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Climate Change and Environmental Justice: A Conversation with Dr. Robert Bullard

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Abstract

Robert D. Bullard is the Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. He is often described as the father of environmental justice. Professor Bullard received his Ph.D. from Iowa State University. He is the author of seventeen books that address sustainable development, environmental racism, urban land use, industrial facility siting, community reinvestment, housing, transportation, climate justice, emergency response, smart growth, and regional equity. In this interview, Dr. Bullard talks about some of the key climate change-related challenges for vulnerable communities and actions needed to address them.

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Interview with Dr. Robert Bullard

By: Maaz Gardezi, Carrie Chenault, and Hannah Dankbar

Robert D. Bullard is the Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. He is often described as the father of environmental justice. Professor Bullard received his Ph.D. from Iowa State University. He is the author of seventeen books that address sustainable development, environmental racism, urban land use, industrial facility siting, community reinvestment, housing, transportation, climate justice, emergency response, smart growth, and regional equity.

Q. Can you think of the salient experience that guided you to environmental justice work?

A. It was an accidental move. In 1978, my wife at the time was suing the city of Houston for planning a waste landfill near a black community. I was just out of graduate school and was asked to collect data for the case, which was suggesting environmental discrimination against the middle-class Black community in Houston. In the course of conducting this study, I was shocked to see how a large quantity of the city's waste would end up polluting the black communities. It is important to remember that this is long before the environmental justice movement. This was my first step into the environmental justice work.

Q. What are some people that inspire you?

A. The work of W E B Dubois has inspired me a lot. He was not only a famous sociologist but also someone who could be called a 'change agent'. He was not only a good social theorist but also very interested in the application of his work. I saw his work to be directly relevant to influencing the life of ordinary people. His work made me believe that research, policy, and practice must go hand-in-hand.

Q. How is climate change a social and environmental justice issue?

A. Climate change is the number one problem of the 21st century. We sometimes forget that climate change is much more than simply parts per million (of greenhouse gas emissions). It is an equity issue. It effects some people directly. The most peculiar aspect of climate change is

that the populations that contribute least to the problem of climate change are most likely to feel its impacts. Such disproportionality makes it a serious social justice issue.

Climate change is also a very complex issue to solve. It is a global issue, a national issue, and a local issue—all at the same time. At the local level, the population at the front line of the impacts of climate change are also at risk to other things. For example, usually the most susceptible to climate change-related impacts are those with greater food and water insecurity. Hence, climate change intersects with vulnerable populations not only after a disaster but also before a disaster.

Because of the complexity and uniqueness of the climate change crisis, we cannot continue to plan (climate mitigation and adaptation) for it using the tools of the past. I think that from a planning perspective, we cannot assume that a uniform plan can work for all in terms of ensuring social justice. Planning has to be sensitive to the fact that communities and nations have different levels of wealth, health, and education. The goal for planning should be to build community resilience and provide an opportunity for people to bounce back both before and after a catastrophic event.

Q. You have spent much of your career documenting and raising awareness of the disproportionate effects, especially health effects, of environmental toxins on communities of color and low-income communities. How well do we understand the effects of climate change on public health, especially for marginalized communities in the United States?

A. In the last four decades, there has been lots of research on understanding people's vulnerability to climate change. Almost all of this research is suggesting that people who are strongly impacted by climate change are also the ones facing highest risk to heatwaves, waterborne diseases and Zika virus. In the U.S., there is geographical variation in vulnerability. Coastal communities in the south Atlantic region, communities that live in the mining and resource extraction towns, and communities that are resource-rich but economically poor will face the most brunt. I think the notion that we can develop a policy by starting from a blank page will not work. It is not possible to build equity into adaptation and mitigation planning without taking into account the history of these communities. Policy and plans should begin by understanding why people become vulnerable in the first. Why is it that people from a Louisiana tribe (Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw) have become climate refugees?

Q. What are some ways of communicating power and equity-related issues pertaining to climate change?

A. I think that how we frame and communicate problems is very important. There are many important things to keep in mind. First, is the messenger. Who is presenting the information is perhaps as important as the information itself. I have said this many time that the people of color, who are in a position of power, in academia and elsewhere, need to come forward as messengers. Second, it is important that when we talk about climate change, it is not presented as parts per million, but the issue of equity should be given equal weight too. Third, we should not run or shy away from highlighting that people will be disproportionately affected by climate change. Fourth, it is important to not only focus on futuristic response to climate change, but also ones that need to be taken in the next few days, months, and years. Focusing on just 50-100 years can take the steam out of climate change issue. Finally, I think that it is important to humanize the climate change issue. We need to show people that there are populations, at the moment, who are getting hurt because of climate change. These kind of real scenarios will show the enormity and urgency of the issue. For example, the government has recently relocated a tribe in Louisiana because their homeland is sinking (from sea level rise). These are the type of scenarios that should be presented to show the urgency of the issue.

Q. In your most recent book, you documented the federal government's historic pattern of unequal response to catastrophic events in communities of color and low-income communities, including but also predating Hurricane Katrina. Given the increasing threat of climate disasters, what changes need to take place in government to enable fair and effective responses? (The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities.).

A. In my experience, it is important to acknowledge that the U.S. government has not always responded to natural and man-made disasters in an equitable manner. The problem is that anti-discriminatory policies are not being implemented. It is much easier to build resilience in a community that has lots of well-educated people and resources, such as doctors, scientists, and lawyers. But what about communities that are not well-connected? The same kind of resilience cannot be expected from poor communities, who do not have access to resources. I think that the Flint water crisis is a good example of how a government does not take into account of its most marginalized people. The government is simply not giving weight to communities of color and

people with poor health. Most of our institutions (government) have a bias. That has to be rooted out.

Q. In December, you led a group of students from historically black colleges and universities to Paris for the climate summit. Could you talk about some of the new voices and leadership in climate justice emerging from HBCUs?

A. The demographics of the U.S. are changing. In the next 25-30 years, the U.S. will have a majority population of people of color. The policies and plans that are put in place now will be inherited by this generation of people. At the same time, this population will be responsible for making policies and programs that will shape the future of this planet. I believe that our young people, who are emerging leaders of tomorrow, needed to see that climate change is a major global justice challenge. Hence, I took 50 young people to the Conference of the Parties (COP) 21 in Paris so that they could interact with other climate change policy makers and activists. I wanted them to experience the process of negotiations related to climate change. They could see how the world came together to tackle one of the most urgent issues of the 21st century. This experience was one of the many ways, I think, can make our youth appreciate and understand how international climate policies are negotiated and implemented.

Q. What advice do you have for communities to address environmental justice on the local level?

A. Communities need to understand that there is no solution until they are organized, informed, and educated. People need to work as a collective. However, that does not mean that everyone in the community has to be involved. You need a critical mass of people—a few dedicated people. The other thing important for communities at the local level is that achieving social change is not a sprint, but a marathon. Perhaps the most important thing about this race is dedication. And just like any race, you win some, but you also lose some. It is only through collaboration and partnerships (both within and outside the community) that communities can win more races.

Q. What advice would you give to a new professional (academic and activist) in the field who is passionate about doing climate and environmental justice work?

A. Young academics and activists these days have great opportunities to make viable relationships with communities. I think that authenticity is the key to ensuring that these relationships are sustainable. Do not promise more than you can give. I find that under-promising is better for establishing trust with the community. Furthermore, as you develop your research expertise and become an expert in some field, don't forget to acknowledge the knowledge in communities. Their knowledge is important too. Integrating the community's knowledge will make your science more useful for them. I think that these are exciting times for young academics to do climate and environmental justice work. You can look into any discipline, there is always room for acknowledging the equity piece. So do not hesitate and collaborate with people in different disciplines.