

Closing the Climate Gap

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We are fast approaching the crucial threshold of 1.5° Celsius average global warming (2.7° Fahrenheit). According to the IPCC, crossing this threshold is expected to result in “catastrophic” extreme heat, drought, flooding, and food shortages for hundreds of millions of people around the globe. Unfortunately, those who are causing the climate emergency are not necessarily those who will be most impacted.

But let’s say we get our act together and invest in clean energy and changes to how we live. We can dramatically reduce our greenhouse gas emissions with economical and strategic investments in the future. Achieving deep cuts in emissions is highly doable – we already have the technology and resources we need. And we’re seeing communities around the nation investing in renewable energy, retrofitting homes and buildings, replacing gas cars with electric, buying locally-produced products and food, and taking other sustainable actions that reduce our collective greenhouse gas footprint. This is good, right?

Action on climate change IS good. We need to take action – a lot of it – right now! All of those investments add up to a lot of money going into the community. Who will benefit from these investments? When homeowners get tax incentives to improve their insulation or install solar panels, who benefits? When people get tax credits for purchasing expensive electric cars, who benefits? When people buy local organic produce at a farmer’s market, who benefits?

Unfortunately, sustainability efforts could further exacerbate race and income divides. Sustainability investments inordinately benefit wealthy non-Hispanic white Americans over lower income residents and people of color. At the upper levels, the U.S. solar industry is 90% white and 80% male. And in California, electric vehicles are largely purchased by white and Asian populations, with less than a quarter purchased by Hispanic, black, or other ethnic groups (as compared to gas cars, where these groups make up almost half of all purchases). Installation of charging infrastructure is rarely targeted towards lower income residents or communities of color, further compounding the disparity. Similarly, farmers’ markets and locally-grown and produced food and goods are often marketed to wealthier towns and neighborhoods with lower diversity.

Not only are climate solutions biased towards white and wealthy people, but climate change impacts are also heavily biased. When fires and floods ravaged the central California coastline a few years ago, wealthy (mostly non-Hispanic white) families evacuated while farm workers, non-English speakers, people with disabilities, yard maintenance workers, household help, and unhoused residents were left in place, exposed to deadly smoke, pollution, and mudslides. Similarly, the racial divide from Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana was astounding, leaving New Orleans with 100,000 fewer African Americans due to the disparity in impact.

It is vitally important that we consider equity among income, race, gender, mobility, and language as we develop our response to the climate emergency. Quick action is necessary AND

we can make each investment do double, or even triple, duty – (1) reduce greenhouse gas emissions, (2) reduce disparity, and (3) improve community resilience in the face of extreme events. Imagine if we invested in electric car share programs for lower income and higher density housing, required rental properties to increase energy efficiency, thereby lowering heating and cooling bills for residents, and/or prioritized local, minority and women-owned businesses for energy-related contracts. Imagine if we brought fresh and local foods to lower income neighborhoods at cheaper prices, thereby leading to healthier kids and families.

Closing the climate gap means closing the wealth, opportunity, and safety gap. Fighting climate change requires building a new, clean energy economy that has tremendous opportunity, if managed well, to bring good jobs, equitable pay, and increased opportunities to those who have been historically marginalized and underserved. The sheer magnitude of the investment needed to address climate change presents us with a significant challenge, but also an opportunity to make meaningful progress on racial, gender, and income equality throughout our community.