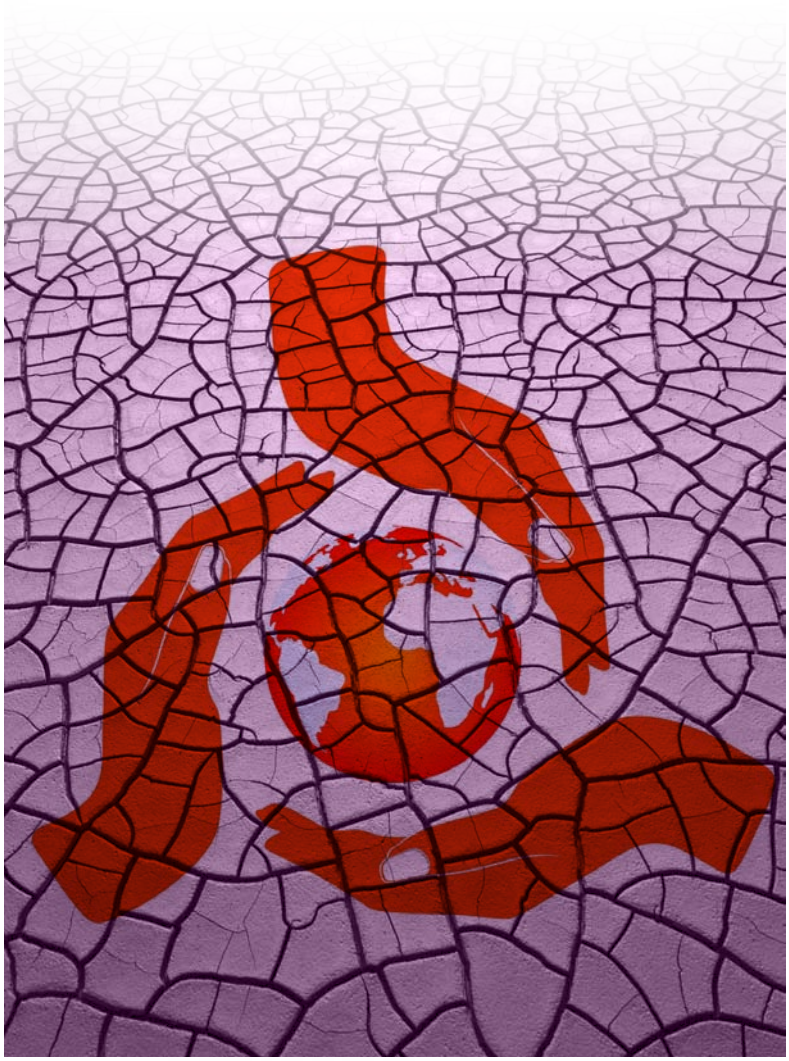
Climate Change, Cities and the Poor

John Cleveland

Peter Plastrik

CLIMATE CHANGE, CITIES and THE POOR

Climate change on its own is an intractable issue. What if we look at climate change through a social equity lens? John Cleveland and Peter Plastrik analyse current climate adaption strategies and deliberate a more active role by 'people on the ground'.



Integrating equity considerations into the climate change debate is a relatively recent development. Deciding what is 'right' and what is 'just' in climate strategies may seem premature or irrelevant. No surprise, since it is such a huge challenge on its own to absorb the climate change science and grapple with the technical complexities involved. A scan the Innovation Network for Communities (INC) conducted for the Ford Foundation found very little advanced thinking about how to design country-specific solutions to climate change mitigation and adaptation in ways that avoid a disproportionate impact on the poor. Where equity has been addressed, it has primarily taken place in proposed international agreements among countries. And even in this context, most international climate mitigation frameworks have only vague references to equity issues.

Ironic Inequity

For a start, the richer you are, the more you are part of the problem**.** Rich people, households and countries produce far more carbon dioxide than poor people, households and countries. According to the World Resources Institute data in 2002, developed nations currently emit approximately nine times more carbon dioxide per capita than developing nations.[1] High income nations emit approximately 13 times more carbon dioxide per capita than low-income nations, while middle-income nations only emit four times more carbon dioxide per capita than low-income nations. The United States per capita emission is 20 times higher than India, 12 times higher than Brazil and seven times higher than China. On the flipside, the poorer you are, the more likely you are to suffer

The poor are the first to feel the effects of climate change – in weather disruptions; agricultural dislocations; social unrest; increased energy and commodity costs as well as low area flooding.

from the consequences. The poor are the first to feel the effects of climate change – in weather disruptions; agricultural dislocations; social unrest; increased energy and commodity costs as well as low area flooding.

Basically, the rich have created a problem that will eventually affect everyone on the planet, but will certainly have a disproportionate impact on the poor. And the rural and urban poor, who are, mostly unintentionally, living much 'greener' lives than the rich, are not being rewarded for this environmental virtue in any way at all.

A Challenge for Cities

These inequities will come to a head in cities, where the practical consequences of climate change and adaptation strategies will mostly be felt.[2] Globally, over 50% of the population lives in urban centres, and this is expected to increase to 60% by 2030. In contrast, more than 75% of the population is already living in urban centres in developed countries like Europe and the US. At the same time, urban centres are also at the frontline of climate change impacts. Many are located on sea coasts and will be impacted by a rise in ocean levels, while rural dislocation due to weather shifts in developing countries invariably leads to migrations of dislocated populations to urban centres. Although cities are often perceived as the antithesis of 'green' – grey and dense consumers of energy and producers of carbon dioxide – in reality, they are far 'greener' on a per capita basis compared to their suburban and rural neighbours. For example, while the average per capita annual emissions level for the US is 20 tonnes of carbon dioxide per person, it is seven tonnes in New York and 12 tonnes in Chicago.[3] One of the greenest things you can do is to move to Manhattan or Chicago, but not into the bucolic countryside! Owing to their density, cities also offer the best and most efficient opportunity to have an impact on global warming gas emissions.

Cities are rapidly organising themselves around this challenge and opportunity. The Clinton Climate Initiative has selected 40 of the largest cities in the world to be the C40 group. The US Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement has been signed by over 900 mayors and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability – has several hundred members participating in its Climate Protection initiative. Yet governmental innovation is not enough to realise the environment, economic or social change that cities have committed themselves to. It will require the development of robust new markets that have self-reinforcing dynamics. For example, the Chicago Climate Action Plan targets 400,000 residential building energy efficiency retrofits by 2020, but at the current pace of government and utility programmes, it would take more than half a century to reach that level and would cost well over US$2 billion.[4] Achieving the target and the associated economic and environmental benefits will require the development of a new regional market for residential retrofits.

But is it possible for cities to craft strategies for large-scale mitigation or adaptation while rewarding the poor for their low-carbon lifestyles? All this, while avoiding disproportionate impacts on the poor's quality of life? The answer is yes.

Not all of the answers are under the control of urban centres, since national governments are creating the 'playing field' for emissions markets. Carbon trading policies must require the rich to purchase the right to produce more than their 'fair share' of emissions from the poor who produce less than their 'fair share'. But whatever the national and global trading schemes, urban centres can weave equity into the design of their mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Deliberately Link Community Development and Climate Change

There is an opportunity to advance the practice of urban climate mitigation and adaptation in a way that improves the quality of life for low income families and neighbourhoods. Through innovations in urban housing, transit, energy and development planning, reduced emissions from low-income families will be rewarded with reduced costs of living and improved household income.

Most community development groups, however, have little expertise in climate change and most climate change advocates know very little about community development, particularly in the area of urban development. We can envision several potential linkages.

The Associates is a network of national practitioners committed to advancing innovation in the application of sustainability strategies to urban centres and aims to support urban regions in implementing large-scale urban sustainability solutions.

Peter Plastrik is the co-founder and president of Innovation Network for Communities (INC), a non-profit national network of community system innovators that has established innovation-development collaborations with several organisations. He has consulted on social enterprises, education reform and economic development programmes. He specialises in social innovation design and implementation, programme assessment and philanthropic foundations.

John Cleveland, co-founder and vice-president of INC, has a wealth of experience in strategic planning, market research, merger and acquisitions, due diligence for mid-sized manufacturing companies and currently serves on the boards of several technological companies. He specialises in strategy development and planning, urban sustainability, innovation and product development as well as sustainable development, green commerce and green infrastructure.

The first point of linkage can be developed through awareness-building and incentive-structuring. A learning network can be developed to create national and regional collaboration between NGOs that span the climate change and community development fields. Correspondingly, a demand for such innovations needs to be developed through a national learning network of municipalities. Lastly, we look forward to a Climate Change and Community Development innovation agenda that looks into the creation of technical support tools, such as GHG (greenhouse gases) calculators, measurement systems, development of climate mitigation and adaptation standards for neighbourhoods and communities, as well as the cultivation of carbon markets that reward the poor for their lower levels of carbon production (eg. Personal Carbon Allowances).

A second point of linkage is to make explicit the connections between reduced greenhouse gas emissions and reductions in the cost of living for low-income households. Many of the innovations that reduce global warming emissions also improve household budgets. An energy efficient home retrofit, for instance, can reduce utility bills by 20% to 30%. Participation in a car sharing service that allows a family to get rid of one of their vehicles can save the household up to US$5,000 per year in the US.

A third point of linkage is to make explicit the connection between the emergence of the 'green economy' as well as skill and job creation for low-income families and neighbourhoods. By targeting job development to the neighbourhoods receiving services, low income families can participate in a true 'win-win-win' scenario – reduced emissions; reduced cost of living and improved household income.

Call to Action

To help communities in the US develop fairer sustainability strategies, the INC,[5] along with several partners, launched a non-profit consulting network known as the Urban Sustainability Associates (the Associates). The Associates is a network of national practitioners committed to advancing innovation in the application of sustainability strategies to urban centres and aims to support urban regions in implementing large-scale urban sustainability solutions. INC envisions that radically improved environmental performance of urban regions can drive inclusive prosperity.

There are four issues that require critical attention – an unclear definition of how the responsibility for GHG emissions varies by economic class in every country, absence of principles that promote equitable actions on mitigation and adaptation, lack of capacity to promptly analyse climate change options and their impact on the poor and lastly, lack of awareness surrounding policy solutions based on equity principles.

The Associates initiative is one of many efforts underway to address equity issues in practical and on-the-ground ways. It urges environmentalists, social activists, philanthropic institutions and municipal governments to take a leadership position on the equity issue by insisting that it is to be addressed at every level of the climate change debate and work with others to advance dialogue, debate as well as policy reform. ❖

[1] Kevin A. Baumert, Tim Herzog and Jonathan Pershing, "Navigating the Numbers: Greenhouse Gas Data and International Climate Policy," *World Resources Institute* (December 2005) <http://pdf.wri.org/navigating_numbers.pdf>, 22-23

[2] Neal Peirce and Curtis W.Johnson, *Century of the City: No Time to Lose* (The Rockefeller Foundation, 2008), 18

[3] Kevin A. Baumert, et. al., 22

[4] Chicago Climate Task Force, "Energy Efficient Buildings," *Chicago Climate Action Plan* <http://www.chicagoclimateaction.org/filebin/pdf/finalreport/EnergyEfficientBuildings.pdf>

[5] Details about the social innovation projects undertaken by INC – including its new Urban Sustainability Associates consulting service – are available at *www.nupolis.com*