

Advice to Council No: 21-02

JPAC Public Forum on Climate Change and Environmental Justice

The Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) of North America:

IN ACCORDANCE with Article 6(4) of the Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (ECA), which states that JPAC “may provide advice to the Council on matters within the scope of this agreement, and may perform such other functions as the Council may direct”;

HAVING conducted a virtual Public Forum, on 9 September 2021 on Climate Change and Environmental Justice with invited experts on sustainable resource management, disaster mitigation and planning, and sustainable law and governance;

AND HAVING participated as observers during the CEC roundtable on the Role of Youth in Ensuring Environmental Justice through Responses to Climate Change on 9 September 2021;

RECALLING the CEC 2021-2025 Strategic Plan and the Parties’ commitment to support communities through the “*Resilient Economies and Communities*” pillar;

ALSO RECALLING the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and, more specifically, Goal 10 seeking to “*Reduce inequality within and among countries*”;

RECOGNIZING the efforts being made by the Parties through past and new CEC projects to increase the resilience of communities and address climate change and Environmental Justice, such as the Nature-based Solutions to Address Flooding in Coastal Cities, the EJ4Climate, the Community Network for Environmental Justice, and the Black carbon mitigation and environmental justice initiatives, among others;

RECOGNIZING the interrelations between climate change and environmental justice and between social and environmental issues, and the need to address them as a system to support more equitable solutions; and

RECOGNIZING that there is increased awareness on climate change impacts and the need to address social and environmental justice, providing an opportunity for bold and meaningful actions to tackle these issues;

SUBMITS the following comments and recommendations for Council’s consideration:

The presentations and discussions during the 2021 JPAC Public Forum and Youth Roundtable highlighted issues, challenges and potential solutions on climate change and environmental justice including the need:

- for urgent, bold and systemic change,
- to offer all citizens, including our youth, the opportunity and space to be part of the discussion;
- to strengthen legal frameworks so they include climate change and environmental justice language;
- to transition to sustainable agriculture and forest management;
- to prioritize environmental education and information dissemination on mitigation and adaptation strategies through platforms, databases and exchanges, and
- to review current tools and policies to ensure resources are allocated fairly, to those who need them most.

As discussed during the panel and as was so eloquently reported by Justin Onwenu, the youth representative during the Council Public Session, climate is not just about the environment. It is also about housing, the economy, infrastructure investment, public health, education, and other social issues, all of which are interconnected. It is about having a healthy democracy, climate change literacy and a space for all citizens to work with governments and making sure that their voices are heard when discussing solutions. When measures to address climate change do not take into consideration environmental justice, we face the risk of further burdening vulnerable and underserved communities and therefore missing the target. JPAC endorses this perspective.

Recommendation #1: Identify and share best practices for the integration of climate change and environmental justice in government policies, programs and activities.

Vulnerable and underserved communities suffer from investment deficit, making them more vulnerable to climate change impacts. Some tools, processes and protocols being used by governments may have unintentional outputs increasing inequalities amongst communities. In North America, several initiatives are underway to correct those inequalities and to integrate environmental justice into government policies, programs, and activities. The CEC Secretariat has historically played an important role in facilitating knowledge sharing and is uniquely positioned to help disseminate these best practices at the continental scale.

- JPAC recommends that the Council support a project identifying and disseminating best practices for the integration of environmental justice in climate change policies, programs and activities in North America.

Recommendation #2: Identify and share case studies highlighting measures taken by vulnerable and underserved communities to increase their resilience.

Vulnerable and underserved communities and organizations are coming together and taking action to find and implement equitable solutions to climate change impacts to increase their resilience at the local level. These initiatives ensure that the solutions developed are inclusive, relevant, and answer local needs, and could inform other communities across North America confronted to similar issues. The CEC Secretariat has historically played an important role in facilitating knowledge sharing and is uniquely positioned to help disseminate these initiatives at the continental scale.

- JPAC recommends that the Council support a project identifying and disseminating case studies on actions taken by local communities to increase their resilience.

Recommendation #3: Support capacity building for vulnerable, underserved and Indigenous communities.

Several programs are in place to help communities adapt to and recover from climate change impacts across North America. However, vulnerable and underserved communities often lack the resources or the capacity to access these programs. This creates an unbalanced situation where resources are not necessarily allocated to communities that need them most. The CEC Secretariat has played an important role in building capacity and disseminating information at the continental scale, which makes it uniquely positioned to help address this issue.

- JPAC recommends that the Council support projects that seek to increase the capacity of nonprofit, grassroots organizations, Indigenous communities and local governments with vulnerable and underserved populations through the creation of a resource repository, templates and training for grant and funding applications and project management. This could be achieved through existing initiatives (e.g., NAPECA, EJ4 Climate) or new ones.

Recommendation #4: Support climate change literacy through knowledge dissemination targeting vulnerable, underserved and Indigenous communities.

JPAC recognizes and supports the Council's efforts to include outreach, communications, and diffusion components to CEC projects to help increase awareness and environmental education at the continental level. To address climate change and environmental justice, we need to reach out and include all citizens in the discussion. Some communities are left out of the conversation due to language barriers and socio-economic factors, and additional efforts to reach them should be pursued. Partnerships with local organizations and the use of alternative communication modes like social media, images or videos should continue to be pursued, as well as more traditional media, such as radio or printed documents for communities having limited Internet access.

- JPAC recommends that the Council continue to support the CEC in its role as a platform for dissemination and increase its efforts to reach vulnerable and underserved communities through existing initiatives and closer collaboration with community organizations.

Recommendation #5: Support and/or strengthen the creation of national climate change and environmental justice laws and policies.

Having strong national laws and policies on climate change and environmental justice is critical. These not only provide a signal that climate change and environmental justice are priorities for the governments but also help ensure that these issues are considered in all relevant decisions. Strong environmental justice laws and their enforcement may also provide safe space for environmental defenders and activists to continue their work to protect our shared environment. To support the

elaboration and strengthening of national laws, governments can refer to the UN Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for sustainable development and increase access to justice.

- JPAC recommends that the Council identify and review pieces of legislation that are key to their climate change policies, with a view to considering whether those laws address issues relevant to environmental justice.
- JPAC recommends that the Council create a working group with members from all three countries to advise governments about how they could include and/or strengthen climate change and environmental justice language into their existing laws.

Recommendation #6: Support the professional development and involvement of North American youth in CEC activities.

JPAC supports and encourages the Council and the CEC to continue its efforts to support youth innovation and engagement through its different programs (e.g., Youth Innovation Challenge, NAPECA, Eco-Innovation Network, etc.) and projects, and formalize its existing internship program into a permanent one, allowing equal participation from youth in the three countries. Young people not only bring energy and new ideas to the climate change discussion, but also different points of view that can enrich the dialogue and strengthen policies and initiatives. As such, they should have a seat at the table and be given the opportunity to be part of education, outreach and decision-making processes and also have the opportunity to exchange with professionals and more experienced individuals that can act as mentors to facilitate knowledge transfer between generations and ensure ongoing institutional memory. Socio-economic factors may create challenges for some of our young people to access professional and mentorship opportunities offered to others. This may have the unfortunate result of limiting their participation and in a collective loss of ideas and talent.

- JPAC recommends that the Council continue to support youth-targeted initiatives but also seek to increase their participation in all CEC activities.
- JPAC recommends the systematic organization of a dedicated youth event as part of JPAC public forums and Council public sessions, and the integration of youth representatives as part of panels for these events.
- JPAC also recommends that the Council create and support youth professional development initiatives that will include involving youth from vulnerable, underserved, and Indigenous communities. Providing grants for internships, creating mentorship networks, and supplying financial support and opportunities for youth exchanges between organizations in Canada, Mexico and the United States could assist in creating such development initiatives.

JPAC is confident that the recommendations contained herein are relevant to the CEC Council's strategic priorities and is unanimous in supporting this Advice to Council.

**Approved by the JPAC members
1 November 2021**