

28th Session of the WORKING GROUP OF EXPERTS ON PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

“ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, THE CLIMATE CRISIS & PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT”

Environmental Racism Earth, Wind & Fire (and water)

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March 24, 2021

I would like to begin by thanking the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent for this opportunity to speak today.

Environmental Racism Earth, Wind & Fire (and water): The Challenges

During the 1980's I found myself living and serving in the Darfur region of the Sudan. While there I encountered the Sahara Desert and the nomadic peoples who moved there but could no longer find sustainable life in their familiar places because the desert was moving southward. I witnessed this and the more violent desert storm winds of Haboob that were the result of climate change. Sadly, this was a contributing factor to the genocide that later came to Darfur.

In the 1990's the Pacific Conference of Churches invited me to be a part of a visit to the Pacific Islands. My kind and generous hosts took me to the places of where their homes used to be but were no longer because of climate change. They became known as the “liquid continent” and I was honoured to tell their story among others at as a speaker at the sixth Conference of Parties to the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP6) on behalf of the WCC in 2000.

In 2005 I found myself serving communities in New Orleans, Louisiana after the devastating assault of Hurricane Katrina. Here again I found climate change had a role in this devastation. Cape Town, South Africa comes to mind when thinking of an African context affected by water shortages and communities of African descent in the USA in places like Flint, Michigan affected by toxic water because of government negligence and disregard for black and brown lives.

In 2014, Flint switched its drinking water supply from Detroit's system to the Flint River to save money. Inadequate treatment and testing of the water resulted in a series of major water quality and health issues for Flint residents. The people's grievances were systematically ignored, overlooked, and even discounted by government officials despite their reports of the concerning smelling, discoloration, and taste of the water brought into Flint homes for 18 months that caused skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin. The Michigan Civil Rights Commission, a state-established body, concluded that the poor governmental response to the Flint crisis was a “result of systemic racism.”

When my mother was pregnant with me while living within the Black community in Cleveland Ohio she rebelled against the industrial fire and smoke that polluted her racially segregated areas and said, “I can't breathe” and that she and her family must flee so she and her children could breathe. Wind can intensify these smoked filled patterns and still does in many communities of African descent in USA.

Consequently, African Americans are 5 times as likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty,¹ which have higher exposure to climate shocks and lack community amenities that mitigate the effects of climate change, such as trees that help to clean the air and cool neighborhoods experiencing heat waves.

Environmental Racism Earth, Wind & Fire (and water): Historical Roots and Consequences

These examples of environmental injustice over decades and dare I say longer than that are examples of how the lack of environmental justice within the horror of the climate crisis affect people of Africa and people of African Descent.

The historic reality of colonialism and structural racism have designed systems that live on today through environmental racism and a myriad of other injustices that grew out of the same evil roots. Throughout 2020, these systemic issues have manifested themselves in the disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minorities who became sick with and died of COVID-19, as well as the continued extrajudicial killing of Black men and women. The Earth and its people are groaning. We are called to respond.

Around the world, we again bear witness to protests for racial justice, this time set amidst unprecedented climate-induced disasters, an economic crisis, and the deaths of more than one million people globally from the pandemic.

Environmental Racism Earth, Wind & Fire (and water): Equity

We support policy, processes and practices that build resiliency in African and Communities of African Descent.

The USA Context:

We welcome the priority of addressing climate change, racial equity, COVID and economic development in the new Presidential administration of President Biden and Vice President Harris.

As one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases in the world, the opportunity to dramatically mitigate emissions and assist countries in their efforts to adapt is welcomed. We encourage the U.S. to strengthen the capacity of national and local partners to prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

In the US and globally we encourage the engagement of people of Africa and of African Descent, along with other disproportionately affected communities of climate-related challenges, in risk reduction planning.

Post-slavery, African Americans have been prevented from exercising political authority, community autonomy, and wealth-based power—all components that weaken a community's ability to engage in self-determination, exercise sovereignty and combat climate change.

Environmental Racism Earth, Wind & Fire (and water): Recommendations

Bread for the World is joining efforts with our ecumenical partners, the Advocacy Network for Africa (AdNA), and Ecumenical Advocacy Days, as we prepare for our Upcoming April Conference on Climate Justice (April 18-21); here are our recommendations.

First, we are urging the US Congress to allocate \$1 billion for the Green Climate Fund in the State and Foreign Operations Fiscal Year 2022 budget.

Globally and Nationally in the USA we recommend the following:

- 1) Include the leadership, experience, and expertise of frontline communities such as communities of African Descent in all stages of the policies, processes and implementation in an equitable way.
- 2) Center racial equity, whereby communities of African Descent are directly impacted to co-create and lead the responses directly impacting their communities, and all solutions are proportionate to the unique needs and historical racial trauma our communities have.
- 3) Ensure a just transition for all impacted industries and communities, with a racial equity lens.
- 4) Create jobs/careers that provide livable wages and disrupts job segregation by race and gender.
- 5) Provide financing for research and development for innovative technologies, with a high preference for research and development by and for communities directly impacted.
- 6) Support and invest in Africa and people of African Descent smallholder farmers, with special regard for women, and the local food producers who create resilience and liveable communities in the midst of crises. Investments in climate resilience programs help farmers to adapt and protects food security.
- 7) Support Africa's and communities of the African Descent COVID recovery plans that push radical reductions in carbon. The multiple crises of climate, equity, and COVID, demand a recovery that prioritizes women, marginalized communities, and young people.
- 8) Climate change has escalated the pressure on African peoples to seek refuge. Governmental immigration policies must accommodate climate migrants while also working with the United Nations to meet the needs of climate induced displaced peoples and their communities.
- 9) Plan climate resiliency into global nutrition and food security programs for Africa and communities of African Descent.
- 10) A transparent assessment of fossil fuel infused fertilizer dependent genetically modified agriculture that should be replaced by ecologically sound locally sourced food in Africa and communities of African Descent.
- 11) Support food systems strategies that mitigate the emissions of both food production and consumption. Today the global food system contributes up to 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.