

World view



By Catherine
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Ida – the one-two punch of poverty and climate change

US President Joe Biden's environmental-justice adviser says: tackle inequality and global warming together.

I spent the 16th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina watching as the Weather Channel tracked Hurricane Ida. The two followed similar paths. As I write, the damage from Hurricane Ida is estimated at beyond US\$95 billion. Many in Louisiana still lack power, and more than 70 people are dead across 8 states.

Some of the worst-hit communities had it hard enough already. I know this from my work on *Waste* (The New Press, 2020) – exposing water contamination and poor sanitation in rural parts of the United States – for which I won a MacArthur Fellowship last year, and from my position as founding director of the Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. About two million people in the United States, including many around New Orleans, lack proper sewerage. Consequently, these regions have widespread hookworm infections, formerly thought to persist in only the poorest countries.

Advocates often talk about social justice, political justice, environmental justice, climate justice and more as though they are separate issues. The fact is: inequalities overlap and amplify each other. Those bearing the brunt of climate change often have the fewest resources and the most constraints on their civil rights, and live in the most polluted places. The pollution and warming that degrades farmlands and parklands disproportionately harms people of colour in cities. The communities that most need resilient, sustainable infrastructure can't afford it.

St James Parish, a region of Louisiana along the Mississippi River that is flanked with dozens of petrochemical plants, exemplifies overlapping injustices. As other parts of the United States closed such plants, more opened in and near the parish – known as Cancer Alley – and sickness rates rose. Earlier this year, the United Nations said the region exemplified environmental racism, citing US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) data showing that cancer risks in predominantly Black areas in this parish are about 1.7 times those of predominantly white areas, and blamed systemic racism and a lack of federal regulations.

As I watched Hurricane Ida close in, I prayed for the people and homes I'd visited in the parishes of St James and St John the Baptist, where people who already have the country's highest cancer and COVID-19 rates now had to worry about losing their homes to storms made worse by climate change. Both parishes were pounded by Hurricane Ida and Hurricane Katrina. The plants there pollute the surroundings and contribute to climate change, and are inevitably placed near marginalized communities.

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Recovery programmes launched after natural disasters rarely build resilience against a more dangerous climate, and they often further increase disparities. Research that tracked assistance from the US Federal Emergency Management Agency to people whose homes were damaged by hurricanes from 2005 to 2016 found that inspectors were less likely to visit areas with more Black residents, denying them a chance to apply for assistance. Even for damage inspections that were filed, those from Black homeowners were denied without reason almost three times as often as those from white homeowners. Separate work found that white residents of counties hit by a natural disaster saw their wealth grow, whereas that of Black residents in the same counties shrank.

The EPA has looked at projected climate-change impacts across the population. It has again found that the most severe harms from climate change fall disproportionately on underserved communities that are the least able to prepare for, and recover from, heat waves, poor air quality, flooding and other impacts.

Fighting such inequalities does not fall neatly under causes such as climate justice, social justice or environmental justice. Lately, I have been using the term planetary justice to encompass it all.

I am heartened by US President Joe Biden's efforts to incorporate such thinking into policy. He has established the White House Environmental Justice Interagency Council, and the Justice40 Initiative, which requires that underprivileged communities accrue at least 40% of benefits from federal environmental investments. This means cleaning up legacy pollution, investing in clean energy, transportation and quality housing, and paying attention to those whose lives are the most precarious. Residents of frontline communities from St James and St John's parishes, to island nations, Indigenous peoples and developing nations, should have a seat at the table to work on solutions, which should be deployed to vulnerable communities first.

Both political will and funds are needed to make this happen. The UN has set up a mechanism it calls climate finance to funnel funds from robust nations to vulnerable ones, warning: "Without investing in the right places, the world will not achieve its climate goals." Even so, the International Renewable Energy Agency estimates that the world is underinvesting in clean-energy transitions by \$3 trillion annually.

But consider this: I am a Black woman from a rural community, one of the poorest regions of the United States, where concerns are more likely to be ignored than addressed. This year, I was invited to co-chair the first-ever White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council, which Biden elevated from a little-known EPA committee. That is progress, and gives me hope for the future.

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