

ENVIRONMENTAL EQUITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE

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• *Natural climate solutions in the Amazon* •
and the Black/Afro-descendant Natural Belt of the Americas

ABSTRACT

Afro-descendant peoples of the Americas are disproportionately affected by overlapping crises such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity, ecological degradation, the Covid-19 pandemic, the public health crisis, extreme socioeconomic inequality, structural racism and the increase in violence against social leaders. Although the communities in what we have named the Black/Afro-descendant Natural Belt of the Americas (ANBA) have a crucial role to play in an integrated response to these crisis, and in spite of the wealth of experiences and good practices at the local and national level, not enough importance has been attributed to the central role they play in the planetary socio-ecological transition needed to overcome the climate and biodiversity crises. This article, among other topics, debates the importance of Afro-descendant communities in the implementation of a range of natural climate solutions, in the region and at a global level, in the territories that are conceptually part of this belt.

KEYWORDS

Natural climate solutions | Environmental equity | Racial justice | Black/Afro-descendant communities

Humanity is facing major interconnected challenges such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity, ecological degradation, the Covid-19 pandemic, the public health crisis, extreme socioeconomic inequality, structural racism and the increase in violence against social leaders,¹ among others. Afro-descendant peoples of the Americas are disproportionately affected by these overlapping crises and are, at the same time, at the centre of their solution.

The Latin America and Caribbean region has unique conditions for responding to these challenges, as they favour the adoption of community-led natural climate solutions² for climate change mitigation and adaptation within a framework of sustainable transformation and development, environmental conservation, risk management and resilience. On one hand, 42% of emissions in Latin America and the Caribbean come from agriculture, forestry and other land use (AFOLU).³ On the other hand, the region has an extensive natural heritage: though it covers only 16% of the planet's surface area, it contains 50% of the world's biodiversity, 23% of its forests and 30% of its water. The intersection between these phenomena represents one of the greatest opportunities to promote low carbon transformation and sustainable development in the region.

However, the natural riches of Latin America and the Caribbean are under severe pressure. It is estimated that there are 200 million hectares of degraded land in the region and that the forest cover has shrunk from 51% of the territory in 1990 to 46.4% in 2015. This has serious consequences for the conservation of biodiversity and strategic ecosystems, the efforts to mitigate climate change and for environmental and racial justice, since much of the natural wealth of the region is found in the territories of Afro-descendant communities. Ethnic, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have over 400 million hectares of land, which are home to around 40% of the natural forests in the region.⁴ In Colombia, this percentage is as high as 50%.⁵ These forests contain 30% of the carbon stored in the forests of Latin America and the Caribbean (34,000 MtC) and 14% of the carbon stored in tropical forests worldwide.

Currently, 135 million hectares are not legally covered by collective property or usufruct rights granted to these communities, and progress in land titling is slow and insufficient. In the last 30 years, land titles have been issued to Afro-descendant peoples for only 8 million hectares of land, out of the estimated 30 to 40 million hectares that could potentially be demarcated in Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Honduras. Furthermore, the effects of climate change pose a severe threat to the Afro-descendant population of the Americas and are exacerbating the conditions of vulnerability and increasing their risk and exposure to natural disasters, thus perpetuating extreme poverty and socio-environmental inequality.

Extreme climate events have had substantial impacts on these communities in the last decade. This has been illustrated by the impacts of Hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, Sandy, Irma, Maria and, recently, Laura, which disproportionately affected the Afro-descendant population in the Caribbean and the United States. Also, in Latin America and the Caribbean, Hurricanes Iota and Eta affected the coastal marine communities of the Caribbean, including the ones in

Colombia, Honduras and Nicaragua, with devastating effects on Afro-descendant peoples. To that, one can add the incremental changes in rainfall and temperature, which will have lasting negative consequences on the territories of these communities and whose effects have not yet been sufficiently studied from an environmental and racial justice perspective.

The disproportionate impacts on these communities are no coincidence.⁶ The first enslaved Africans arrived in America at the end of the 15th century as a consequence of the infamous slave trade. According to the settlement pattern associated with *marronage* and *palenques*,⁷ these communities established themselves in areas rich in natural resources, as they sought to isolate themselves from the colonial world and use natural ecosystems as a protection mechanism, while remaining highly connected to one another. Later, the racialized hierarchical structure excluded them from decision-making processes, leaving them in a situation of invisibility that still exists, given the prevalence of structural racism that continues to afflict the region. However, it was this isolation that led these communities to develop unique models to adapt to their natural surroundings, which contributed to the conservation of the natural heritage in these areas.

This historical exclusion can be currently seen in the disproportionate exposure to risk and environmental threats and the unequal access to processes and spheres where decisions on the protection and conservation of natural resources are made. These factors have done great environmental and racial injustice to the Black/Afro-descendant population in the Western Hemisphere. Although there have been notable advances in acknowledging the role of local communities in the conservation of strategic ecosystems,⁸ it is important to note that the contribution of Afro-descendant communities continues to be systematically ignored. For instance, in discussions on the Amazon, there is little to no mention of Brazilian *quilombola* communities, and few people know that around 80% of the population of the Brazilian Amazon is Afro-descendant. Similarly, little is known about the Maroon population in Surinam and Guyana and the Colombian Afro-descendant groups that inhabit this important biome. A similar phenomenon occurs when addressing issues related to marine and coastal ecosystems, particularly in the Caribbean, the Bahamas and the south of the United States.

The communities in what we have named the Black/Afro-descendant Natural Belt of the Americas (ANBA) have a crucial role to play in an integrated response to the crisis of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, inequality and socioeconomic exclusion, drug trafficking, migration and structural violence, among others. In spite of this and the wealth of experiences and good practices at the local and national level, not enough importance has been attributed to Afro-descendant communities and the central role they play in the planetary socio-ecological transition needed to overcome the climate and biodiversity crises. Therefore, we must start documenting geographical, ecological and strategic environmental conditions, as well as their cultural values, governance models and historical contributions to environmental management. We must also emphasize the importance of Afro-descendant⁹ communities in the implementation of a range of natural climate solutions, in the region and at a global level, in the territories that are conceptually part of this belt.

This geographic concept is based on socio-ecological, linguistic and cultural characteristics at a hemispheric level. Given its scale, there can be no effective climate solution without contributions from the natural heritage of the Afro-descendant communities of Latin America and the Caribbean. However, what happens to these communities is paradoxical. On one hand, they have an enormous natural wealth that performs valuable environmental services for humanity, and on the other, they live in precarious conditions where most of their basic needs are unmet. To overcome this, new paradigms are required – ones based on a vision from the Global South that reflects the challenges befalling communities experiencing similar difficulties. Since the environmental and conservationist movement¹⁰ was founded on power relations that exclude and render indigenous and Afro-descendant populations throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States invisible, the themes of racial and social inclusion, multiculturalism and pluriversal justice must be at the new paradigm's core.¹¹

To correct these historical imbalances and their contemporary consequences, we must identify key players, create linkages between them at the regional level, facilitate exchanges, generate spaces for listening in regional and global centres of power, and create platforms that raise the voices of Afro-descendant climate and environmental leaders. To do so, we will need to reinforce existing networks and create new networks and hubs for exchanging experiences and engaging in joint advocacy work to strengthen these communities' voices, influence and participation in international, regional and local scenarios where the climate and environmental decisions that affect them directly are made. Furthermore, technologies co-created with local Afro-descendant communities for the collection and generation of data and scientific evidence should be developed to support these actions. In addition, a differential, racial and environmental justice-driven approach to data generation and the analysis of environmental impacts on these communities and their contributions based on a subregional, regional and hemispheric perspective must be implemented.¹² At the same time, state-of-the-art technologies should be developed to increase the effectiveness of the communities' environmental management and their autonomy in managing their territories.

In this context, racial justice is closely linked to environmental justice. They are indivisible categories. However, there are still conceptual, instrumental, and empirical questions for which more theoretical and practical content is needed on the racial and environmental justice dimensions. This content must be developed from the perspective of the communities who experience in their daily lives the major socio-spatial inequalities that characterize the Western hemisphere. This crucial, though insufficiently studied nexus is exacerbated by the lack of a systematic agenda for critical analysis and research on the relations between the well-being of Black/Afro-descendant communities at a hemispheric level and urban and environmental planning, climate actions and nature conservation.

At COP-26 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Glasgow, an influential group of community leaders and innovators from the region launched the Afro-Interamerican Forum on Climate Change in a collaboration with the Environmental Solutions Initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

This forum aims to promote effective answers to gaps in participatory research and the implementation of collaborative high-impact in-field actions and advocacy work from a Global South perspective. Furthermore, the forum seeks to empower Afro-descendant communities through the creation and strengthening of a regional network of Afro-descendant leaders, the systematization of lessons learned and good practices, and the analysis and production of information focused on environmental and racial justice.

In the coming years, with the support of the MIT Environmental Solutions Initiative and universities and research centres from the Global South, the forum will focus on developing a collaborative research agenda to promote the co-creation of information, community-level innovation and high impact advocacy work to support the implementation of community-led natural climate solutions as strategies for transforming and building equality, peace and well-being in the Afro-descendant Natural Belt of the Americas (ANBA) and the Amazon.

NOTES

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