

The Need of the Hour: An Equitable Climate Action Plan

Do people realize that when they tackle climate change, they address their families and communities' health?

BY ISNA GREEN INITIATIVE TEAM



OVER THE PAST YEAR, FAMILIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND THE WORLD lost loved ones and livelihoods. The coronavirus, a respiratory disease made worse by air pollution, turned the world upside down.

Communities nationwide are bracing themselves for another devastating season of extreme heat, wildfires and hurricanes — all made more frequent and severe by climate change. Everyone deserves to live in healthier, safer communities powered by pollution-free, efficient and renewable energy. This, in addition to providing immediate economic relief to those in need, is why we need climate action now to protect the public from dangerous extreme weather events and the threat of climate change.

No one is exempt from the vagaries of climate change, and Muslims accept their share of the responsibility. Everyone must play their part in returning Earth to some semblance of balance. Environmental and climate justice are embedded in the matrix of Islamic teachings. The Qur'an is rich with guidance on our role, responsibility and accountability to our neighbors, humanity and the world. We are the first generation to feel the effects of climate change and the last to be able to do anything about it.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) special report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (<https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>) was notable for its

combination of scientific and ethical clarity. It discussed some critical truths:

1. We must do everything to try to hold the warming to a maximum of 1.5°C. This effort is our only chance of achieving the Paris Climate Agreement's backstop goal of holding global warming "well below 2°C."

2. To have a substantial chance of achieving 1.5°C, global emissions must decline by at least 45% and as much as 60% from 2010 levels by 2030 and must reach net zero around 2050.

On Earth Day, April 22, President Biden announced a new target for the U.S. to achieve: a 50-52% reduction from 2005 levels in economywide net greenhouse gas pollution by 2030. The announcement — made during the virtual Leaders Summit on Climate (<https://www.state.gov/leaders-summit-on-climate/>) that he held to challenge the world on increased ambition in tackling climate change — is

part of his focus on building back better in a way that will create millions of good-paying union jobs, ensure economic competitiveness, advance environmental justice and improve the health and security of communities nationwide.

Equitable, democratic and bold climate action is needed now. That means implementing holistic and comprehensive policies that integrate equity and justice while achieving net zero emissions targets limiting warming to 1.5 degrees.

Democratizing energy is central to achieving a “just transition” away from a fossil-fuel economy and toward a new renewable energy economy grounded in economic and social justice. Energy democracy seeks to address the energy system’s legacy of structural inequities through greater public accountability and distributive infrastructure investments.

STRATEGIES TO TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE MUST PRIORITIZE THE MOST IMPACTED AND LEAST RESOURCED COMMUNITIES. ACTION ON CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND MITIGATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL INCREASES LIVABILITY, STIMULATES ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND LOWERS THE COSTS AND SOCIETAL DISRUPTION CAUSED BY NATURAL DISASTERS.

It is no secret that communities of color and low-wealth communities are hit first and worst by the climate crisis and suffer disproportionately from extreme weather events and pollution. Decades of underinvestment and systemic discrimination have left these communities with disproportionately high costs for energy, transportation and necessities, limited access to public services, high levels of poverty and pollution, and outdated and weak critical infrastructure. Climate change exacerbates these injustices — making climate adaptation and community resilience essential priorities.

Strategies to tackle climate change must prioritize the most impacted and least resourced communities. Action on climate resilience and mitigation at the local level increases livability, stimulates economic activity and lowers the costs and societal disruption caused by natural disasters. Done correctly, these investments can also make communities healthier and improve equity for all residents.

Methane pollution from the oil and gas sector is accelerating the pace of the climate crisis and harming the health of families and communities across the

country. If left unaddressed, methane pollution will continue to cause significant harm to public health, threaten the stability of our economy and compromise the well-being of future generations and the planet.

Methane, over 86 times more potent than carbon dioxide, is a potent climate pollutant released alongside toxic air pollution during oil and gas production that can worsen respiratory illness. One in three people in the U.S. lives in a county with oil and gas production, and oil and gas facilities leak nearly 13 million tons of methane a year (www.edf.org/sites/default/files/content/methane_rule_health_fact_sheet_reboot_final_no_citations.pdf). Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities are disproportionately impacted by harmful oil and gas pollution from facilities that have historically been built in and near their communities. This pollution degrades their health at a time when everyone, and especially those with pre-existing health conditions like heart disease and asthma, are even more susceptible to serious respiratory illness, including the coronavirus.

The transportation sector is our largest source of carbon pollution (www.epa.gov/greenvehicles/fast-facts-transportation-greenhouse-gas-emissions). Air pollution from dirty vehicles and heavy-duty trucks also disproportionately impacts low-income and BIPOC communities, making clear the need for a global commitment to tackle environmental injustice. Tailpipe and diesel pollution severely contribute to deadly health impacts in low wealth and BIPOC communities and results in higher-than-average rates of asthma and other respiratory diseases, which disproportionately impact children of color. Jumpstarting electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing has the potential to drive millions of well-paying and sustainable union jobs to U.S. workers.

For the U.S. to take responsibility for being one of the world’s leading carbon polluters and to get back on track as a global climate leader, it must address pollution from

its transportation sector. We must act by reinstating the California waiver that allows states to band together to set tougher tailpipe pollution protections (www.federalregister.gov/documents/2013/01/09/2013-00181/california-state-motor-vehicle-pollution-control-standards-notice-of-decision-granting-a-waiver-of); using Obama-Biden era clean car standards as a starting point from which to improve vehicle pollution limits; implementing strong standards that put us on the path to 60% clean, electric vehicles by 2030 and 100% clean, electric vehicles by 2035; creating strong standards to cut pollution from buses, freight trucks and delivery trucks and by transitioning to pollution-free trucks and buses; and sparking the electric vehicle revolution by building a network of EV chargers, electrifying transit buses, electrifying our school buses and helping consumers purchase the vehicles of tomorrow.

When we tackle climate change, we address our families and communities’ health, and, as such, it is imperative that frontline people of color lead this movement and ensure a just transition into a pollution-free, efficient and renewable energy future. Now it is time to make smart infrastructure investments to rebuild our communities and to ensure that our buildings, water, transportation and energy infrastructure can withstand the impacts of climate change. To secure a lasting and equitable economic recovery that allows us to bounce back from the last year of economic hardship, it is time to do more: going big on jobs, justice and climate solutions. *ib*

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