

# Research & Policy Brief Series

## Climate justice and flood governance: Are New York's flood-governance networks equipped to succeed?

By Clifton Staples<sup>1</sup>, Libby Zemaitis<sup>2</sup>, Brian G. Rahm<sup>3</sup>, and Elizabeth LoGiudice<sup>4</sup>

### What is the Issue?

Climate justice is a social movement linking social justice to the fight against climate change, the effects of which can exacerbate social inequality. Disadvantaged groups are disproportionately impacted by sea-level rise, extreme precipitation, extreme heat, and drought.<sup>i</sup> The rising threat of flooding is particularly concerning in the Northeast U.S.<sup>ii</sup> Flooding, like many natural hazards, overburdens historically marginalized communities such as black, indigenous, people of color, low-income, and the elderly<sup>iii</sup>. In the U.S., climate injustice can be traced back to unequal land access stemming from policies and practices that pushed groups to live on marginal lands (e.g. wetlands and floodplains)<sup>iv</sup>. Furthermore, mainstream environmental movements have historically failed to recognize the perspectives of non-white people, particularly black, indigenous, and immigrant people<sup>v</sup>, resulting in a landscape of natural hazards management and climate change preparedness in which the interests of marginalized groups are significantly underrepresented<sup>vi</sup>.

Federal agencies and programs direct flood mitigation policy, providing the majority of flood mitigation infrastructure in the nation's most flood-prone areas and subsidizing insurance premiums through the FEMA National Flood Insurance Program<sup>vii</sup>. However, state and local governments are playing a larger role in flood governance and climate change policy to fill gaps left by federal inaction<sup>viii</sup>. Much of this work is accomplished through ad-hoc regional flood-governance networks that include state and local government entities and non-governmental organizations<sup>ix</sup>.

Are these regional flood-governance networks better equipped than the federal government to assist marginalized communities with flooding and climate change? If so, are they achieving this goal? To answer this question, research was conducted to evaluate an ad-hoc flood-governance network in New York State's (NYS) Hudson Valley.

### Evaluating flood-governance gaps

Representatives from NYS agencies, non-profit organizations, and local governments were interviewed in early 2020 to discuss their organization's programs and role in the ad-hoc flood-governance network (figure 1). Interviewees were asked to respond to a series of prompts regarding identified gaps in flood-governance-management under climate change, including:

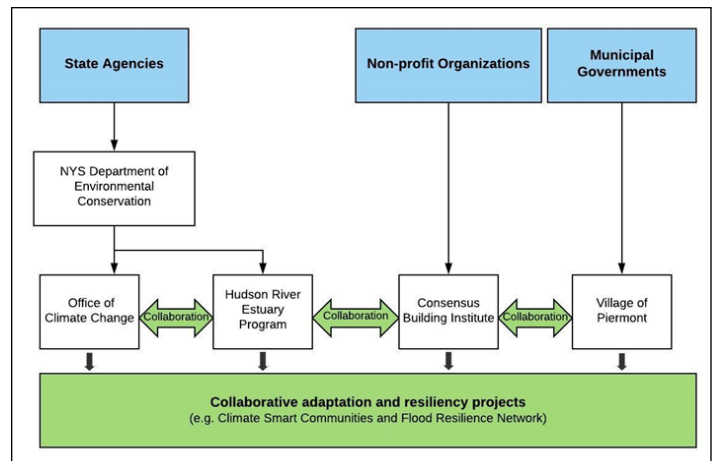
- flood and climate change impacts on marginalized communities,
- alternatives to traditional gray infrastructure,
- the role of the National Flood Insurance Program in flood-governance, and
- the need to raise awareness of flood risk among the general population.

Respondents indicated that although some of these emerging concerns are being adequately addressed by the flood-governance network, others were areas for improvement. For example, many of the organizations are on the cutting edge of finding alternatives to gray infrastructure for flood mitigation<sup>x</sup>, including green infrastructure, with innovative methods for necessary project funding, planning, and design. However, although the promotion of green infrastructure leans on traditional strengths of the U.S. conservation and preservation movements, addressing the disproportionate impact of flooding on marginalized communities is hampered by a historical deficiency. Namely, there has been a failure to incorporate non-white environmental perspectives at the institutional level<sup>v</sup>. Organizations of the Hudson Valley flood-governance network also struggle with this concern.

### Addressing environmental racism and injustice at the organizational level

Organizations in the Hudson Valley flood-governance network noted a lack of programmatic support for addressing the disproportionate impact of flooding on marginalized communities. Although interviewees felt the issue demanded attention within the field of environmental policy, the majority cited a personal lack of experience in working from an environmental justice and

**Figure 1.** A visualization of the ad-hoc flood-governance network serving the Hudson Valley, including select organizations and governmental entities. See shared projects at [Climate Smart Communities](#) and [Flood Resilience Network](#).



<sup>1</sup>Hudson River Estuary Program, NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation and NYS Water Resources Institute

<sup>2</sup>Hudson River Estuary Program, NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation and NYS Water Resources Institute

<sup>3</sup>NYS Water Resources Institute

<sup>4</sup>Hudson River Estuary Program and Resilience Communications and Consulting, LLC

human rights perspective, identifying a need for improvement in this arena at both the organizational and regional levels.

A review of the literature reveals a series of recommendations relevant to organizations engaged in flood-governance networks. These recommendations are intended to facilitate the process of anti-racist and equity-focused organizational change and to break down institutional barriers between mainstream environmental organizations and marginalized communities.

**Establish permanent work on anti-racism, justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.** The first step in addressing the concerns of historically marginalized communities is for environmental organizations to reflect internally on issues such as justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (“JEDI”), and anti-racism at the organizational and individual levels. Environmental organizations need to contend with the complex landscape of current and historical environmental racism and injustices perpetrated on black, indigenous, and people of color, as well as the complicity of mainstream environmental movements<sup>v</sup>. Many organizations do not have the benefit of diverse perspectives: an unfortunate consequence of white-dominant perspectives within the environmental field is that environmental organizations continuously struggle to hire, retain, and promote people of color<sup>xi</sup>.

Top strategies to smooth the process of organizational learning include hiring or appointing a JEDI coordinator for each organization in the network, forming a permanent JEDI committee for staff members to participate in, and addressing unconscious racial biases in hiring pipelines<sup>xi</sup>.

It is important to note that these are only the first steps, and the goal of supporting a JEDI coordinator as well as a permanent committee is to generate more specific goals focused on individual organization and staff needs (e.g., requiring ongoing anti-racism training for all staff). While general improvements in diversity programming are encouraged, it is recommended that these actions focus on initiating specifically anti-racist organizational change as racial equity has been identified as the primary deficiency in environmental organizations<sup>xi</sup>.

**Collaborate with community-based organizations to engage diverse stakeholders.** In addition to internal diversity, organizations will benefit from collaborating with a more diverse audience through programming and outreach, achievable by partnering with regional organizations that work across racial and class divides<sup>xi</sup>, also those addressing relevant issues such as housing, health, and others. In the case of the Hudson Valley flood-

governance network, this recommendation is especially relevant due to the highly collaborative nature of existing programs and projects. By bringing more diverse organizations into existing projects, fostering new relationships, and/or creating new projects that align with mutual interests, the flood-governance network may attract a more diverse audience to participate in its projects and programs.

**Follow best practices for inclusive community engagement.** Finally, when working with the public, organizations can follow best practices for inclusive community engagement to achieve more diverse participation<sup>xii</sup>. Inclusive practices for collaborative projects with marginalized groups include

- engage residents from the beginning as leaders in the process,
- advertise meetings through outreach venues used by target audiences,
- offer meetings at a time of day and day of week that is most convenient for working people or in conjunction with existing community meetings and events,
- offer meetings in target neighborhoods at trusted locations, such as churches or community centers,
- offer childcare, food, and stipends to attendees,
- acknowledge historical injustices and current inequities that impact residents,
- be willing to alter meeting plans and processes if they are not working well for participants,
- employ a peer-to-peer, rather than “expert-lecturer” approach,
- compensate an organizer from within the community, and
- simplify and translate outreach messages to be more easily accessible.

## Conclusion

The intersections of social justice and the environmental movement have become impossible to ignore. By implementing these recommendations, environmental organizations like those in the ad-hoc flood-governance network serving the Hudson Valley can contribute to ending the segregation of the mainstream environmental movement from the environmental justice movement, a critical step to equitably prepare for climate change. Fortunately, the work of linking environmental justice and climate change has already begun in NYS with the passage of the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act and the governor’s creation of a permanent state-level Environmental Justice Advisory Board. It remains for other environmental organizations to follow this example to create a more just and equitable environmental future.

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