Resilient Cities:
Building Community Control in a Shifting Climate

By Movement Generation

Oil is the life-blood of globalization. Along with its sister coal, it has made industrial capitalism hum at a feverish pace for the past 200 years. Globalization is the force that is pushing our ecological and economic systems to the brink. Should we choose to stay the current course, the planet’s health will face some serious and catastrophic tipping points.

The most common face of the crisis is climate chaos, but this is only one of several interconnected and mutually reinforcing problems: Toxic waste poisons our land, air, and water; a shortage of fresh water has left growing numbers of humanity without access to clean potable water; a food and agriculture crisis has resulted from land being industrially consumed and depleted to produce export crops; biological and cultural diversity are facing extraordinary rates of extinction; and indigenous communities are facing cultural and physical genocide. It’s apparent that our addiction to fossil fuels and a fixation on market-based ‘economic growth’ have placed the planet’s life-systems in a precarious situation.

“Reclaiming democratic control over our food and water and our ecological survival is the necessary project for our freedom,” says Vandana Shiva, the celebrated author and physicist. To meet this challenge we need a well prepared and forward-thinking social justice movement that can help envision and build a post-globalized world based on local living democracies—deeply rooted in a sense of ecological place and centered on meeting its residents’ needs in an equitable way. “A global economy which takes ecological limits into account must necessarily localize production to reduce wasting both natural resources and people,” she writes.

Modern industrial society’s failure to recognize this has led us to an untenable situation. As journalist George Monbiot points out, “If our economy grows at three percent between now and 2040, we will consume in that period economic resources equivalent to all those consumed since humans first stood on two legs.”

Critical Political Opportunity for Urban Centers

From a grassroots perspective, building community resilience and higher degrees of material self-sufficiency will be critical towards ensuring that communities of color weather coming ecological transitions. The basic needs of urban communities of color—such as access to potable water, healthy food, and mass transit—will otherwise be at stake in an era of heightened ecological stress.

“The key to truly addressing ecological crisis [is not] buying more hybrid cars but collective action towards systemic change,” says Claire Tran, the national organizer at Right To The City Alliance. “That’s what’s needed if we want to achieve community resilience in this period of ecological transition.”

A useful bellwether for the future of urban centers in the United States may be the current situation in Detroit, Mich. Responding to decades of deindustrialization, capital flight, and governmental neglect, an intergenerational grassroots movement known as Detroit Summer has taken self-reliance to heart and built a citywide network of over 700 community gardens. As legendary civil rights activist Grace Lee Boggs recently wrote, “Detroit’s local foods movement has been a catalyst in the [r]evolution that is rebirthing Detroit as a city of Hope... The city’s early devastation by deindustrialization provided us
with the space to start anew... it challenged us to make a paradigm shift in our thinking about social justice."

This paradigm shift has intertwined the concepts of community control and sustainable agriculture and is crafting an innovative path for other urban communities of color to emulate across the country. Adrienne Maree Brown, director of the Ruckus Society points out that, “It’s not young, white activists doing the gardening in Detroit [but] 30-, 40-, 50-year old black men coming out of prison, who are gardening and farming. And it’s no longer about getting a job and being a cog in someone else’s system. It’s about liberated work where you are actually playing a useful role in your community… Out of necessity, people have started sharing food and thinking of food as a central way to be in community with each other.” (See interview below.)

A New Kind of Positive Regionalism

The creation of local community resilience will require us to have a reflective and responsive relationship to our ecosystem. We must first learn to read a place if we are to establish a sustainable relationship to it. In turn, the creation of such resiliency will hinge upon the establishment of democratic control over decisions that affect our daily life and the places we live in. The primary function of renewed local and regional place-based economies will be the shared, equitable management of common resources—namely air, water, land, food, energy and labor—for the benefit of all. But in order to re-position rights to shared resources, we must first de-commodify the resources or, as in the case of the right to pollute the atmosphere, refuse to commodify at all.

So, the chief arenas of struggle for the implementation of climate justice will increasingly be local and...
regional zoning boards and land-use policies, regional transportation policies, and regional water boards, to name a few. Understanding and managing ‘regional’ foodsheds, watersheds, smart growth plans, and transportation plans are key to implementing a vision for urban racial justice that is rooted in ecological place.

In San Francisco, for example, a community organization called POWER (People Organizing to Win Employment Rights) has initiated a partnership with the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD)—the largest landholder in the city—to create community gardens, farmers markets, and flea markets on idle school district land. The use of these properties for free or at low cost supports community resiliency and self-reliance through the low-cost production of food and the creation of barter networks within the community. Such a collaboration also advances the concept of a public commons: idle land previously considered ‘private property’ and beyond the community’s control, is now treated as public property to be used for the common good.

Alicia Garza, the co-director of POWER, connects this campaign to a climate justice lens in the following way: “Community control has always been at the center of our political work as community organizers, but it’s become that much more important in this new period of global ecological transition... In this
Clim ate Change: Catalyst or Catastrophe?

context, resilience—adapting to climate change from a grassroots perspective—must mean taking control of what this transition is going to look like in our communities. We are standing at the threshold of a new political moment.”

Community-Based Solutions

Building community food security and designing equitable, healthy regional “foodsheds” may mean different things to different regions as each has distinct watersheds, agricultural surroundings, climate patterns, as well as distinct power dynamics at play. But the concept of “community resiliency” opens up incredible opportunities for organizers to generate innovative strategies for linking our intrinsic rights to natural resources (that have been historically denied), to creative, participatory projects and campaigns that build community power. Done right, the process can dramatically lower carbon footprints at the local and regional level, rebuild the health of local and regional ecosystems, and institute new systems of governance rooted in equity, justice, and self-determination.

Furthermore, as we build our capacity for self-governance by asserting ourselves in existing political arenas where policy is set, we must also build the transcendent institutions that we will need to better manage our commons. Democratic worker cooperatives, urban food security projects, regional exchanges, local micro-lending systems, publicly run water management entities, decentralized energy systems—all of these will be necessary in a socially just post-carbon society.

As the examples from Detroit and San Francisco illustrate, elegant solutions are waiting for our implementation. “I feel extremely empowered and extremely hopeful with the emergence of these new movements shaping a new ecological paradigm and a new earth democracy,” says Vandana Shiva.

Endnotes

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