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Society

THE FRENCH CASE FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE IN THE CARIBBEAN

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The plantation-based economies that warring colonial factions established in the Caribbean fuelled the Industrial Revolution and laid the foundation for the geopolitical power dynamics currently in place. For centuries, Caribbean economies developed around the export of a single agricultural product; it was not in the colonizers' interest to promote development beyond the seaport. In fact, the capital cities of most Caribbean countries were established on their coastlines with the sole purpose of exporting raw materials to Europe and other global markets. These same Caribbean countries today are now among the most susceptible to climate change impacts such as sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events (IPCC AR6 SYR, 2023, p. 6). Furthermore, climate shocks largely account for why the region of Latin America and the Caribbean is the second-most disaster-prone area in the world (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2020).

While most Caribbean nations have similar climate risk profiles, due to their geographic size, as small island developing states (SIDS), their abilities to adequately respond vary in part due to their postcolonial governance structures (Robinson, 2018). For example, countries like Guadeloupe and Martinique are former French colonies that now belong to the Outermost Regions of the European Union (EU). This means that they are non-sovereign countries that are governed with the same laws and regulations as mainland France itself, despite being separated by oceans and miles. These Outermost Regions of the EU also help maintain an EU presence in the geographical regions where they are situated. Note that the Outermost Regions of the EU differ from Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) of the EU. While OCTs are also former colonies of an EU member state, OCTs are semiautonomous and are not members of the EU like the countries of the Outermost Regions (OCTs are granted special considerations by the EU, however). This paper emphasizes the Outermost Regions of the EU given their non-sovereign status.

Why France Should Lead on Climate Justice

France, Portugal, and Spain are the three member states with countries in the Outermost Regions of the EU. Six of the nine countries in this grouping belong to France, with four of these six located in the Caribbean. Additionally, of the thirteen OCTs of the EU, six are linked to France, another six are associated with the Netherlands, and the remaining one, to Denmark. France therefore has the largest share of non-sovereign EU countries. It is also the only EU member state with both Outermost Regions and OCTs. France's exclusive economic zones and maritime areas—of which its overseas territories comprise 97 percent—also make it the second-largest maritime power in the world (Ferdinand, 2018). Resilient climate adaptation measures, like wetland restoration, green infrastructure, structural upgrades, and more, are especially needed for the *Outre-mer* (as these non-contiguous French territories are referred to nationally) as sea levels continue to rise and coastlines erode, amid ongoing postcolonial development challenges like poverty reduction and more.

Despite the socioeconomic conditions of French Caribbean countries (French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Saint Martin) being similar to those in most sovereign countries in the Global South, their status as Outermost Regions of the EU precludes them from capitalizing on assistance they would otherwise be eligible for (Ferdinand, 2018). Consider the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which “is the most important financial mechanism under the global climate regime” (Onifade, 2021). Even though France was the second-largest GCF contributor for 2020–2023, France's own Outermost Regions are unable to leverage these funds—or other international financing arrangements like it—since they are politically situated in the Global North (Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations in New York, 2020). This reality contributes to the countries and people of the *Outre-mer* being the most climate vulnerable, nationally among the French, and geopolitically among SIDS populations worldwide (Ferdinand, 2018). With claims to slightly more than half the EU's postcolonial presence globally, France is thus well positioned to lead on climate justice¹, even though it is not the only EU member state with postcolonial territories.

1. This paper builds on Ferdinand's (2018) analysis of climate justice for the French *Outre-mer* and offers a multiscalar approach that also incorporates several of his initial arguments.

Defining Climate Justice

Climate justice is a concept that makes explicit the reality that climate change is not solely an environmental or economic issue, but one that affects people's livelihoods and has social and justice implications within and across countries (Sultana, 2021). Moreover, climate justice requires that greater attention be paid “to how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways” through the climate “adaptation or mitigation interventions pursued” (Sultana, 2021). Climate justice thereby offers a framework through which the climate crisis can be addressed while simultaneously creating opportunities to strive toward a postcolonial world that is fairer, more inclusive, and just, at the local, national, regional, and geopolitical scales.

To this end, the Paris Agreement was the first global treaty to mention the concept of climate justice. It also called for more climate adaptation measures on behalf of developing countries, as well as for a reduction of carbon emissions through voluntary commitments from all countries, regardless of development status or size (Onifade, 2021). While the Paris Agreement encouraged developed countries to financially support the adaptation needs of developing countries, it was not compulsory (Onifade, 2021). Further, whereas mitigation is an issue that has had better success garnering geopolitical support for collective action, climate adaptation has sometimes been viewed as a domestic issue that is instead the responsibility of individual nation states (Barrett, 2012; Onifade, 2021). Onifade (2021) therefore states that “state sovereignty appears to be a fundamental challenge facing climate justice.” If so, the institutional responsibility for climate adaptation measures within non-sovereign countries in the Outermost Regions of the EU would then fall on the associated mainland European state, notwithstanding the reality that climate change impacts are most acutely felt at the subnational level in local communities situated throughout the Outermost Regions.

To be clear, climate justice is less about blaming and shaming. Rather, it is more about safeguarding the wellbeing of marginalized countries, people, and local communities so that they can flourish physically, socially, and economically, now and in the future (Onifade, 2021). In terms of the French Caribbean, this would require an institutional evaluation of existing postcolonial

governance structures, to assess whether there are political economic considerations that are fostering or inhibiting resilient climate adaptation planning and implementation efforts— such as improved land and water management, structural upgrades, green infrastructure, crop diversification, etc.—using a multiscalar approach (Ferdinand, 2018; Onifade, 2021).

A Multiscalar Approach to Climate Adaptation

A multiscalar approach to climate adaptation is one that explores the interplay between global, national, and subnational levels of governance, in terms of how well they reduce the climate vulnerabilities of people and communities most adversely affected yet least equipped to respond to climate change (Barrett 2012). Relatedly, the “Governance and Policies” section of the sixth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment report states, “Effective climate action is enabled by political commitment, well-aligned multilevel governance, institutional frameworks, laws, policies and strategies, and enhanced access to finance and technology” (IPCC AR6 SYR, 2023, p. 34). The section continues:

« Effective multilevel governance for mitigation, adaptation, risk management, and climate resilient development is enabled by inclusive decision processes that prioritize equity and justice in planning and implementation, allocation of appropriate resources, institutional review, and monitoring and evaluation” (IPCC AR6 SYR, 2023, p. 34)..

Thus, the extent to which intergovernmental structures, policies, and processes align or fail to align can impact how effectively climate action, such as the adaptation approaches mentioned above, are conceived and executed. Without addressing such structural elements, countries in the Outermost Regions of the EU will remain unable to access certain global financial instruments (like the GCF), which could accentuate their climate vulnerability rather than reduce it.

Nationally, France has been engaging its regions and localities in climate adaptation planning efforts since the early 2000s. In 2019, a national High Council on Climate (HCC) was created as an independent body to monitor the progress of public policies and mitigation measures toward the 2015 Paris Agreement. The HCC concluded that “as front runners on climate issues, regions must play an important role in coordinating actions between

the different territorial levels and territorial climate governance” though it is not readily apparent whether the Outermost Regions of France were also included in this reference (Climate Chance, 2021). Accordingly, concerted attention to addressing the unique political and institutional arrangement of France’s Outermost Regions in the Caribbean may be useful in assessing their ability to adequately plan for and implement robust climate adaptation measures, given their greater exposure to intensifying hurricane seasons, rising sea levels, and other climate-related threats, as compared to their Europe-based counterpart.

Notably, the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) has been employing a “Three Oceans Strategy”² since 2019 to promote regional integration of the country’s foreign aid activities including climate resiliency. Notwithstanding, there appears to be an inherent contradiction between how this strategy engages the Outre-mer compared to and how it deals with sovereign nations in the regions where it is coordinating its efforts. For example, most of the funding in AFD’s Atlantic Ocean Strategy is in the form of development loans rather than intergovernmental grant transfers between the central and subnational levels of government. AFD committed €192 million for Martinique in 2021, with €152 million of this total designated as public sector loans and €38 million as private sector loans (Agence Française de Développement, n.d.). Government grants comprised the remaining €2 million. Guadeloupe likewise had €84 million allotted that year, with only €3 million assigned as grants. By comparison, the Dominican Republic, as a sovereign nation, received €86 million in foreign aid loans from France, with a nominal €0.2 million in grants (Agence Française de Développement, n.d.). It is not clear if geographically connected mainland departments, like Rhône or Paris, have a similar intergovernmental relationship with the central government, but the fact that the loan-to-grant distributions for the departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe are indistinguishable from a foreign aid package to a neighbouring independent country might merit further investigation. Subjecting its own subnational departments to such debt burdens, specifically those most susceptible to the dangers of extreme weather events, seems to underscore the likelihood that overseas France exists outside of the French state rather than as a component of it. Assessing the relationship between the French central government and its Outermost Regions, through the lens of climate justice, thus seems appropriate.

2. France has overseas departments and territories in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions as well, in addition to the French Caribbean jurisdictions in the Atlantic Ocean region.

Conclusion

The world is at a critical juncture, where a variety of climate change responses are needed more than ever and at multiple scales (Barrett, 2021). Particularly, affected countries that exist outside traditional “sovereign” versus “non-sovereign” binaries are in a precarious position due to their status as overseas extensions of a Global North country. Previous instances, such as with the Green Climate Fund, revealed that this postcolonial institutional arrangement precludes them from being eligible for certain global financial resources, despite their environmental, economic, and social conditions being more reflective of the Global South. France, as a Global North country with 12 territories and 2.6 million citizens in the Global South, may have an opportunity to expand its global leadership on climate change response by working more intentionally with its overseas jurisdictions in the Caribbean (where most of its non-sovereign regions are located) through a climate justice approach.

More specifically, a future study could investigate:

- whether France could help support all eligible states—like the Outermost Regions of the EU—in accessing global climate financing tools geopolitically;
- whether or how mainland France might streamline the central government’s institutional arrangements with overseas France nationally; and
- whether or how mainland France might promote sizable, context-specific, appropriate, resilient climate adaptation measures in its Outermost Regions locally.

While not all-encompassing, findings from this future research may underscore new ways forward, where the distinct impacts of climate change on the French Outre-mer are better acknowledged and addressed, as France works to safeguard the wellbeing of all French citizens, whether in Europe or abroad. In all, this is climate justice.

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