

Environmental Rights as Human Rights

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At only a four-hour flight from New York City, the Independent Commonwealth country of Antigua and Barbuda, composed by two namesake islands and several smaller ones, lies in the Caribbean. The islands of Antigua and Barbuda are very different from the islands that make up NYC. At the same time, these places have something in common: they are all affected by climate change. The New School (TNS) in New York, a university known for its radical approach to everything: spreading from the arts to political science, a selection of works from the Antigua and Barbuda's National Pavilion exhibition "*Environmental Justice as a Civil Right*" from January 11th to the 27th. The exhibition focuses on the connection between the need for environmental justice and civil rights. This is a connection that, unless you are deeply versed in the climate change discourse, you wouldn't really make right off the bat (if you are not, you're not to blame; unfortunately, countries started including this kind of discourse in school curriculum in the last 10 years and it hasn't really caught on yet.)

The exhibit was brought to TNS thanks to its Tishman Environment and Design Center, a research and practice center that fosters design, policy, and social justice approaches to environmental issues. Tishman Center staff also contributed to the exhibition, with the project "Calling All Global Citizens," which connected high school students through a series of online video chats. The students were from not only Antigua and Barbuda, but also Venice, Italy, and New York City. Initially, the exhibition was conceived for the occasion of the 16th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia in May of 2018, what is considered the top architectural event in the world. The exhibition was curated by Barbara Paca, O.B.E., Cultural Envoy to the Ministry of Culture of Antigua and Barbuda and Visiting Scholar at the Tishman Center, in association with Prof. Nina Khrushcheva, from the Julien J. Studley Graduate Programs in International Affairs at The New School. On the Tishman Center side, "Calling All Global Citizens" was curated by Molly Craft Johnson, former Assistant Director for Sustainability Initiatives at the Tishman Center. So, now that we have done all of the proper "introductions, let's get down to it.



How does environmental justice connect with civil rights? Let's take these two definitions apart first. According to the [United States Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#), "environmental justice" is "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." The definition continues, stating that the only way environmental justice can be achieved is when all people, despite of their social status and race, can enjoy "the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work". On the other hand, according to Dictionary.com, "civil rights" are "the rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality". See the connections with civil rights here? Civil rights cannot be achieved if there is systematic discrimination in who gets environmental justice and where.

So who gets discriminated against? And who are the "lucky ones"? People in developed countries like the United States often hear a lot of "fuss" about climate change. Not being affected as evidently by it as much (yet) as people who live in countries closer to the equator — the hottest part of the world, therefore, becoming even hotter with the rising temperature caused by climate change — these "climate-privileged people" are able to put the climate action discourse aside if they want to. On the contrary, the residents of Antigua and Barbuda, like many others, are affected by the effects of climate change on a daily basis. "Climate change means that the communities who are least responsible for the climate crisis will feel its impacts the worst and first around the world. Small island nations like Antigua and Barbuda are really the example of this climate injustice" Ana Baptista, Chair of TNS Environmental Policy & Sustainability Management Program and Associate Director at the Tishman Center, said to me through email correspondence. "In order to address climate injustice we must hold developed countries like the United States to account for the damages that have already begun to be felt and that will continue to impact the most vulnerable places around the world. We also will need to think about large scale systems changes that will shift our way of life away from destructive, extractive fossil fuels and towards more just and inclusive economies" Baptista said.

What Prof. Baptista is referencing to are revolutionary approaches to solve and adapt to climate change, like “just transition” and specific economic models like the circular economy. Just transition is a set of unifying and non-discriminatory principles, policies and practices that want to shift economic and political power from an extractive economy (also known as a “linear economy”) to a regenerative economy. In the words of the [Climate Justice Alliance](#), “this vision was first forged by labor unions and environmental justice groups, rooted in low-income communities of color, who saw the need to phase out the industries that were harming workers, community health and the planet; and at the same time provide just pathways for workers to transition to other jobs.”

As above mentioned, one of the economic models proposed by this vision is the circular economy. This one is based on the principles of renewable energy usage and re-usage of materials and products that can be reused for future manufacturing of new ones. Additionally, according to the [Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#), a circular economy “recognizes the importance of the economy needing to work effectively at all scales – for large and small businesses, for organizations and individuals, globally and locally.” You can see how this concept blends very much with the descriptions of both environmental justice and civil rights.



Courtesy of New Zealand Ministry for the Environment

The focus on Antigua and Barbuda brings attention to the record-setting hurricanes that have hit Caribbean nations during these past few years. In fact, the exhibition: “*Environmental Justice as a Civil Right*,” tells the story of the repercussions of Hurricane Irma, **when 90% of the buildings in Barbuda were destroyed** and all residents were evacuated to Antigua, along with the reconstruction that followed. This really highlights the points of physical, but also social and economic “resiliency” of the island and people of Barbuda (something that I have researched for a project with UNDP, where I focused on the case of Nepal and their vernacular housing). “*Calling All Global Citizens*,” the part of the exhibition developed by the collaboration with Miss Johnson from the Tishman Center, really talks about this human aspect of climate change. Not only the resiliency of the people deeply affected by it, but also the sense of solidarity that there is between them and people living elsewhere. Presenting the footage from the self-led video conversations between students of these three diverse counties is an example of the unifying steps that institutions, organizations and governments should undertake in order to create more dialogue around the solutions to climate change. As with everything else, there must be conversations at every level in order to come to possible solutions.

The exhibit is now on tour through the United States before it goes to Antigua and Barbuda where it will stay forever. Its next stop will be Morgan State University for Black History Month. The rest of the tour has not been determined yet. If anyone is interested in touring the exhibit, they can contact the curator of the exhibit, Barbara Paca at the following email address: pacab@newschool.edu