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FIVE REASONS FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE IN SPATIAL PLANNING

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About this report

The Royal Town Planning Institute

RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 25,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors.

Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social and environmental challenges.

A climate change position paper

The concept of 'climate justice' frames the RTPI's current programme of work on climate change. This position paper - the first in a series on the programme - introduces the concept, discusses relevant academic literature, and explores why climate justice matters to spatial planning in the UK.

Future position papers in this series will cover other key themes in our climate change research programme, including the relationship between decentralisation, strategic planning and effective climate change mitigation/adaptation, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

For more information about our climate change research visit rtpi.org.uk/climatechange or email research@rtpi.org.uk.

This report was authored by Dr Daniel Slade, RTPI Research Officer.

Cover image: New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina

The cover image is an aerial photograph of severe flooding in New Orleans, taken on 31 August 2005, following Hurricane Katrina. The hurricane was catastrophic for the city's predominantly African American population, which suffers from some of the highest rates of poverty and social vulnerability to extreme weather in the USA (Cutter & Gall, 2007).

The City of New Orleans' comprehensive city plan at the time "…made absolutely no mention of the extreme flood hazard facing the city, ways of mitigating the hazard through land use or building regulations, or how the city might recover from an event such as Hurricane Katrina." (Burby, 2006: 179). Climate change is likely to make such weather events both more common and more extreme.

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Executive summary

As the climate crisis deepens disadvantaged communities will bear the brunt. A complex range of factors combine to make them vulnerable— including high average ages and levels of disability, low incomes, and cuts to local government.

This applies to the UK as much as anywhere else. In many areas of the country, social or political factors such as under-resourced planning services, economic disadvantage, and an overwhelming national policy focus on housing delivery are compounding the effects of habitat loss and increasingly frequent extreme weather to make already vulnerable communities even more prone to the impacts of climate change.

The concept of 'climate justice' focuses on these social dimensions, and makes clear that climate change represents an ethical challenge, as much as a scientific or technical one. Policy makers must consider not only how and why levels of vulnerability to climate change vary, but also how and why their policy responses benefit or disadvantage different groups. Answering these questions requires long-term thinking, coordination and engagement across sectors and places, all of which demands effective spatial planning.

This RTPI position paper outlines five reasons why climate justice should be used as a practical and conceptual tool by planners to understand the nature of the crisis, and to respond effectively:

1. **It reinforces the importance of diversity and equality in planning for climate change;**
2. **It puts real engagement at the centre of planning for climate change;**
3. **It focuses attention on the wider social costs and benefits of adaptation and mitigation measures;**
4. **It opens up crucial questions about governance, resourcing, and institutional capacity; and**

5. **It helps planners to tell compelling stories that spur action and collaboration.**

Climate justice presents a clear challenge to government and other decision makers: a fair and decisive response to climate change requires climate justice. And climate justice requires effective, well resourced, spatial planning.

What is ‘climate justice’?

Recent years have seen a series of watershed moments in the national discourse on climate change. However, for spatial planning two moments have been particularly significant. The first was the publication of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) report Global Warming of 1.5°C (IPCC, 2018). This landmark report found that the global consequences of failing to keep global warming within 2°C of pre-industrial temperatures – the target set by the Paris Climate Agreement – would be catastrophic. Indeed, it found that even exceeding the 1.5°C ‘aspirational’ target set by that agreement would seriously increase risks to all aspects of human wellbeing. The report made clear that the challenge facing humanity is titanic – rapid and unprecedented shifts are required across all aspects of society – but that such a change is nonetheless possible, with effective spatial planning and land use regulation playing a key role.[1]

The second watershed moment came eight months later when, following recommendations from the Committee on Climate Change and intense campaigning pressure by protest groups including Extinction Rebellion, the UK Government introduced legislation that commits the UK to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions to ‘net-zero’ by 2050 (BBC, 2019a). While undoubtedly a strong, positive statement, the Government has been worryingly light on details about how this target will be achieved in practice.

Much of the discourse around both of these high-level targets has understandably focused on the technical and political feasibility of meeting them (e.g. BBC, 2019b). Planning’s role has largely been discussed in terms of the profession and the systems’ ability to support the deployment of the technology and infrastructure. However, climate change is clearly far more than a technical and scientific problem. The vulnerability of different places and communities to climate change varies greatly, according to socio-economic status, according to their social-economic status, age, culture, health, the effectiveness of local and national governance structures (Roy et al, 2019), and a range of other factors of great importance to planning. Indeed, it is now well established that in both the global south and the global north, disadvantaged places and communities are disproportionately more vulnerable to climate change than their wealthier counterparts, despite having contributed to it less, and often having least say in policy responses to it (Steele et al, 2015; Roy et al, 2019; Jafry et al, 2019; IPCC, 2018). This relationship takes the form of a vicious circle; the impacts of climate change worsen poverty, while poverty increases vulnerability to these impacts (JRF, 2016).

[1] For example, the authors argue that: “The urban and infrastructure system transition consistent with limiting global warming to 1.5°C with no or limited overshoot would imply, for example, changes in land and urban planning practices, as well as deeper emissions reductions in transport and buildings compared to pathways that limit global warming below 2°C...” (IPCC, 2018: 15).

A subsequent report, focusing on climate change and land use, makes the case for ‘land-use zoning, spatial planning, integrated landscape planning’ being important for ‘positive adaptation and mitigation outcomes’ in even stronger terms (IPCC, 2019).

The core features of climate justice

The concept of 'climate justice' aims to draw attention to these facts. It promotes a 'people-orientated' understanding of climate change, which acknowledges that both its impacts, and our response to its impacts, are intrinsically matters of equality and equity. As Bonewit & Shreeves (2015) argue in a UN report, the concept aims to link:

> **"...climate change with human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly." (Bonewit & Shreeves, 2015)**

Climate justice therefore focuses analytical attention on both the social factors that make different communities and places more vulnerable to climate change related hazards, and how and why adaptation and mitigation policies/projects benefit or disadvantage different groups (Bulkeley et al, 2014; Knox, 2019).[2]

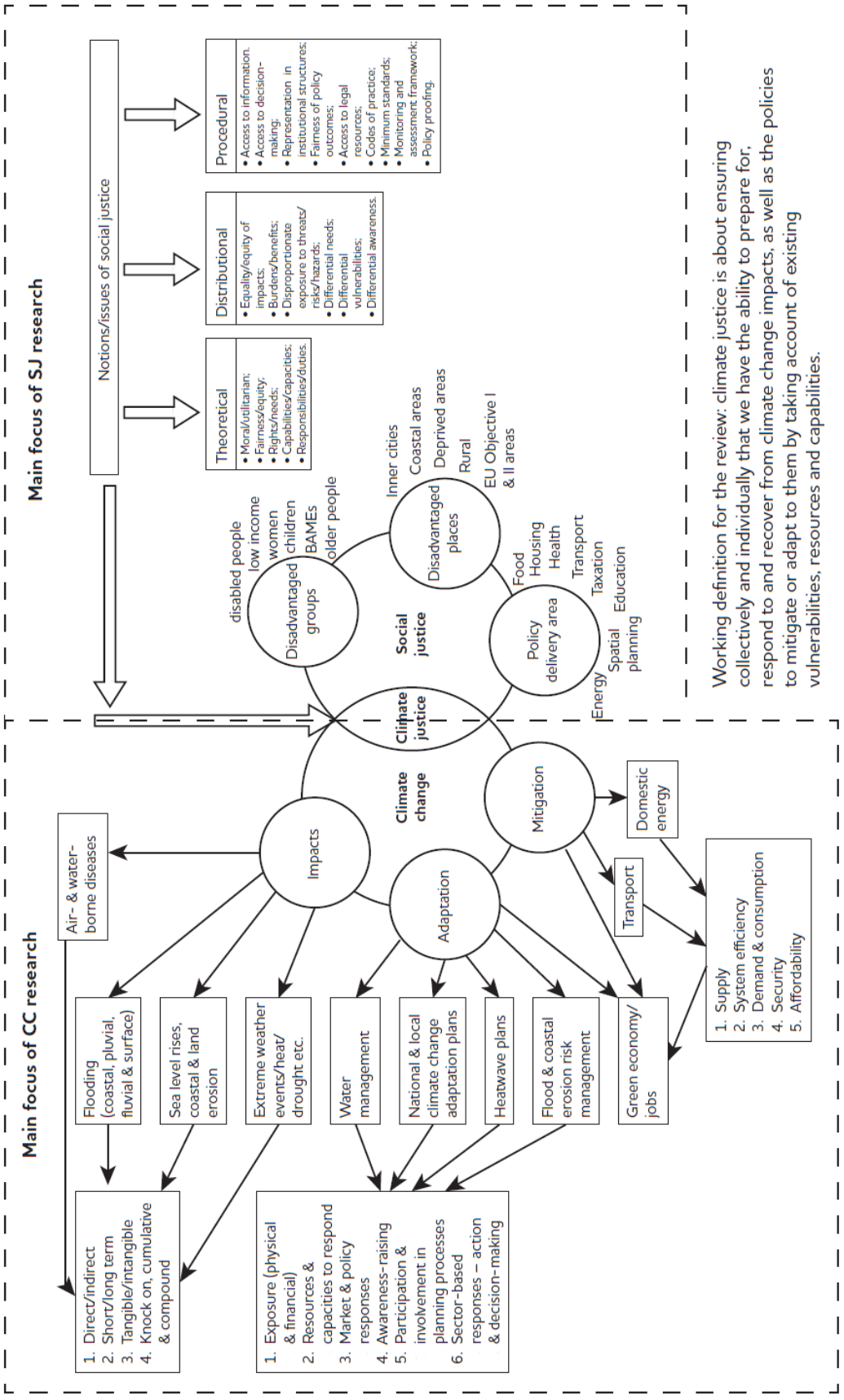
This emphasis on both the impacts of climate change, and the processes through which society mitigates or adapts to its effects, means that climate justice explicitly considers both *distributive* justice (i.e. how different benefit and burdens are allocated) and *procedural* justice (i.e. how different procedures or practices recognise and involve different interest), as well as the close relationships between the two (Brisley et al, 2012; Steele et al, 2015).

Overall, climate justice focuses on four different areas of inequity and justice in relation to planning for climate change (Knox, 2019):

1. Inequities in responsibility for carbon emissions (causes);
2. Inequities in the social impacts of climate change (consequences);
3. Inequities in how the costs and benefits of responses are shared (responses); and
4. Procedural injustice (governance)

[2] Brisley et al (2012: 12) argue that climate justice is particularly valuable for highlighting the 'social conversion factors' which determine communities' vulnerability to climatic hazards. These include factors which are more abstract, and may be based on existing relationships, interpretations, or decision-making regimes, such as: "…social isolation and support networks (which can affect awareness of and responses to climate impacts), fear of crime (leading to people being afraid to go outside/open windows even when it is very hot) and institutional regimes (such as the tendency for over-heating care homes)."

Figure A: The interface between climate change and social justice research, from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report 'Climate Change and Social Justice: An Evidence Review' (Preston et al, 2014: 16)



Climate justice in planning research

Until recently, with the notable exception of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's large body of work on the subject,[3] the literature on climate justice tended to focus on nation states and international relations (Bulkeley et al, 2014; Jafry et al, 2019), rather than settlements and local communities. However, climate justice is a subject of increasing interest to planners, and academic studies have examined how a wide range of social characteristics intersect to influence the consequences of planning related climate change policy and practice for distributional and procedural justice. These include, for example, gender (Terry, 2009; Bonewit, 2015; Reckien et al, 2017), age (Krawchenko et al, 2016), disability (Smith et al, 2017), generational difference (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013), and whether individuals or groups live in formal or informal settlements (Bambrick et al, 2015).

Although the concepts of 'environmental justice' and the 'just city' have long had currency in planning research (Steele et al, 2012), work that applies the specific concept of *climate justice* to spatial planning practice and policy remains relatively rare.[4] The concept also remains rare – though not entirely absent[5] - in UK domestic social policy (Jafry et al, 2019). Interestingly, this is not the case for international policy. The concept explicitly or implicitly underpins various international spatial planning related targets, projects, and programmes, most notably the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.[6]

Climate justice has the potential to both inform current planning practice and make the case for planning as an important means of delivering the public interest. Below, we explore five reasons for this concept:

Climate justice:

1. Reinforces the importance of diversity and equality in planning for climate change;
2. Puts real engagement at the centre of planning for climate change;
3. Focuses attention on the wider social costs and benefits of adaptation and mitigation measures;
4. Opens up crucial questions about governance, resourcing, and institutional capacity; and
5. It helps planners to tell compelling stories that spur action and collaboration.

Each of these arguments are discussed in detail in the following chapter.

[3] Between 2009 and 2017 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation conducted and commissioned a large body of research on climate justice related issues in UK adaptation policy. See here.
[4] For rare examples see Steele et al (2012; 2015; 2019), Osborne (2013), and Schrock et al (2015).
[5] For one example of how the concept *has* been embedded in national-level domestic policy, see Wales' Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) here.
[6] One of the earliest, high-profile uses of the term was at the 8th Conference of the Parties (COP) in Delhi, under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which included a 'Climate Justice Summit' (Pettit, 2009).

Five reasons for ‘climate justice’ in planning theory, policy and practice

1. It reinforces the importance of diversity and equality in planning for climate change

The notion of the public interest underpins the legitimacy of planning as a profession and social activity (Slade et al, 2019). As such, the RTPI’s Code of Professional Conduct (RTPI, 2016) requires all planners to take into account representation and diversity during the course of their work. In particular, point 22 of the code states:

> **“Members must seek to eliminate discrimination by others and promote equality of opportunity throughout their professional activities’ (RTPI, 2016).”**

This is of utmost importance for planners in all areas of their work. But given the scale of the interventions society will need to make in response to climate change; that climate change will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable; and that urban society is becoming increasingly diverse, it is particularly significant with regards to climate change.

Climate justice focuses attention on these issues of professional ethics, legitimacy, and the public interest in the way that planners respond to climate change as a profession. In the words of Steele et al (2012: 67); ‘the imperative of climate change adds urgency to the longstanding equity agenda of planning in cities’. Continuing ‘business as usual’ on these agendas in the face climate change will not maintain the status quo, but rather lead to worsening inequality and the loss of opportunity for the already disadvantaged.

2. It puts real engagement at the centre of planning for climate change

Closely related to the above, climate justice’s emphasis on ‘procedural’ justice means that much of the research in the field focuses on public engagement. This includes research on possible models of policy making that include the voices of marginalised groups in decisions about climate change policy (Bonewit & Shreeves, 2015; Swim & Bloodhart, 2018; Chu & Michael, 2019).

This is crucial from a practical, and not just ethical, perspective. Marginalised communities are often the most vulnerable to climate change, so it is simply not possible to identify a place’s key vulnerabilities without their meaningful input. In addition, the sheer scale of the infrastructure transformation needed (e.g. settlement relocation, or the installation of new energy systems and flood barriers), and the trade-offs required by climate change, mean that it is crucial that planners’ interventions are seen as legitimate by public. This requires a careful focus on the processes through which decisions are made (Adger, 2016), not just the

eventual distribution of benefits and costs.[7] It can also mean the use of policy tools such as citizens' assemblies, working with a much more diverse range of organisations than planners may ordinarily do, or helping communities to improve their own resilience to climate change. Indeed, community-led policy making and grassroots activism are key themes in the climate justice literature (Agyeman & Evans, 2004).

Public engagement has been of central interest to planning research, policy and practice for decades, but climate justice is a particularly useful tool for thinking-through how the quality of adaptation and mitigation measures directly relates to the quality of the public engagement which informs them. Much like the importance of diversity and equality, climate change adds urgency to an existing, and important, social agenda. The value of climate justice is that it makes these links obvious.

3. It focuses attention on the wider social costs and benefits of adaptation and mitigation measures

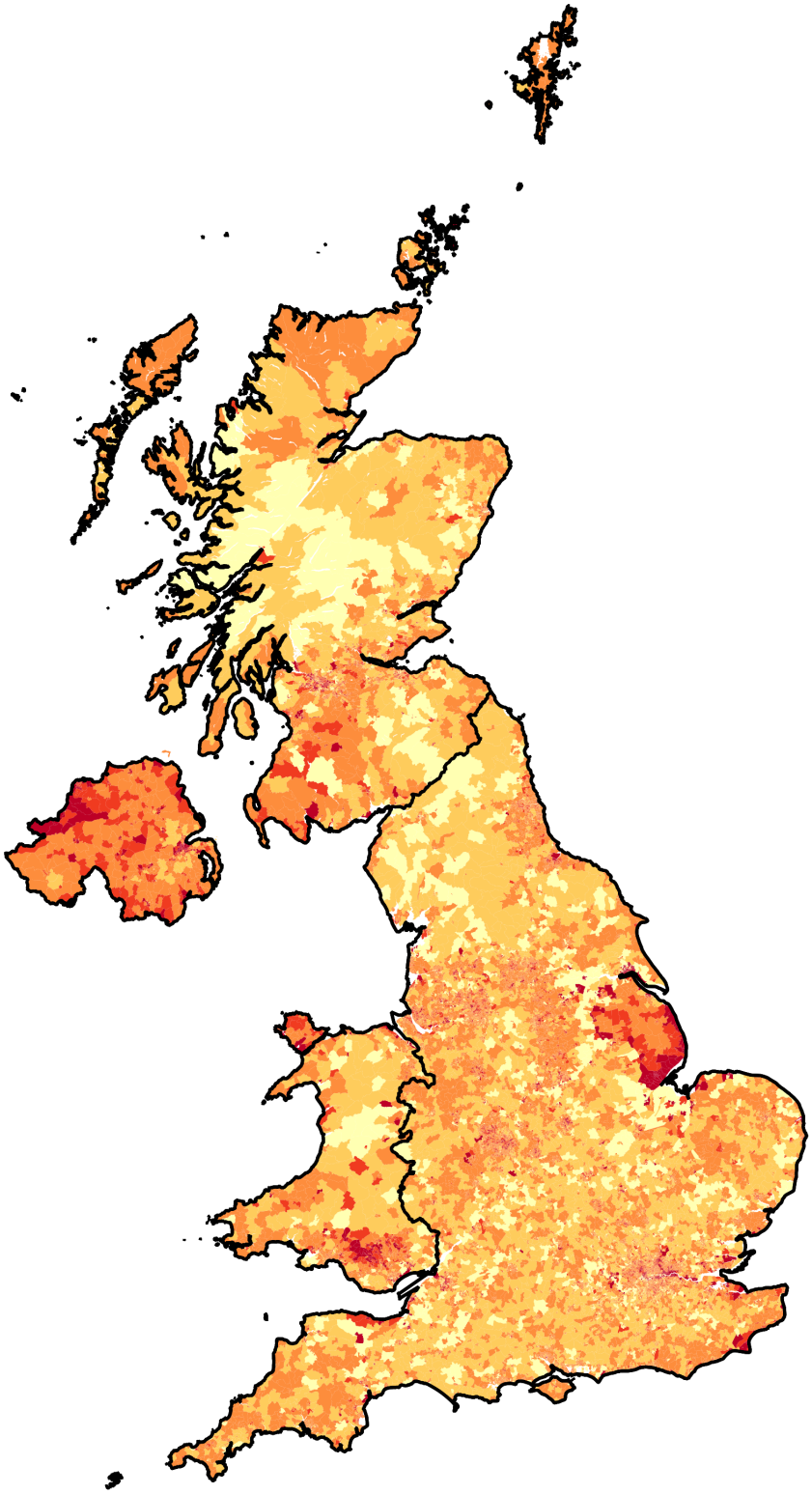
Climate justice provides a valuable lens for considering the wider social benefits and costs associated with different adaptation and mitigation measures. Access to natural resources, transport networks, energy and social networks, the provision of housing and green or open space, and attractive urban design are all challenges in their own right, while also being fundamentally related to climate change. As such, adaptation and mitigation policies can disproportionately affect vulnerable communities if they are poorly designed (Reckien et al, 2017; Chu & Michael, 2019). For example, 'low-carbon gentrification' may occur where efforts to reduce urban carbon emissions through targeted residential energy efficient retrofit programmes don't consider the differing abilities of communities to pay for such changes (Bouzarovski et al, 2018).

Equally, however, well designed climate change policies can both reduce the equity concerns of climate change (Reckien et al, 2017), and address a range of social issues for which climate change is not the primary driver. The provision of green infrastructure is an excellent example of this. It is often a central component of urban climate adaptation policy, being crucial to addressing overheating, flooding, and soil erosion. But it also has a range of co-benefits for mental health and physical fitness. Similarly, ensuring that communities have good access to public transport can reduce carbon emissions, while benefiting low-income communities which are particularly reliant on public transport for mobility.

Overall, putting people - and particularly disadvantaged communities - front-and-centre of thinking about planning for climate change helps to highlight the multiple social benefits of climate change adaptation and mitigation measures. This holistic perspective can help when prioritising adaptation planning options when resources are limited (Delcet-Barreto, 2019), and convince decision-makers at various levels to adopt policies which contribute to mitigation/adaptation, even when they might be reluctant to consider addressing climate change as an end in itself (Haines, 2015).

[7] Indeed, a large body of evidence suggests that much public opposition to new development and infrastructure in general can be attributed to dissatisfaction with decision making processes, rather the proposed projects themselves (Slade & Davies, 2017).

Figure B: Map of flood disadvantage in UK neighbourhoods, according to Social Flood Risk Index score, from Sayers et al (2017)[8]



[8] This maps, from research by Sayers et al (2017) which underpins the JRF's Climate Just Mapping Tool (which is available here), shows the Social Flood Risk Index (SFRI) (group) score of different neighbourhoods in the UK. This illustrates where social vulnerability and exposure to flooding coincide. High positive scores (dark red) identify neighbourhoods were large numbers of the most vulnerable people are exposed to flooding. For more information, see Sayers et al (2017).

4. It opens up crucial questions about governance, resourcing, and institutional capacity

Institutional capacity, including the effectiveness of local and regional government, are important determinants of different communities' level of vulnerability to climatic hazards, and the extent to which mitigation pathways are equitable (Roy et al, 2019; IPCC, 2019). With its interest in both procedural and distributional understandings of justice, a climate justice 'lens' brings the political choices which shape this capacity into sharp focus.

The IPCC highlights governance capacity as a particular challenge in the rapidly urbanising cities of the global south (Roy et al, 2019), but this is also a significant problem in wealthy countries like the UK. In England in particular, deregulation, serious under-resourcing, an overwhelming national policy focus on housing and economic growth, and uncertainty around national planning policy, have all profoundly affected the ability of local authorities to respond to climate change through planning (TCPA, 2016; TCPA & RTPI, 2018; Slade et al, 2019). Indeed, there is evidence that these pressures mean many English local authorities are currently struggling to plan for the public interest even in 'business-as-usual' conditions (Slade et al, 2019).

The impact of these debilitating factors varies greatly across the UK. Research by the RTPI shows that local planning authorities in comparatively disadvantaged regions have borne the brunt of austerity (Kenny, 2019), while wealthier areas with high development demand are relatively well placed to harness this growth and plan in the public interest (Slade et al, 2019). Similarly, devolution can give local policy makers more power to tailor their approaches to planning for adaptation and mitigation to local communities and places' vulnerabilities. But the landscape of devolution in the UK is uneven, with the nations' planning systems increasingly diverging, and different city-regions in England having different levels of power over planning.

When the varying spatial impacts of climate change are considered alongside these institutional factors, an alarming picture begins to emerge. Kingston upon Hull, for example, suffers from some of the highest levels of 'flood disadvantage' in the UK (Knox, 2019).[9] It is no coincidence that, given the area's local economic challenges, development demand in the area is also low,[10] and the Local Planning Authorities in Yorkshire and the Humber have suffered disproportionately from austerity (Kenny, 2019). Looking further ahead, sea level rise and the increasing incidence of extreme weather may have serious consequences for local service demand, housing and housing markets, infrastructure, land availability, and resourcing in general across the region. As conditions worsen, political decisions will have to be made about future resourcing and the level of support given to cities such as Hull.

For England in particular, these interlocking issues point to a much bigger, underlying, question about whether a planning system that has been systematically cut-back and re-geared towards housing delivery and economic growth above all other social objectives can ever be compatible with a resilient and net-zero carbon future. As big as these questions

[9] I.e. how 'social vulnerability coincides with flooding hazard exposure to create disadvantage' (Knox, 2019: 119).

[10] This means there is less inwards investment in local priorities, and local planning authorities receive less income from providing planning services or levies such as the community infrastructure levy.

are, the planning sector and research community do not have the luxury of being able to ignore them; the scale of the societal transformation the IPCC and others have shown we need simply demands that they are answered. In the words of Schlosberg et al (2017), citing O'Brien and Selboe (2015, p311), who focus on adaptation:

> **"…adaptation to climate change is unlikely to have long-term effects if it is treated as only a technical problem. Adaptation must address and challenge the 'drivers of risk and vulnerability', including various social, political, and economic systems and structures. Only an approach to adaptation that moves beyond a sole focus on the biophysical risks of climate change, to one that considers the larger and more complex processes that interact and produce vulnerability, can address social, environmental, and climate injustice."**

The people-focused lens of climate justice emphasises the close links between the political and ethical choices that shape institutional capacity, their social justice implications, and powerful impacts they have on the ability of different places to plan effectively for climate change.

5. It reinforces the need to tell compelling stories that spur action and collaboration

Planning researchers have long noted that 'storytelling' - weaving together particular understandings of *'what [has] been going on, what [is] going on and what should, or at least could, be done*' (Van Hulst, 2012: 300) - is and should be central to planning at all scales (see: Forester, 1996; Sandercock, 2003; Van Hulst, 2012; Thorgmorton, 1992; 1996). But for planning to be *effective*, planners and other decision-makers must paint compelling, believable, visions and narratives for places, which bind together actors with shared understandings, meanings and goals.

In no policy area is this truer than planning for climate change. This is because it is so dependent on collective action and long-term holistic thinking across spatial scales. Planners must weave together a narrative that is at once convincing, positions climate change as an important consideration in *all* aspects of the development process, projects a sense of urgency, and captures the global nature of the challenge.

Crucially, to have real public influence, such narratives require broad based community buy-in. To motivate action, they must go beyond dry, abstract or technocentric understandings of climate change and towards a narrative based on climate justice (Powell, 2018). Important climate change related concepts such as 'risk' can be extremely difficult for planners to communicate and for communities to understand, but a large body of research on motivating communities to act on climate change suggests that appealing to a wider, more 'everyday', set of ideas and feelings are a powerful way of doing this (Jansson & Dorrepaal, 2015). These ideas include 'daily need' (Schlosberg et al, 2017), 'identity' (Adger, 2016), 'care' (van der Linden et al, 2015), and fairness or equity (Gampfer, 2014; Moser, 2006).

Climate justice's person focused understanding of climate change brings such considerations to the fore, making it a potentially powerful tool for planners to both consider the nature of the climate change challenge, and collaborate across scales.

Making the case for spatial planning

Each of the points made above are clearly very closely linked. Points one, two, and three highlight the practical utility of climate justice as a way for planners and other policy makers to think about how they respond to climate change. Both public engagement and equity are long-standing concerns for planners, but the imperative of climate change makes them even more crucial. Point four demonstrates that related issues of governance (devolution, capacity and the role of the state in delivering public goods) are inseparable from our ability to respond to climate change through planning, and the vulnerability of the communities we are trying to protect. Meanwhile, point five cuts across each of the above, to remind us of the importance of vision and long-term thinking in planners' work on climate change.

Taken together, these points highlight that a response which treats climate change as a predominantly technical challenge is not sufficient. Even from a purely pragmatic perspective, our responses must be person-centred and have diversity, the public interest, public engagement and equality as central concerns if they are to be effective. They must address governance and the role we think the state should play in improving citizens' lives. And they must paint a convincing, shared vision for the future.

The level of coordination and collaboration required to weave compelling narratives across different sectors, communities and landscapes necessitates fair and effective spatial planning. For organisations which advocate for spatial planning, whether they are the RTPI, government, charities, academic, or private sector, *this* is the 'story' which needs telling, and climate justice is a powerful way of doing it.

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