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Executive Summary

# A Climate of Change

African Americans, Global Warming, and  
a Just Climate Policy for the U.S.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## A CLIMATE OF CHANGE

AFRICAN AMERICANS, GLOBAL WARMING, AND A JUST CLIMATE POLICY FOR THE U.S.

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Everywhere we turn, the issues and impacts of climate change confront us. One of the most serious environmental threats facing the world today, climate change has moved from the minds of scientists and offices of environmentalists to the mainstream. Though the media is dominated by images of polar bears, melting glaciers, flooded lands, and arid deserts, there is a human face to this story as well.

Climate change is not only an issue of the environment; it is also an issue of justice and human rights, one that dangerously intersects race and class. All over the world people of color, Indigenous Peoples and low-income communities bear disproportionate burdens from climate change itself, from ill-designed policies to prevent it, and from side effects of the energy systems that cause it. *A Climate of Change* explores the impacts of climate change on African Americans, from health to economics to community, and considers what policies would most harm or benefit African Americans—and the nation as a whole.

African Americans are thirteen percent of the U.S. population and on average emit nearly twenty percent less greenhouse gases than non-Hispanic whites per capita. Though far less responsible for climate change, African Americans are significantly more vulnerable to its effects than non-Hispanic whites. Health, housing, economic well-being, culture, and social stability are harmed from such manifestations of climate change as storms, floods, and climate variability. African Americans are also more vulnerable to higher energy bills, unemployment, recessions caused by global energy price shocks, and a greater economic burden from military operations designed to protect the flow of oil to the U.S.

### Climate Justice: The Time Is Now

Ultimately, accomplishing climate justice will require that new alliances are forged and traditional movements are transformed. An effective policy to address the challenges of global warming cannot be crafted until race and equity

are part of the discussion from the outset and an integral part of the solution. This report finds that:

***Global warming amplifies nearly all existing inequalities.*** Under global warming, injustices that are already unsustainable become catastrophic. Thus it is essential to recognize that all justice is climate justice and that the struggle for racial and economic justice is an unavoidable part of the fight to halt global warming.

***Sound global warming policy is also economic and racial justice policy.*** Successfully adopting a sound global warming policy will do as much to strengthen the economies of low-income communities and communities of color as any other currently plausible stride toward economic justice.

***Climate policies that best serve African Americans also best serve a just and strong United States.*** This paper shows that policies well-designed to benefit African Americans also provide the most benefit to all people in the U.S.

***Climate policies that best serve African Americans and other disproportionately affected communities also best serve global economic and environmental justice.*** Domestic reductions in global warming pollution and support for such reductions in developing nations financed by polluter-pays principles provide the greatest benefit to African Americans, the peoples of Africa, and people across the Global South.

***A distinctive African American voice is critical for climate justice.*** Currently, legislation is being drafted, proposed, and considered without any significant input from the communities most affected. Special interests are represented by powerful lobbies, while traditional environmentalists often fail to engage people of color, Indigenous Peoples, and low-income communities until after the political playing field has been defined and limited to conventional environmental goals.

A strong focus on equity is essential to the success of the environmental cause, but equity issues cannot be adequately addressed by isolating the voices of communities that are disproportionately impacted. Engagement in climate change policy must be moved from the White House and the halls of Congress to social circles, classrooms, kitchens, and congregations.

The time is now for those disproportionately affected to assume leadership in the climate change debate, to speak truth to power, and to assert rights to social, environmental and economic justice. Taken together, these actions affirm a vital truth that will bring communities together: **Climate Justice is Common Justice.**

## African Americans and Vulnerability

In this report, it is shown that African Americans are disproportionately affected by climate change.

### African Americans Are at Greater Risk from Climate Change and Global Warming Co-Pollutants

- The six states with the highest African American population are all in the Atlantic hurricane zone, and are expected to experience more intense storms resembling Katrina and Rita in the future.
- Global warming is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of heat waves or extreme heat events. African Americans suffer heat death at one hundred fifty to two hundred percent of the rate for non-Hispanic whites.
- Seventy-one percent of African Americans live in counties in violation of federal air pollution standards, as compared to fifty-eight percent of the white population. Seventy-eight percent of African Americans live within thirty miles of a coal-fired power plant, as compared to fifty-six percent of non-Hispanic whites.
- Asthma has strong associations with air pollution, and African Americans have a thirty-six percent higher rate of incidents of asthma than whites. Asthma is three times as likely to lead to emergency room visits or deaths for African Americans.
- This study finds that a twenty-five percent reduction in greenhouse gases—similar to what passed in California and is proposed in major federal legislation—would reduce infant mortality by at least two percent, asthma by at least sixteen percent, and mortality from particulates by at least 6,000 to 12,000 deaths per year. Other estimates have run as high as 33,000 fewer deaths per

year. A disproportionate number of the lives saved by these proposed reductions would be African American.

### African Americans Are Economically More Vulnerable to Disasters and Illnesses

- In 2006, twenty percent of African Americans had no health insurance, including fourteen percent of African American children—nearly twice the rate of non-Hispanic whites.
- In the absence of insurance, disasters and illness (which will increase with global warming) could be cushioned by income and accumulated wealth. However, the average income of African American households is fifty-seven percent that of non-Hispanic whites, and median wealth is only one-tenth that of non-Hispanic whites.
- Racist stereotypes have been shown to reduce aid donations and impede service delivery to African Americans in the wake of hurricanes, floods, fires and other climate-related disasters as compared to non-Hispanic whites in similar circumstances.

### African Americans Are at Greater Risk from Energy Price Shocks

- African Americans spend thirty percent more of their income on energy than non-Hispanic whites.
- Energy price increases have contributed to seventy to eighty percent of recent recessions. The increase in unemployment of African Americans during energy-caused recessions is twice that of non-Hispanic whites, costing the community an average of one percent of income every year.
- Reducing economic dependence on energy will alleviate the frequency and severity of recessions and the economic disparities they generate.

### African Americans Pay a Heavy Price and a Disproportionate Share of the Cost of Wars for Oil

- Oil company profits in excess of the normal rate of profit for U.S. industries cost the average household \$611 in 2006 alone and are still rising.
- The total cost of the war in Iraq borne by African Americans will be \$29,000 per household if the resulting deficit is financed by tax increases, and \$32,000 if the debt is repaid by spending cuts. This is more than three times the median assets of African American households.

### A Clean Energy Future Creates Far More Jobs for African Americans

- Fossil fuel extraction industries employ a far lower proportion of African Americans on average compared to other industries. Conversely, renewable electricity generation employs three to five times as many people as comparable electricity generation from fossil fuels, a higher proportion of whom are African American.
- Switching just one percent of total electricity generating capacity per year from conventional to renewable sources would result in an additional 61,000 to 84,000 jobs for African Americans by 2030.
- A well-designed comprehensive climate plan achieving emission reductions comparable to the Kyoto Protocol would create over 430,000 jobs for African Americans by 2030, reducing the African American unemployment rate by 1.8 percentage points and raising the average African American income by 3 to 4 percent.

### Combat Racism for Healthy, Efficient Communities

- Racism, both institutionalized and individual, is a driver of sprawl, inefficient housing, and irrational transportation policy.
- The senseless and wasteful energy, transportation, and housing policies that drive up U.S. energy use and

greenhouse gas emissions also damage the physical, environmental and economic health of the African American community.

- Because racism causes bad climate policy, the two problems can not be solved separately, but only together.
- Historically and currently, struggles of relatively powerless people to be free from environmental burdens have been catalysts for essential breakthroughs in environmental policy that benefit everyone. This tendency is clear in the climate arena as well.

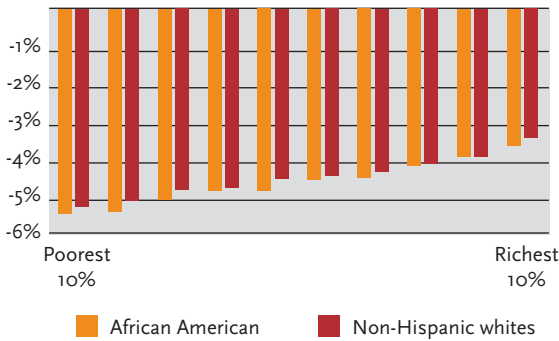
### Different Approaches to Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions Have Very Different Impacts on African Americans and on the U.S. Economy

This paper examines several emission reduction scenarios, including an offset-oriented scenario, a cap-and-trade scenario in which emission rights are given away free to large polluters, and two polluter-pays scenarios—“cap-and-dividend,” in which emission rights are transferred to the people equally on a per capita basis; and the “Climate Asset Plan,” in which a charge on pollution is used to eliminate the cost burden on low and moderate income households, finance energy efficiency and renewable energy, and provide a cash benefit or tax reduction to all households.

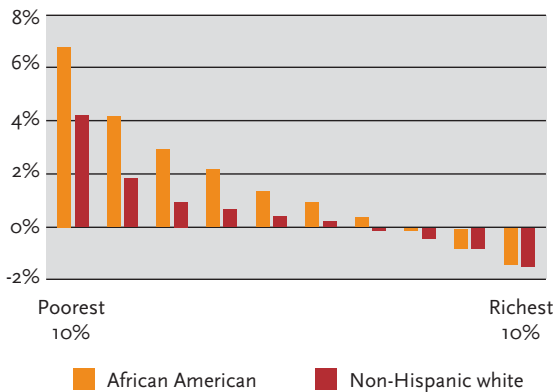
**ES Table 1. Alternative Approaches to Implementing a Polluter-Pays System**

Criteria	Instrument		
	Pollution Tax	Emission Fee	Auctioned Allowance
Political Difficulty	High	Medium	Medium
Enforcement Resources	High	Low	Low
Enforcement Cost	Low	Moderate	Low (upstream) Very high (downstream)
Constitutional or Procedural Limits	Severe in some states; low at national level	Moderate	Low
Limits on Revenue or How Money Can Be Spent	No	Yes	No
Guaranteed Emission Limit	No	No	Yes, unless a “safety valve” or other policy is implemented
Potential for Price Spikes/Shocks	No	No	High, unless borrowing is allowed
Evasion/Enforcement Problems	Low	Moderate	Potentially high if trading or offsets allowed
Prevents Local Pollution Hot Spots	No	No	No

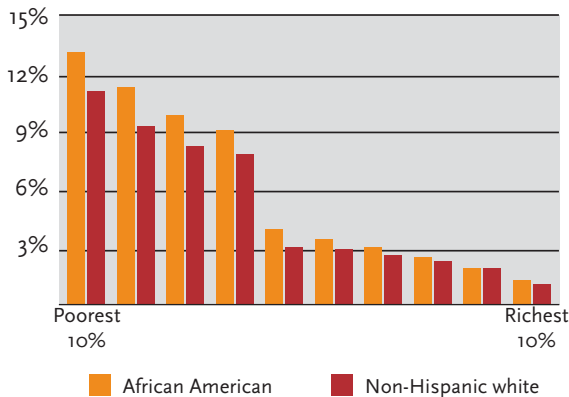
**FIGURE ES 1: Cap and Trade Scenario: The Burden of a \$50/tonne CO<sub>2</sub> Charge as a Share of Expenditures by Race and Income**



**FIGURE ES 2: Equal Per Capita Payment Scenario: Benefits and Burdens of \$50/tonne CO<sub>2</sub> Charge**



**FIGURE ES 3: Climate Asset Plan Scenario: Benefits of a \$50/tonne CO<sub>2</sub> Charge**



The no-domestic-reductions (i.e., offset) scenario imposes little direct economic cost, though the environmental cost is largest because the emission reductions it posits can not be assured.

The three graphs above show the distribution of burdens and benefits for the solutions that do have significant economic impacts, from top to bottom. They show: the

cap-and-trade, cap-and-dividend, and Climate Asset Plan scenarios, respectively.

As the graphs show, under cap-and-trade all households lose, low-income households lose most, and African Americans lose more than non-Hispanic whites in every income class. In the cap-and-dividend scenario, all but the highest-income households are net winners, and African American households gain more or lose less than non-Hispanic whites in every income category. This option increases average African American income by about two percent. Under the Climate Asset Plan, all households are net winners as the increase in energy cost is mitigated through energy efficiency. Low-income households and the average African American household both gain about twice as much as under the cap-and-dividend scenario.

The polluter-pays alternative can be implemented in a variety of ways, including a tax, fee, or allowance auction. Each has its advantages and disadvantages as discussed in this paper.

Any emissions reductions achieved by U.S. climate policy can be magnified or reduced by global effects. On one hand, the effectiveness of U.S. policies promoting the development of new clean technologies is increased many times over when these technologies are exported to rapidly growing developing nations. On the other, policies that limit emissions from the production of pollution-intensive goods (like steel and cement) can be undercut if domestic production is reduced and the same goods are imported. This is what environmentalists call “leakage,” and it happens when emissions from foreign production offset any reduction of domestic emissions. Leakage can be prevented if imports and exports are treated by law as though they carried their emissions with them (i.e., consumption-based accounting), so that the U.S. accepts responsibility for all the emissions caused by U.S. consumption.

Perhaps the most important findings of this study are that:

- Widespread economic and environmental impacts tend to have concentrated or amplified effects on African Americans;
- Over a broad range of policy options, the policies that are best for African Americans are also best for the majority of people living in the U.S.; and
- Policies that are worst for African Americans are also worst for the majority.