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Policy Brief on Combating Climate Change: Women, SIDS, and Indigenous Communities

## Executive statement

While states and international organizations are slowly taking action to combat the global issue that is climate change, significantly more must be done to ensure these responses reflect justice and equity in order to protect those most vulnerable.

## Introduction

Climate change is increasingly becoming a threat to all life on Earth, though inarguably some groups are more affected than others. Women (especially women of color), small island developing states (SIDS), and Indigenous American communities are among the marginalized groups most threatened and affected by rapid climate change. These groups have access to fewer economic resources and as such do not have the capacity to adapt to the changes in lifestyle and living conditions required by climate change. Therefore, efforts to combat climate change must be intersectional, incorporate solutions put forth by these groups, and address not only the effects of climate change, but also the key barriers which block the implementation of adaptation strategies. These barriers include but are not limited to, insufficient financial resources and weak institutional capacity.

## Effects on Women

Women – primarily women of color in developing countries – are among those who disproportionately experience the negative effects of climate change. Two categories in which this is especially prevalent are in the agriculture sector, and reproductive health. In most developing countries, women make up the majority of the agriculture workforce and also bear most of the responsibility for supplying food to their families. As a result of their direct involvement in agricultural labor, they often feel the full effects of drought and natural disaster first and more intensely. This creates a direct link between women’s rights and the climate crisis. One example of this link can be seen in the way that, “only 10-20% of women in the agriculture workforce in developing countries have land rights”, which ultimately reduces women’s access and opportunities for the loans and resources that are key to adopting more environmental agriculture practices. This highlights the mutually detrimental relationship between climate change and women’s rights. Put simply, as climate change intensifies, women’s rights decline and vice versa. Another example of this link has become clearer as global warming continues. As global temperatures increase, so do threats of contagious diseases and viruses. This issue is also commonly connected to overpopulation. As world population continues to increase exponentially, states continue to search for ways to combat it which – unfortunately in developing countries – have been known to take the form of mass sterilization projects (ex. 1976 “Emergency” in India). These are extremely invasive, and mostly target at Black, Latina, and other women of color.

Furthermore, these projects continue to be accompanied by policies that limit women's access to contraceptives and family planning resources, which are not only violations of women's rights to bodily autonomy, but also leads to millions of unintended pregnancies annually, increased number of pregnancy related deaths, and exacerbation of world poverty. As stated by climate strategist, Katharine Wilkinson, "The climate crisis is not gender neutral."

## Feminist Approach to Climate Change Governance

A feminist approach to climate change at this point in the crisis doesn't just mean including women in adaptation plans, it means intentionally positioning women at the forefront of the movement and prioritizing their voices at all levels. One way to go about this is by empowering women in leadership positions. Women on all levels, all across the map have been taking action against climate change. From Christiana Figueres, the head of the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change who drafted the Paris Climate Agreement, to teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, to New Zealand's former prime minister, Jacinda Ardern who pledged carbon neutrality for her country by 2025, women have been making their voices heard and advocating for measures that prioritize marginalized and minority communities. These voices need to continue to be uplifted and inserted into public discourse. Something that these climate leaders also bring up is the need for emotional intelligence when addressing this issue. They emphasize the need for empathy, teamwork, commitment to justice, and the fight against the climate crisis as a global issue, not an individual one. A third key component of climate feminism lies in the development of women's rights as a way to limit the unequal effects of climate change and to reduce the injustice between global communities. This encompasses women's access to contraception and family planning, women's right to vote and run for public office, women's right to financial opportunity and freedom. Putting women at the forefront of the fight against climate change will lead to innovative solutions to climate change in frontline communities as well as increased momentum in the human rights movement.

## Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

As of 2023, the United Nations identify there to be thirty-eight small island developing states around the world. These states have a special vulnerability to climate change for a number of reasons. 90% of SIDS are located in the tropics and are therefore seasonally affected by extreme weather events like tropical storms, cyclones, hurricanes, storm surges, droughts, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. As a result of their island status, SIDS are of limited physical size which eliminates adaptation options to climate change and sea level rise. Rise in sea level also often threatens freshwater resource supplies which these states are heavily dependent on. Apart from environmental factors, SIDS also tend to have limited resources which are under heavy stress from socio-economic activities, the coastal tourism industry, and other unsustainable human activities. This lack of resources is exacerbated by insufficient financial, technical, and institutional capacities which also contribute to SIDS' inability to mitigate and adapt to adverse impacts of climate change. Finally, economically, SIDS experience relative isolation from major markets, affecting competitiveness in trade, contrasted by extreme openness of their own small economy and the high sensitivity to external market shocks.

## The Future of SIDS

Looking forward, current climate-related stresses in various SIDS are only expected to increase, both in intensity and in frequency. By 2080, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) expect the Mediterranean to experience a surface air temperature increase between 4 and 4.5 degrees Celsius which will hurt coral reefs, change seasonal rain and drought patterns, increase potential threats from vector-borne diseases and heat waves. This, in turn, affects trade, land and ocean biodiversity, and sea related tourism – all of which SIDS are dependent on for survival and economic growth. The UNFCCC also expects the Caribbean to experience a 30% decline in seasonal rainfall which happens to be the states' primary source of freshwater. Most SIDS are entirely reliant on a single source to fulfill their freshwater needs, which is therefore highly vulnerable to the changes in the environment resulting from climate change. This reduction in rainfall will also change the intensity of El Nino seasonal destruction. It is also projected that as little as a 50 cm rise in sea level would take out 60% of beaches in Grenada and a 1-meter rise would submerge the Maldives entirely. Loss in beaches would also result in disruption of tourism, which for SIDS like the Bahamas where 70% of the labor force is employed in the tourism sector, would be debilitating.

## Adaptation Plans and Preventative Strategies

The implementation of adaptation plans for climate change specifically centered around SIDS is of global importance when taking into account SIDS' status as global indicators. SIDS are among the lowest contributors to carbon emissions, but some of the first and hardest hit when it comes to environmental adversity. This extreme sensitivity helps warn the rest of the world about what is to come. Due to SIDS's intense vulnerability to climate change, adaptation plans and preventative strategies must be aggressive and established quickly. Another key component of these initiatives must be widespread cooperation. These steps toward adaptation and risk reduction must attend multiple states at once in order to maximize response efficiency.

One current project founded by the United Nations is the South-South cooperation between the Pacific and Caribbean SIDS on Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management. This project is financed by UN funds and is an \$800,000 USD three-year project which aims to help SIDS share regional best practices and technology to improve resilience. The second key project addressing this issue is the Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change (PACC). PACC delivers \$13.4 million USD in donations and co-financing of \$44.7 million USD to establish a UNDP Global Environment Facility (GEF) which would enhance SIDS' capacities to adapt to climate change in food security, coastal zone management, and freshwater access. Capitalizing off SIDS' extreme potential for renewable energy production and use, PACC, in time, is expected to increase the number of successful commercial renewable energy applications and solidify legal policy surrounding energy and the environment. The project has been largely successful in installing solar home systems in remote locations and equipping schools with biogas digesters which recycle biogas into useful energy. While these two project examples inarguably serve as effective strategies, more need to be implemented in order to stop the damage being done.

## Indigenous Communities in the United States Introduction

Like AIDS, Indigenous American communities are among the lowest contributors to global warming, and like AIDS they are among the communities most affected by its harmful effects. Native American communities are traditionally very reliant on the land they inhabit, so climate change's attack on the environment, threatens these communities' ways of life. In the United States around 40% of federally recognized tribes are located in Alaska where rising air and water temperature are having large effects. In the past 60 years, the average temperature in Alaska has increased more than twice what it has in the rest of the United States. This temperature increase has contributed to the thawing of permafrost which covers 80% of Alaska's surface which leads to other problems like melting sea ice, and general change in ecosystems which is puts Native American access to traditional medicine, crops, and foods like fish at risk. This lack of food is quickly leading these communities to experience malnutrition and food insecurity. Alaska also has a very long, quickly shrinking coastline as sea levels rise and native coastal communities are being forced to relocate to higher ground. In April of 2015 more than 30 Native villages in Alaska began the process of relocating their entire community. Aside from loss of buildings and infrastructure, this process of relocating increases economic, mental, and social problems attributed to loss of tradition and culture tied to these places and senses of home.

## Indigenous Peoples' Solutions

Due to a history of racism against Native Americans, these communities are frequently overlooked and not taken into account when looking for adaptation plans and further preventative strategies. This is a big mistake. The main issue with current responses and data collection on the effects of climate change is that there is no way to record the effects on small, village-scales contributing to a harmful narrative, which ignores the disproportionate effects of the climate crisis on smaller, minority, or marginalized communities. This is where place-based Indigenous knowledge comes into play. Place-based Indigenous knowledge contains vital information and experiences that must be considered in further preventative action against climate change. One organization that is already doing this is the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, which is drawing information from interdisciplinary science, traditional knowledge, and local environmental observers to create and conduct detailed, small-scale climate change health assessments in local Alaskan Indigenous communities. Moving away from Alaska, the Navajo Reservation has also begun combining traditional knowledge of their land with scientific approaches to observation to record ground water and soil changes in the area. This strategy of incorporating traditional knowledge into modern scientific research will provide a more comprehensive collection of data describing the effects of climate change on smaller, village and individual levels, and therefore contribute more small-scale solutions that can be taken in order to achieve bigger, carbon neutrality and climate change mitigation goals.

## Conclusion

Climate Change is a global problem that in certain aspects must be addressed on a small scale in order to achieve goals set on a larger scale. It is also important that these small-scale actions respond directly to those most affected by the climate crisis. Women's rights must be improved in order to combat social inequality advanced by climate change, financial support for renewable energy sources should be given to SIDS in order to establish lasting protective and preventative measures, and more attention must be paid to the way climate change affects smaller communities by use of the traditional place-based knowledge of Indigenous communities. Inaction is no longer an option, and the later action is taken, the more intense the disproportionate suffering of marginalized communities becomes.

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