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## Black lives and climate justice: courage and power in defending communities and Mother Earth

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### ABSTRACT

This article shares examples of the leadership of Black communities and social movements in the struggle for climate justice, in four different parts of the world: resisting extraction and promoting community health in Nigeria; addressing extreme climate impacts and building people's sovereignty in Haiti; confronting repression, defending territory and Mother Earth in Honduras; and cultivating community control and building a land-based movement in the US. Together, these examples have rich lessons to share around the importance of linking climate justice with racial justice; of combining strategies of resistance with those of creating alternative models; of maintaining focus on Black communities' connections with land, territory and Mother Earth; of recognising and creating space for women's leadership; and of intersectionality across geography and sector.

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On the streets of Paris, during the UN climate negotiations of December 2015, there were a range of different chants and songs that movements called out, as part of demonstrations for climate justice. Many were reminiscent of those chanted out at past climate marches. One however, led by organisers Sarra Tekola of Got Green and Denise Abdul-Rahman of Indiana NAACP, was new to this space:

It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.

These powerful words, first spoken by Assata Shakur, have been taken up by Black and multiracial communities around the US as part of a range of struggles for social justice. Sarra and Denise, part of the 'It Takes Roots to Change the System' delegation to Paris, organised by Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, Climate Justice Alliance and the Indigenous Environmental Network, brought this powerful call-and-response chant forward, as a way to lift up the connections between racial justice and climate justice struggles, particularly led by Black communities. Indeed, these connections go back to the origins of the environmental justice movement in the US. Founded by communities of color who came together to put an end to the disproportionate impact and legacy they face from environmental contamination in multiple forms, these leaders created a set of Environmental Justice

principles which were a key foundation in the creation of climate justice movements, and which are an important resource for ongoing struggles today.

There are a number of scholars and activists who have written about the importance of the connections between racial justice and climate justice in recent years. In his book published in 2012, *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa*, Nnimmo Bassey, former Chair of Friends of the Earth International and former Executive Director of Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, made perhaps one of the most important contributions to the literature about the impacts of continued resource grabs on African communities already struggling to deal with the effects of climate change, as well as about these communities' resistance. In 2014, Nene Igietseme, a fellow with the US-based Centre for Story-based Strategy, reflected on connections between police violence against Black communities in the US, capitalism and climate disruption, in her article 'Climate Justice, Black Organizing, and Mike Brown'. Later that same year, the Nation published an article by Naomi Klein on 'Why #BlackLivesMatter Should Transform the Climate Debate'. In it, Naomi recalled the alarm that African delegates and organisers sounded back at the 2009 Copenhagen climate negotiations, reflected back on the devastating impact that Hurricane Katrina had on Black communities in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf South, and Hurricane Sandy in the Northeast. She asserted: 'Taken together, the picture is clear ... Racism is what has made it possible to systematically look away from the climate threat for more than two decades'. Earlier this year, Marcia Ishii-Eitemann, Grassroots Science Programme Director of Pesticide Action Network, wrote an article in which she asserts that:

Climate injustice is the manifestation of racism that has, for centuries, been directed at Indigenous communities and peoples of colour; it is the misogyny directed at women that also shows up as brutal disregard for life on Earth; and it is the institutions and structures that perpetuate the notion that it's okay to dominate, destroy, extract and commodify nature in the pursuit of profit regardless of the expense.<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to contribute to this important body of writing about the connections between climate justice and organising for racial justice by sharing examples and reflecting on lessons of Black communities' leadership for climate justice in Nigeria, Haiti, Honduras and the US. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase, global leaders fail to make binding commitments to the emissions reductions that are necessary and the new political leadership of the country with the greatest historical responsibility for climate change promotes both institutionalised white supremacy and climate denial, the lessons we can learn from and with these Black organising efforts are more necessary now than ever.

## Resisting extraction in Nigeria

From the Stern Report to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fifth Assessment report, numerous sources have documented the devastating impact that climate change is already having on the people of the African continent, with impacts on food production and access to clean water being some of the most prominent. The disproportionate impact of global average temperature increase on Africa is the reason why African countries came together to declare that the pledges made at the 2009 Copenhagen climate negotiations would not be enough 'to buy us coffins'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, studies indicate that in Africa, people are 500 times more likely to die from climate-change-related mortality than anywhere else in the world.<sup>3</sup>

In Nigeria, communities are experiencing another powerful force related to climate disruption: extractive industry. In particular, transnational corporations have been extracting oil from Nigerian land for decades, contributing both to greenhouse gas emissions and to degradation of land and water bodies, as a result of serial oil spills and unmitigated gas flaring. Community struggles to resist extraction in the Niger Delta have been well documented, including the successful struggle of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) against Shell Oil. Now, groups such as Environmental Rights Action and the Health of Mother Earth Foundation continue to work with communities resisting extraction and creating alternative livelihoods. For example, in Egiland, communities have faced widespread ecological devastation, and are now conducting policy advocacy work to push for environmental auditing of the region, conducting community health trainings to uncover harmful pollutants and organising Community Health Dialogues to support ecological defence linked to sustainable livelihoods (such as fishing). Several other major challenges remain, including the promotion of false solutions such as the carbon offset programme called REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), which allows polluters in the Global North to keep releasing greenhouse gas emissions and causing major health and other environmental injustices in communities of color, while also taking territory rights away from Indigenous Peoples in the Global South. Large-scale agribusiness interests have also promoted corporate-controlled agriculture across Africa (and beyond) supposedly as a way to respond to droughts or flooding, even though studies have found that the industrial agriculture system is actually the cause of 44–57% of global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>4</sup> That said, communities like those organising through HOMEF, together with broader networks such as OilWatch, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa and the No REDD in Africa Network, are exactly the kinds of grassroots efforts needed to stay clear on real solutions that can address the root causes of climate change.

### **Addressing extreme climate impacts and building people's sovereignty in Haiti**

Similar to most people in Africa, the people of Haiti have contributed very little to the causes of climate disruption, and yet have borne the brunt of a number of extreme weather events in recent years. In 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit, causing over 100 deaths, making over 200,000 Haitians homeless and contributing to food insecurity that is estimated at affecting 1 million people. From 2014–2016, Haitians suffered from a devastating multi-year drought. By 2015, this drought had led to a loss of 80% of crops at the national level, putting over 4 million people into food insecurity, according to the National Council for Food Security (CNSA). In October 2016, Hurricane Matthew landed on Haiti, the first category 4 storm to hit Haiti in 50 years. Hurricane Matthew caused widespread destruction across most of the country's rural regions, including nine of the 10 geographic departments. Over 500 people died; some estimates place the number at over 1000. Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, founder and long-time leader of the Mouvmman Peyizan Papay/Peasant Movement of Papaye (MPP), a movement of over 60,000 Haitian peasants in the Central Plateau of Haiti, described Hurricane Matthew as 'the worst disaster in the history of Haiti, for peasants'. MPP reported that the hurricane destroyed all fruit and forest trees and agricultural production in the affected areas, killed 90% of the animals and destroyed 90% of the homes and public buildings, damaged drinking

water systems (where they existed) and caused the re-emergence of cholera as a major public health concern.

Mainstream efforts by transnational corporations and governments, including aid agencies like USAID, have responded to disasters like these with their own techno-fixes – such as responding to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti by sending shipments of Monsanto seeds. These seeds are part of an approach to agriculture based in the philosophy of the Green Revolution – promoting corporate-controlled seeds, often in monocultures, along with a package of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, on the idea that these so-called ‘improved’ seeds will lead to higher yields. NGOs as well as movements of small-scale farmers, such as La Via Campesina, have warned that these Green Revolution technologies are in fact the cornerstone of so-called ‘Climate-Smart Agriculture’, which is being promoted by the UN in concert with several large corporations, including Monsanto, Syngenta, Yara and Walmart. However, this approach depletes soil fertility and takes control out of the hands of peasants and small-scale farmers, who over centuries have developed healthy approaches to agriculture, including a wealth of locally-adapted seeds. Furthermore, as described above, this approach significantly contributes to the causes of climate change.

In the face of these climate impacts and of the false solutions that are imposed in their wake, Haitian social movements have been developing real solutions that address the impacts and root causes of climate disruption. MPP has for over 40 years been bringing communities together around a vision and practice of Haitian self-determination, based on connection with the land and protection of the environment. Through their agro-forestry work, MPP has planted over 50 million trees, many of which are fruit trees and contribute to communities’ food sovereignty, while addressing the problem of deforestation and preventing erosion. This work is part of MPP’s overall work of agroecology, including soil conservation, water access, saving and disseminating creole seeds, and distributing and caring for livestock. In addition, MPP has been working to develop sources of renewable energy for its members through a New Energy project which aims to produce solar panels, as well as alternatives to charcoal for household cooking. MPP does its work through a combination of training, technical support, policy advocacy and movement building with other peasant and social justice groups across the country. It carries this work forward to the international level through its membership in La Via Campesina, including its involvement in the LVC Climate Justice Collective.

One of the groups that collaborates with MPP and with other Haitian peasant movements is Platfòm Ayisyen pou Pledwaye ak Devlopman Altènatif/Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development (PAPDA). Founded in 1995, PAPDA is a coalition of nine Haitian organisations working together to promote the emergence of a new Haiti, through its diverse thematic areas, including external debt, food sovereignty, participatory democracy, climate justice and solidarity economy.

In response to the recent climate disasters, groups like PAPDA and MPP sprang into action across the country. For example, during the long-term drought, MPP created a multi-faceted response, including production of trees, distribution of drought-adapted creole seeds, radio spots to educate the community about the climate crisis and methods of adaptation, and conferences about the climate crisis. After Hurricane Matthew, MPP continued this work and added in efforts to treat and prevent the further spread of cholera. PAPDA implemented a three-pronged approach, including emergency response (food, shelter, water, psychosocial support), reconstruction and rehabilitation (including agriculture, ecosystem restoration,

women's cooperatives, solidarity economy projects) and capacity building (including water sanitation). These Haitian-led disaster response efforts reached many communities that mainstream aid organisations had not reached in the days after the storm.

Furthermore, movement organisations like MPP and PAPDA conduct disaster response in a way that is connected to their ongoing work, identifying and addressing root causes of the problems. Ricot Jean-Pierre of PAPDA explains:

The roots (causes) of this catastrophic situation may be found as consequences of climate change, as a consequence of the capitalist economic model and the public policies applied in Haiti, imposed by the international institutions (WB, IMF) and governments like the US – an economic model which has played a key role in the destruction of the Haitian ecosystem and biodiversity.<sup>5</sup>

These movements do not stop there. They apply this analysis to tie short-term community-based disaster relief in with broader grassroots organising to build power toward their visions of structural change – including self-determination, solidarity economies and climate justice from the local to global levels.

### **Confronting repression, defending territory and Mother Earth in Honduras**

On the Atlantic coast of Honduras, Garifuna peoples – Afro-descendant Indigenous Peoples whose ancestors were escaped Africans who were brought to St. Vincent on slave ships, as well as of indigenous Arawak peoples – have been facing multiple threats. As a result of climate disruption, their territories have borne the brunt of several severe storms, such as Hurricane Mitch in the late 1990s, as well as increasing erosion from these storms and the threat of sea level rise. Indeed, the organisation Germanwatch lists Honduras (along with Haiti and Myanmar) as one of the countries most impacted by severe storms as a result of climate change.<sup>6</sup> There are already Garifuna families who have become climate refugees as a result of losing territory from these impacts.

In addition, Garifuna peoples' territories in Honduras are under serious threat from a number of other interests, including organised crime, transnational companies who have sought and been granted concessions by the Honduran government to drill for offshore oil near Garifuna and other indigenous territories, and elite agrofuels interests who engage in land grabbing. To make matters worse, under the current coup government there is a great deal of violent repression and criminalisation of the movements standing up to defend their land and territory against these threats.

In this extremely difficult context, Honduras is also the site of some of the strongest and most courageous movements in the world, who do not give up in their nonviolent struggle to defend their lands, territories, communities and Mother Earth. The Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña/Black Fraternal Organisation of Honduras (OFRANEH) is one of the organisations building these movements. OFRANEH is made up of Garifuna community members all along the Atlantic coast of Honduras who come together to protect their economic, cultural and social rights. They use a variety of strategies to do so, including direct action (i.e. land reclamation), legal strategies (i.e. bringing cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights), communications/cultural resistance (i.e. community radio programmes, music and dance) and international solidarity.

The struggle to defend Vallecito has become an important hallmark of the Garifuna struggle for ancestral territory and climate justice. In 1996, Garifuna land cooperatives won their

fight for legal title to territory in Vallecito. Since then, organised crime took over 80% of the territory, and Miguel Facusse, known by communities in Honduras as the *Palmero de la Muerte*, illegally planted 40 hectares of African palm in Vallecito alone. After a Supreme Court ruling in 1999 that came about as a result of community organising efforts, the Garifuna community got its 40 hectares of land back. However, due to frequent invasions from agro-fuels, extractive companies and a proposed 'charter city' on this land (promoted by the Honduran government), Garifuna communities have organised through OFRANEH to reclaim their territory through direct action – a reclamation process and permanent reoccupation on the lands of Vallecito. In Vallecito, community members are rebuilding their lives and cultures, and connecting deeply with the land. Women and youth take leadership, incorporating cultural and spiritual activities, food production and reforestation to rehabilitate the ecosystems. Jovanna Garcia Soto, Latin America Programme Coordinator at Grassroots International, reflects:

Vallecito represents collective resistance to the systematic land grabs happening throughout the Atlantic coast where the Garifuna ancestral territories are located. It has become a refuge, not just for those losing their land from land grabs, but also for those losing their land from the impacts of climate disruption.

Indeed, the impacts of OFRANEH's work go far beyond its own geographic areas of focus along the Atlantic coast of Honduras. Miriam Miranda, OFRANEH's coordinator, travelled to New York to connect with frontline climate justice groups from across the country and around the world during the September 2014 People's Climate March, and delivered the following message as a speaker at the #FloodWallStreet action:

The time has arrived to question the model of 'development' that has been imposed on us in these last decades. We cannot accept nor perpetuate this supposed development which doesn't take into account or respect nature and the earth's natural resources. What responsibility are we assuming with our future generations? We should and must have the obligation to leave water, air, food, and secure the safety for our sons and daughters, and other living beings.

The planet is collapsing and the time has come to act. We act NOW against the culture of death that we are being condemned to by the grand corporations of death and transnational capital. We demand and construct a plan of life.<sup>7</sup>

## Cultivating community control and building a movement in the US

While the impacts of climate change have been felt around the world for quite some time, my own awakening to its impact on communities of color came in the days, weeks and months following Hurricane Katrina. A combination of the brute force of the storm, combined with impacts of institutionalised racism and capitalism, led to a devastating situation, particularly for the low-income communities of color in the Gulf Coast, with Black communities being hardest hit. Nearly 2000 people died, untold numbers were criminalised and hundreds of thousands were displaced from their homes. The demographics and landscapes of cities like New Orleans were forever changed, as thousands of Black former residents never got their homes back, public programmes like education were gutted and privatised, and corporate developers saw an opportunity to swoop in to profit in the wake of the storm.

Since that time, there have been many more examples of the impacts of climate disruption in the US – including other severe storms (such as Hurricane Sandy in 2012), intense droughts throughout not only the Southwest but even in the Northeast, widespread wildfires in the

West, heavy floods in the Midwest and unusually heavy snow storms across much of the east coast. In many of these cases, it is again low-income communities as well as communities of color experiencing some of the worst impacts.

At the same time, many of these same frontline communities have been organising in powerful resistance to the root causes of climate change, and building creative solutions that strengthen community while restoring ecologies. A few such examples with strong Black leadership are Alternatives for Community and Environment, Cooperation Jackson, the Black Land and Liberation Initiative and the Movement for Black Lives.

Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) is an environmental justice organisation based in Roxbury, a Boston neighbourhood with strong Black history and culture. Since 1993, ACE has taken on and won a number of important struggles, including transit justice (i.e. a youth pass on public transit) and environmental health. In recent years, ACE has linked its struggles to a climate justice vision, starting by listening to the issues that are most important to people in the neighbourhood. Kalila Barnett, ACE's former Executive Director, explains:

Given the economic and political environment we are in, in order for a conversation around climate to be relevant and interesting to people, it has to have strong components connected to struggles to stay in the neighborhood, because of the high cost of housing. Two, we connect it to people's health. It has to connect to the displacement fight ... Part of our work is to expand people's notions of what is sustainability, what is climate, and how that relates to conversations and opportunities to really improve people's lives ... community control and stabilization is part of how we adapt to a changing climate.<sup>8</sup>

As part of the Right to the City Alliance at a national and local level, ACE is working towards passage of a local policy that would help keep some renters in their homes. It is also working on explicit community development efforts: 'making sure people are involved in decision-making, and calling into question how development can improve the health of the community and strengthen our ability to be more resilient in the face of changing climate'. In community planning workshops that the Boston Redevelopment Agency has organised, ACE noticed that there was no conversation raised about climate: 'even though we know that parts of Roxbury will be susceptible to flooding, and heat will be an issue as a number of people are impacted by asthma and other respiratory illnesses'. ACE sees its role as raising these issues and pushing to make sure they are addressed, so that the current population in Roxbury can stay in their homes and enjoy an improved quality of life.

ACE is also moving forward its work of community control over land through gardens. After visiting community-run urban gardens in Detroit during the 2010 US Social Forum, ACE's youth decided to initiate a local campaign called 'Grow or Die', taking over vacant land in the neighbourhood and working with local residents to create urban gardens. Thanks to ACE's work, two of these gardens will soon become part of community land trusts so that they can continue for the long-term, with resident stewardship committees making decisions about how to run the gardens.

In addition to the Right to the City Alliance, ACE is also part of the Climate Justice Alliance, a national alliance of grassroots community organising groups across the country, as well as movement support organisations. Kalila reflected:

We are constantly in a place of trying to learn from and about work that's happening in different parts of the country ... we're trying to do work that is meaningful and based on our values, but I don't think the work is new. Our work has evolved and continues to evolve – it has been really influenced by mobilizations and gatherings sponsored by the Climate Justice Alliance, and is

also influenced by the struggle locally around land and housing. We are trying to have our work be connected and have a coherent strategy that puts a lot of our organizing and policy work around peoples' right to remain and community control as a part of that.<sup>9</sup>

Cooperation Jackson, based in Jackson, Mississippi, is another member of the Climate Justice Alliance, and anchors one of the CJA Our Power Campaign pilot areas, moving forward an agenda for a Just Transition away from the extractive economy, towards regenerative, local, living, loving, linked economies. Brandon explains:

Just Transition is about being oppositional and transformative – in our communities, families, neighborhoods ... We're looking at the current political moment, and trying to figure out a way we can move toward non-extraction, but toward sustainability and doing things that are in alignment with the planet. We're building out a network of interdependent and interconnected cooperatives that work together in an ecosystem where whatever we produce we are able to regenerate as well.<sup>10</sup>

So far, Cooperation Jackson's emerging network of cooperatives include: Freedom Farms (an urban farming coop), Nubia's Place catering coop (including development of a cafe), the emerging Green Team (landscaping and composting) and a newly forming Community Production cooperative. The strategy is an interconnected cycle, where Freedom Farms produces food for Nubia's Place, where the food waste from Nubia's Place is converted into compost through the Green Team, and where the compost is then used to nourish the soil at Freedom Farms. At the same time, these coops create meaningful work through sustainable livelihoods that are based in democratic practices. As more cooperatives are created, this web will expand.

As part of its Sustainable Communities Initiative, Cooperation Jackson plans to build an ecovillage sitting on a community land trust. The start of the eco-village is a project on a full block with state-owned property that the organisation acquired. The vision is to have a live, work, recreation and learning community, including urban farming, housing and democratic control of the means of production through a Fab Lab.

In addition to doing such inspiring and powerful local work, Cooperation Jackson clearly also prioritises efforts to build links and solidarity with others around the country and around the world. Brandon reflected:

Something I learned at the COP21 (in Paris) was that if we were not there, there would have been much invisibility of Black people colonized in the US sharing their opposition to the UN climate talks. It's super important for Black people all over the world to connect, realizing that we can't continue to operate in the same fashion, that we have to be creative in how we implement our programmes, doing it in a way that's sustainable, connecting global capitalism to how our communities are impacted on the frontlines... If we don't have a clear understanding of root causes, it's like putting band-aids on, we'll rebuild but won't be able to stop the system that is destroying the environment. We need to stop capitalism in an anti-imperialist way.<sup>11</sup>

As the two examples above demonstrate, frontline Black communities in the US are finding ways to connect with one another to learn from one another and work toward broader goals of climate justice. One additional resource that is connecting Black communities is the Black Land and Liberation Initiative (BLLI). A collaboration between the Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project and the Blackout Collective, this initiative brings together organisers, activists, artists, farmers and healers across the country as part of a national cohort, as well as within several regions, to learn from one another and build movement around Black communities' struggles for land. Quinton Sankofa, staff collective member at Movement Generation, explains:

My generation is the first generation to grow up outside of the South, and even those in the South, a lot have migrated to big Southern cities ... This is a global phenomenon, with the Green Revolution in the 1950s. A lot of Black folks have lost relationship to land, especially those of us who are outside the South. My grandma kept her knowledge and gardened, but it was a supplemental cultural thing. One of the most important things we can do is to take activists and organizers in cities who have done really important things – i.e. organizing against police brutality – but who don't have any connection to ecology. We are investing in long-term strategy development and then also centering our culture back onto ecology. We are looking at healing our relationship with the earth and the planet as Black people, as a way to heal ourselves as well.

No matter if we take back the land, buy land or are being gifted land, we have to take cues from the living world. Just like in nature, diversity is our best defense; zero waste – there are no throwaway things or people. We want our actions to tie threads together around all different struggles – i.e. between gentrification and climate, private schools, prison and food.<sup>12</sup>

BLLI does this through an 18-month programme, including several week-long trainings (including skills-building around direct action, earth-based skills and more) and strategy sessions, combined with deep engagement and coordinated actions at the local level.

This philosophy of the interconnectedness of issues facing Black communities is in many ways a reflection of the consciousness that has come forward through the Movement for Black Lives. One of the most powerful and galvanising efforts around the struggle for racial justice in the US, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) is an expansion and continuation of efforts that started as #BlackLivesMatter, originating in the wake of the killing of several young Black people by police. In the summer of 2016, the M4BL released an extensive platform, developed by over 50 organisations who came together from across the country, outlining a set of demands that answer the question of what the movement is calling for. The document starts out:

Black humanity and dignity requires Black political will and power. Despite constant exploitation and perpetual oppression, Black people have bravely and brilliantly been the driving force pushing the US towards the ideals it articulates but has never achieved. In recent years we have taken to the streets, launched massive campaigns, and impacted elections, but our elected leaders have failed to address the legitimate demands of our Movement. We can no longer wait.

We have created this platform to articulate and support the ambitions and work of Black people. We also seek to intervene in the current political climate and assert a clear vision, particularly for those who claim to be our allies, of the world we want them to help us create. We reject false solutions and believe we can achieve a complete transformation of the current systems, which place profit over people and make it impossible for many of us to breathe.<sup>13</sup>

This visionary platform goes into detail around six subheadings, two of which relate directly to the struggle for climate justice: Reparations and Invest-Divest. The Reparations section of the platform connects environmental injustices done against Black communities to a number of other important issues:

We demand ... Reparations for the wealth extracted from our communities through environmental racism, slavery, food apartheid, housing discrimination and racialized capitalism in the form of corporate and government reparations focused on healing ongoing physical and mental trauma, and ensuring our access and control of food sources, housing and land.

We demand investments in the education, health and safety of Black people, instead of investments in the criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people. We want investments in Black communities, determined by Black communities, and divestment from exploitative forces including prisons, fossil fuels, police, surveillance and exploitative corporations.<sup>14</sup>

The Invest-Divest section of the platform continues this approach, with greater focus to climate justice:

Black people are amongst the most affected by climate change. If we're not serious about reducing emissions, the planet will keep getting hotter and Black people will continue to bear the biggest brunt of climate change. Divest from industrial use of fossil fuels and reinvest in community-based sustainable energy solutions to make sure communities most impacted (Black communities) are helping to lead that shift.<sup>15</sup>

The platform names the US military as the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and the industrial agriculture system as one of the largest sources of emissions as well. It puts forward a number of solutions from the federal to local levels, including divesting from industries that profit from fossil fuels, reinvesting in the creation of cooperative loan funds and shifting to Black community control of renewable energy and food systems. It includes concepts such as a Just Transition, zero waste, promotion of solidarity economies and building connections between small-scale farmers, including with La Via Campesina.

As part of the Invest-Divest context and demands, the M4BL platform recognises and opposes the role of the US government and military in exploiting and oppressing Black people and other oppressed nationalities around the world, specifically naming the impacts on Africa, Garifuna communities in Honduras, the people of Haiti and Palestinians. It calls for a 50% cut in US military expenditures, reparations to countries and communities 'devastated by US war-making' and a reinvestment in domestic infrastructure and community well-being:

While this platform is focused on domestic policies, we know that patriarchy, exploitative capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy know no borders. We stand in solidarity with our international family against the ravages of global capitalism and anti-Black racism, human-made climate change, war, and exploitation. We also stand with descendants of African people all over the world in an ongoing call and struggle for reparations for the historic and continuing harms of colonialism and slavery. We also recognize and honor the rights and struggle of our Indigenous family for land and self-determination.<sup>16</sup>

Brandon King of Cooperation Jackson was one of the authors of the M4BL platform. He reflected on next steps for those who would like to see the platform put into practice:

It's very good to state intentions, what our hope for the future is, and it's imperative that we build those systems amongst ourselves, to make those policies a reality. The platform can be inspiring ... but it's imperative that we build on the ground, on the grassroots level, how we can organize around different aspects of that locally. We have to build power in order to make the platform a reality.<sup>17</sup>

## Reflections and opportunities on the road ahead

This article shared highlights from just a few examples of the strength and power of Black communities organising for climate justice in Nigeria, Haiti, Honduras and the US. Of course, there is much more detail than what I was able to fit in this article, and there are countless more powerful examples around the world. That said, there are several important lessons that we can draw from these movements and organisations described above:

1. **Each of these movements make a clear connection between climate justice and other aspects of the struggle for racial justice** – whether for community health and development, economic justice and solidarity economies, against militarisation

and police brutality, housing and gentrification. The recognition of the interconnectedness of these struggles as part of a climate justice struggle make their efforts stronger and more grounded in the realities that Black communities are facing, and it's important to support this type of intersectional approach.

2. **Each of these struggles combines resistance against what is killing Black communities and causing climate change along with creative efforts to build the kind of societies we want to see.** Without resistance, our communities stand to lose too much – especially in political contexts such as Honduras, where there is a dangerous coup government in power, and in the US, where the arrogance and destructiveness of Trump's extreme right-wing agenda is taking so many of us by surprise. At the same time, if we do not also use our energy in intentional ways to create models and examples of what we want to see, we will remain stuck in the existing dominant systems and it will be that much harder to make our visions a reality. The key in this moment is for movements to do both – resist and create – and each of the examples described above do just that.
3. **Each of the efforts above includes deliberate work to continue or re-establish Black communities' connections with land, territory and Mother Earth.** Black people have historically had deep connections with land, territory and Mother Earth, though global economic forces and white supremacy act as powerful disrupters of that relationship, often displacing Black communities from the lands they have had long-standing relationships with. Each of the movements and groups described in this article work to re-establish and/or defend the connections between Black people and the land in particular places, as well as with the earth as a whole, as a central strategy for social and ecological justice.
4. **Each of the examples above is possible because of women's leadership.** In Nigeria, women are the ones taking leadership in community environmental health assessments, and working to create sustainable livelihoods in local fisheries. In Haiti, the Peasant Movement of Papaye is now led by a staff collective including a woman Executive Director and a woman Programme Director, and the organisation as a whole has made a commitment to gender parity and equity throughout all aspects of its work. In Honduras, Miriam Miranda provides key leadership for OFRANEH, and each Garifuna community involved also has strong women's leadership. In the US, the Movement for Black Lives was originally founded by three women, and continues to have strong involvement of women throughout. It is clear that women's role and leadership are key in the struggles for humanity and Mother Earth, not only in Black communities but in all cultures.
5. **The geographic terrain on which struggles take place can vary from place to place.** In all cases, it is critical to be grounded in grassroots communities. In some cases, movements are able to also be effective in pushing demands at the state or national level. In others, the most effective terrain to push for climate justice demands is at the local level. Brandon King of Cooperation Jackson shared:

I feel like the place where we have the most space to move things forward on policy is on municipal and local level. Anything on the state level is almost as bad as the federal level. I think the concept of rebel cities around the country and around the world, where folks are trying to move a progressive agenda, interconnected and sharing things that have been challenging and things that have been successful, can help a lot in terms of opening space.

6. **Linking movements and struggles together across sectors and geographies is not only beneficial, but also necessary.** Communities in Nigeria are connected with other communities resisting extraction across Africa and around the world through OilWatch. Peasants in Haiti are connected with other peasant movements within the country through the Kat Je (Four Eyes) group, and with others around the world through La Via Campesina. OFRANEH is deeply connected with other Indigenous movements in Honduras, such as the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH), and more broadly across the Americas as well. Groups like Cooperation Jackson in the US are connected nationally through alliances mentioned above, as well as through Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, and to international movements such as the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil.

In 2010, Grassroots International was honoured to connect our Haitian partner Mouvman Peyizan Papay (MPP) in Haiti with a number of groups in New Orleans during the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, through the Climate Justice Alliance and Gulf South Rising. Mina Remy, Programme Coordinator at Grassroots International, accompanied Juslene Tyresias of MPP to New Orleans. She reflected on ways the experience helped her and others draw powerful lessons about the connections between struggles in Haiti and those in the US:

When I think of what goes on in Black communities across the US (dumping of hazardous waste, disproportionate numbers of pollution-producing industries and communities bereft of trees) and the state of the environment in Haiti, I think of environmental injustice. I think of poverty and neglect and the price poor folk must pay for being poor and marginalized. At its core, the issue of poverty and neglect is the same whether you are in Haiti or in Black communities across the US. As one person mentioned during the tenth commemoration of Katrina, the wealthy folks in New Orleans got out on time, it was only the poor folk who were left behind. In Haiti, the wealthy are global citizens who can always get out of Haiti, it's only the poor who must deal with the environmental consequences of being poor, neglected and marginalized.

What was inspiring in New Orleans, and something both Juslene and I remarked on, was the importance of solidarity within and between communities. Solidarity is what will get communities through difficult times whether it's a hurricane or an earthquake. Building solidarity across the Black Atlantic is important; not every lesson must be learned anew and wins must be shared and celebrated because it gives hope to others.

Of course, there remain many daunting questions and challenges ahead. Is it possible to achieve movement wins in areas where climate injustice runs deep but resistance and organising have been crushed (such as Ethiopia)? How can movements obtain the resources they need to do their vital work, when such a disproportionately high level of resources is going to create the very problems movements are formed to address? How can movements achieve the scale and power that will be necessary to achieve justice in Black communities and Mother Earth as a whole, especially as right-wing forces are gaining more power politically, with explicit white supremacist and misogynistic ideologies, in so many parts of the world? These and many other critical questions remain, and the stakes have never been higher.

That said, there is so much we can do to advance the struggles for climate justice and racial justice, by following the examples of Black community movements such as those in Nigeria, Haiti, Honduras and the US. Indeed, our future depends on doing just that.

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Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Sara has spent the majority of her life in the US and brings years of experience connecting local community organising (such as with Direct Action for Rights & Equality in Providence, Rhode Island) with broader movement building efforts. Sara served as Visiting Faculty in the Ethnic Studies Department of Brown University, and received her Master of Arts in Environmental Studies from Brown University in 2015.

## Notes

1. Ishii-Eitemann, "A Matter of Climate," 10.
2. Welz, "Emotional Scenes at Copenhagen," 9.
3. McMichael et al., "Global Environmental Change," 191.
4. GRAIN, "Food and Climate Change," 10.
5. Jean-Pierre, personal communication, 17 October 2017.
6. Williams, "Honduras, Myanmar, Haiti," 1.
7. Schachet, "Speaking Out," 6–30.
8. Barnett, phone interview, 30 January 2017.
9. Ibid.
10. King, phone interview, 31 January 2017.

11. Ibid.
12. Sankofa, personal interview, 30 January 2017.
13. Movement for Black Lives, "A Vision for Black Lives," 3–4.
14. Ibid., 9–10.
15. Cooper et al., "Divest from Fossil Fuels," 1.
16. Movement for Black Lives, "A Vision for Black Lives," 4.
17. King, phone interview, 31 January 2017.

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