

## Communities in action: grounded imaginaries in practice

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### Summary

Thanks to the RSNSW for the opportunity to contribute to the crucial Forum theme of communities as the seedbed or source for responses to social and environmental challenges. As a Professor of Environmental Politics, this really has been my focus for the last 30 years or so — not on the construction of ideal environmental policies, but on the ways that impacted communities respond to environmental crises — in their actions, their demands, and their own theorising about environment, power, capital, race, and necessary transformations (Schlosberg 1999, 2007, 2013; Schlosberg and Craven 2019). I want to talk about both conceptual and practical contributions such impacted communities make — both in understanding the reality of environmental crises and disadvantage and in designing sustainable and equitable ways forward. I'll do that by discussing what my colleague Dany Celermajer and I are calling “grounded imaginaries:” designs and practices being imagined and implemented in impacted communities (Celermajer 2021).

### Community action in response to climate change

First, when it comes to responses to climate change, what community action often illustrates is a counter to the common narratives or imaginaries. The usual imaginaries include the business-as-usual approach: coal is good for you, there's nothing to see here, the denialism of “everything will be right.”

Then we have the other side, the doomist imaginary, that collapse of everything is coming, inevitably, no matter what we do — and we should just focus on protecting our own patch. Third, of course, we have the techno-fix approach, that the billionaires and their capital will fix our climate problems.

These dominant imaginaries don't come *from* communities, from community knowledges and experiences, they come at the *expense* of local communities, and in particular those disadvantaged and made vulnerable. These top-down imaginaries ignore, disempower, and do harm. Crucially, what they ignore is what many communities are *already doing*, on the ground, to respond to climate change: creating community energy grids, local food systems, sustainable supply chains, coordinating emergency response. How people eat, how they produce, acquire and consume food and energy, how they respond to climate emergencies, how they live in relation to the natural world can challenge existing imaginaries and engender new ones.

We are working with community partners in Australia and India to examine these grounded and transformational practices, from new approaches to farming and water management in the Himalayas, to local food production on the NSW south coast. “Imaginaries” might be the wrong term, because we're talking about actual practices; this is not just about some utopian set of ideas without real impact, but praxis, action.

### **A counter or grounded imaginary**

Second, I want to just offer a historical example of a counter or grounded imaginary that comes from the environmental justice movement, because that movement illustrates the broad normative and pragmatic contribution impacted and disadvantaged communities have actually made to environmental discourse, policy, and practice.

The idea of environmental justice focuses on the reality that some communities are inequitably exposed to environmental risks; that some communities are routinely disrespected and disparaged — that is, somehow deserving of pollution and toxins; that some communities have no real political input or say on issues that affect them everyday; that some communities simply have their basic needs and functioning undermined (Schlosberg 2007, Pellow 2018, Sze 2020).

This idea of environmental justice comes from that everyday lived experience of multifaceted injustice, from African-American communities in the US to Aboriginal communities here in Australia. Such impacted communities developed a thorough, grounded, material analysis of the impacts on everyday life. Lead poisoning, childhood asthma rates, cancer clusters, contamination of rivers and aquifers, climate anxiety, the decimation of sacred places and cultural practices — those experiences have all led to this analysis of the reality of environmental injustice and the structures of power, capital, and racism that create it, maintain it, profit from it.

Just as important as that grounded critical analysis of the reality of injustice is what communities demand governments to *do* in response. The idea of environmental justice is now regularly used to frame and ground many environmental and climate policies.

Climate justice was key in the preamble to the Paris Agreement. All of the recent US climate legislation, including the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022, embrace and implement elements of community environmental justice demands.

What this community-driven environmental justice focus illustrates is that environmental and climate policy is not just about emissions reduction, but also about deconstructing the relationship between environmental damage, climate change, and unjust impacts on everyday life (Mendez 2020).

So mitigation policy in the US now addresses air pollution and the broad range of health problems that come with burning fossil fuels. It makes clean energy more affordable and more accessible. It supports more energy-efficient housing that cuts energy bills. Just energy transition policies mean communities will share in the benefits of such transitions. It means changes in everyday life.

This is a great story about communities as a seedbed for ideas. Environmental justice, originating from grounded community experience and response, is now a normative framework for both understanding environmental crises and developing just, equitable, transformative practices and policies in response.

### **A future-focussed project**

Third, and finally, I want to give an example of a more future-focused project dedicated to communities as the origin of necessary imaginaries and change — communities as the source of climate change adaptation.

The recently released Future Earth of Australia and Academy of Science-supported strategy for *Just Adaptation*

(2022) illustrates exactly this theme of communities in action — or listening to and putting communities into action to develop transformative, just adaptation plans in the face of climate change. What's crucial about this *Just Adaptation* strategy is that it is *not* just about addressing climate hazards and potential disasters, but also takes on the converging crises of climate change, inequity, and vulnerability. It aims to address climate and systems of injustice simultaneously.

Adaptation to climate change is a necessity, and it should be informed by diverse community knowledges, needs, capabilities, and aspirations. The strategy calls for such processes to engage the voices and experiences of those made marginalised and disadvantaged. The strategy insists, in particular, on recognition of the knowledges embedded in Australian Indigenous communities.

Australia is immensely privileged to have First Nations that are not only connected to country, but who have actually lived through climate change before, with oral histories and substantive, applied advice to about shifting ecological systems and processes (Williamson and Weir 2021). Grounded, lived experience and imaginaries. The just adaptation strategy suggests how taking voice seriously — actual, authentic, engaged listening — is crucial to our responses to climate impacts.

Climate change is unsettling, and there is an opportunity here to change the focus of a settler nation through that unsettling experience, and to better understand and live *with* country and First Nations. Just adaptation requires it.

## Conclusion

These are just three examples — grounded imaginaries, environmental justice, just adaptation — that illustrate the crucial nature of community knowledge and practice in thinking about, responding to, and designing transformation in the face of environmental and climate challenges. These examples should show just how rich such community thinking and action is, and how applied and impactful it can be.

## References

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