



Towards Environmental Justice in an Era of Climate Change: The Nexus between History and Impactful Policy Formation in the Caribbean

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Historical Context

The first step towards environmental justice must be simply facing the stark truth. This can be difficult, but it must be done by both the developed and the developing world. The conjured images are hard to face. The historical discussion must involve accounts of the entrenchment of an extraction ethos that included mineral wealth and agricultural products, which spanned five centuries and continues in less direct forms today.

Caribbean landscapes were left with land exhausted from overuse, polluted rivers, destroyed wetlands and grasslands, and extensive deforestation. Animal populations were decimated and new ones introduced. In addition, just like animals, human populations were decimated and new ones introduced.

Social inequality took on dimensions not seen before through several systems of coerced labor like the *encomienda* system, African chattel slavery, and Indian indentureship. Economic, political, and social hierarchies developed based on race and shades of skin color. Diseases became a major threat to people's survival, with malaria and yellow fever becoming endemic. Life expectancy levels were low.

History also records the destruction of native cultivation patterns. This involved the scope and intent of production, the nature of what was produced, and the methods by which they were produced. Monoculture was introduced. Trading

relationships, which privileged the production of raw materials with low levels of refining, buttressed by trade and commercial agreements, were entrenched. As a result, local manufacturing and innovation were actively retarded.

Real development was illusive. Economies became characterized by cycles of "Boom and Bust." The result was relatively low economic growth and indebtedness as the region contributed to the accumulation of unprecedented wealth in Europe. There was even talk of paving roads with gold and silver in Spain. The contrasts in these images are nothing less than mind-blowing.

It did not end there. This history has imposed a very distinctive development trajectory on the Caribbean region. Natural development patterns were skewed by the entrenchment of an economic system introduced by countries external to the region, with no consideration as to what was best for the land and people. Their only motivations were what was best for the economic and political aggrandizement of Europe and the white upper classes. Thus, the interests of the Caribbean periphery were subsumed to privilege the interests of the metropole and foster development there. The naked exploitation of workers resulted in racial divisions and inequities within the population, which were reinforced and mirrored in the economic, political, and social institutions in the societies.

Eric Williams assessed the long-term implications as early as 1944. In his

seminal work *Capitalism and Slavery*, he concluded, “The ideas built on these interests continue long after the interests have been destroyed and work their old mischief, which is all the more mischievous because the interests to which they corresponded no longer exist (211).”

These colonial developments are still embedded in the very institutional framework of Caribbean territories. Transformation has not occurred. Moises J. Schwartz (2018) notes the endowment of factors such as the long-term impact on climate and geography and describes colonies as becoming “path dependent” making it difficult for truly new or modified institutions to emerge. Thus, the plantation “lives on” in the Caribbean in many ways. Sometimes the crop changes (sugar, bananas). Sometimes the nature of the extraction changes (gold, silver, oil, natural gas). Sometimes the product is brought in as opposed to being exported (tourism). However, the basic institutional framework remains intact. Thus, the relationship with the developed world also remains the same.

Underdevelopment theorists have described this reality. It is indeed multifaceted and requires exploring dimensions of environmental colonialism (Kelly Duquette, 2020). The nature of the environment that was artificially created is also captured in Terry Jones’ adoption of the term “apartheid ecology” in 1975 (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2020). These concepts can even be applied to the names of Caribbean streets, the persons honored in statues occupying open spaces and museums, and even the locations of some Caribbean communities.

The Conundrum of Vulnerability:

Historicizing the Climate Crisis in the Caribbean Context: From Plantationocene to Anthropocene

The Caribbean is no stranger to globalization, and with it came an early phase of climate crisis because of the settlement systems described. Thus, Donna Haraway and others refer to the plantationocene to describe the devastating environmental changes that accompanied the plantation system (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2020). Caribbean climate challenges in 2022 cannot be solved with only a contemporary lens. The region’s crisis is rooted in exploitative relationships and the institutions established from as early as the fifteenth century.

The real difference is that the problems are no longer localized in areas like the Caribbean, however, the journey in the Caribbean has been more complicated. This region has already experienced a first wave that has left it more vulnerable to the second phase. Today, Caribbean communities are vulnerable on several levels. Their historical exploitation, size, location, and economies based on essentially agriculture and tourism make climate and environmental patterns more likely to lead to natural disasters, which will be more intense in their impact. The reality is that Caribbean countries must find solutions, but are challenged economically, and this is a practical concern. However, there is another practical concern: history forces the question - What is the role of the global community? Paul Driessen uses the term eco-imperialism to warn us about possible consequences of the forceful imposition of Western environmentalist views on this already challenging context (Kelly Duquette, 2020).

This paper posits that solutions cannot repeat the injustices of the past but must instead provide repair. There are critical questions to ask:

- Have the solutions proposed fully considered the kind of justice needed in the Caribbean? The major drive seems to have come from a broader global political economic context.
- How objective is environmental science and the interventions advocated? Have the solutions sufficiently dealt with the issue of inequity in their applications?
- Are the same people from generations past being asked to do more and to accept greater risk?
- Are the approaches doomed to limited success because the region is still experiencing aftershocks from the first calculated abuse of their environments?
- Do Caribbean people have any reason to trust interventions that are not rooted in Caribbean centric perspectives and realities?

This is not to suggest that nothing has been done to limit the impact and to build resilience. Policy making also reflects a renewed focus on the climate, the environment, and sustainability. However, one can question the extent and the impact. There is also much variation across the region with numerous small states and widely different economic, political, social, and topographical realities. This is further complicated by what Michelle Scobie (2012) describes as "...determining the best way to use limited national budgets...". Another issue is the

current cultural context. What is really expected from the focus on climate change in the Caribbean? The people of the Caribbean often seem not to be as intimately involved as they should be.

Proposals for More Effective Implementation Include:

1. More funds from international sources
2. Empowerment of strategic persons in the Caribbean through training
3. A comprehensive regional approach
4. More focus on monitoring results
5. More involvement with the people of the Caribbean and use of local knowledge
6. An enhanced role for local governments
7. Grounding in social equity and levels of trust

Thus, although very important in themselves, the solutions are bigger and deeper than practical scientific solutions. Solutions must be adaptable to the Caribbean context and financed in a way that does not burden already strained governments. Legislation and policies have no power without people, without trust, without cultural acceptance and support. Anything less means only scratching the surface. Environmental justice includes connotations of not just fairness, but also meaningful participation.

There are three justifications for environmental justice:

1. Justice because of the root causes of climate change in the Caribbean region
2. Justice in sharing the impact of climate

change adjustments and thus not perpetuating further injustices

3. Justice in facilitating true transformation through Caribbean sensitive approaches/ policies for mitigation and adaptation

A New Role for History

Can a history that has resulted in such untenable relationships be used to finally transition to a better future? Can the paradigm shift that is needed be based on the understanding and sharing of the historical context? Two focal points are needed. The first is an understanding of the local, regional, and international factors that led to the current context. The second is an analysis of the history of climate and environmental changes, as well as natural disasters, in the Caribbean. The focus here should also be on the local knowledge and the culture that has led to a resilience, which is almost uncanny.

How Will this History be Applied?

It is not enough to say that more developed countries must acknowledge and accept responsibility. The evidence of why they must bear that responsibility must be properly documented and presented when proposals are advanced.

The regional context will also benefit from regional approaches to environmental history. This will highlight the areas that a regional focus will strengthen.

Local histories are also important. Each island has specific concerns and strengths, which must shape its internal responses and policies.

History must be used to reach local communities and involve them in the transformation. Community museums

and schools can be very powerful vehicles.

Finally, a top-down approach will only have limited success. History equalizes. Everyone must understand how the Caribbean has come to be in this situation and create solutions that span multiple levels. All levels must interact for maximum impact. Caribbean connections must be understood and appreciated. This is the only way to produce effective solutions that will be received and implemented by the people of the region and the international community. It is only history that can help the people of the Caribbean understand the full circumstances behind the factors that put them at risk from environmental threats and the conditions needed to ensure effective responses. Such approaches cannot be developed without starting with the history, linking it to the kinds of policies needed and the interfaces required to ensure effective implementation. In an environment where history itself has led to mistrust; this is the only approach. It is the only way to achieve truly transformative changes. If this is not done, climate change will also become just “another disguised plantation.”

Endnotes

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