

*The earth is the Lord's (Psalms: 24:1)*

*The Lord hears the cry of the poor (Job: 34:28)*

# A Religious Agenda on Poverty and Global Climate Change



THE NATIONAL  
RELIGIOUS  
PARTNERSHIP  
FOR THE  
ENVIRONMENT

**US Conference of Catholic Bishops  
National Council of Churches  
Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life  
Evangelical Environmental Network**

## Overview

In recent years, many faith communities representing the breadth and depth of religious life in America have come together to call for a proactive response to the growing threat of global climate change. On this issue, we are guided broadly by scriptural commands to care for God's creation and to "love our neighbors" as we promote the common good of the entire human family. But we are particularly driven by our moral obligation to stand up for the voiceless and vulnerable in this debate -- those who have contributed the least to the problem yet stand to suffer the most from it. Indeed, experts tell us people living in poverty and on the margins of society will not only be put at greatest risk environmentally by the physical impacts of climate change, they could also bear the greatest burden economically from any large-scale program to reduce global warming pollution if the legislation is not structured correctly.

We applaud the recent efforts by Congress to find common ground on this critical issue and move forward with consensus legislation to lower the earth's temperature. But we believe that any plan will be substantively incomplete as a matter of policy and morally unacceptable as an expression of our values if it does not make protecting those least able to protect themselves a central priority. That means, in our view, taking meaningful and measurable steps to shield vulnerable populations from the disproportionate dangers they are likely to be exposed to as the planet warms, to spread the economic costs of changing our energy habits fairly and sustainably, and to limit the financial burdens that will be placed on low-income and working families by new regulations on global warming pollution.

Fortunately, these ethical principles and the related priorities and policies -- which flow directly from our faith and unite our diverse religious communities -- are as attainable as they are essential. In fact, the primary legislative approaches now under consideration by Congress will produce substantial resources and unique opportunities -- not just to protect the disadvantaged from environmental degradation and higher energy bills, but to improve their quality of life and our communities in the process. In particular, they offer tremendous potential through our free market system to create and promote new technologies, new industries, new jobs, and new sources of income, as well as new ways to help the voiceless and vulnerable protect themselves from the dangers of climate change.

To help draw attention to these opportunities, as well as to the larger moral dimensions of this critical debate, we offer the following Climate Fairness Agenda. This policy framework begins with a series of goals for achieving environmental and economic fairness in the climate change legislation Congress is considering -- and then identifies a set of ideas specifically designed to advance them domestically and internationally. Among other things, our agenda calls for:

- Priorities:** Making protecting people in poverty a central focus
- Resources:** Setting aside 40 percent of all new revenues generated by climate change legislation for programs aimed at shielding vulnerable populations from environmental dangers and limiting the economic burdens of new policies on low-income and working families at home and abroad
- Energy Relief:** Providing temporary rebates to American low-income and working families to offset any substantial rise in energy prices resulting from climate change legislation
- Evaluation:** Studying the particular impacts and consequences of climate change on vulnerable populations around the world and the effectiveness of specific relief efforts
- Preparation:** Promoting emergency and long-range planning and assistance to help vulnerable populations in our own country and abroad adapt to adverse climate impacts and climate change policy and to participate in mitigation efforts.

## Domestic Agenda

### Goal #1: Congress should make protecting America's low-income and working families<sup>1</sup> a central priority of any climate change legislation

**The Idea:** Set aside 30 percent of revenues raised from climate legislation to help minimize the environmental consequences of climate change and economic burdens of climate change policies on disadvantaged Americans

**The Details:** Make revenues reserved for climate fairness programs immune from Congress' annual appropriations process

Guarantee that funding for climate fairness programs will be in addition to and not in lieu of existing appropriations for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, the Weatherization Assistance Program, and similar programs targeted at low-income families and displaced workers.

Ensure the transparency and accountability of climate fairness funding through an annual review mandated by Congress.

### Goal #2: Congress should prevent the poorest Americans from shouldering disproportionate costs and unfair burdens for reducing greenhouse gas emissions

**The Idea:** Provide low-income and working families energy fairness rebates to offset any rise in household energy bills, including transportation, resulting from climate change legislation

**The Details:** Eligibility for relief should be determined using federal and state low-income guidelines

Consider a range of delivery options to guarantee access to those eligible for rebate relief (such as direct electric bill rebates, the food stamp program, refundable tax credits)

To reduce the need for energy fairness rebates over time, pursue

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<sup>1 1</sup> By "working families" we mean those families that have at least one full-time working member and struggle to stay above the poverty level. According to the Urban Institute, the working family makes on average \$25,000 per year.

new approaches to promote energy efficiency and lower energy costs, such as :

- Encouraging replacement and retirement of inefficient appliances (refrigerators, air-conditioners, etc.) for all households (via rebates, tax credits, etc)
- Encourage and assist low-income housing developers (new or rehabilitated; private or government) to build much more efficient homes and apartments
- Increasing funding for weatherization programs

Broaden the mandate of the Community and Faith-Based Initiatives Center at the Department of Energy to help community and faith organizations implement programs to assist low-income households, such as employing young people to weatherize homes

### **Goal #3: Congress should focus on helping the economy create new well-paying jobs and assisting workers who lose their jobs as a result of new climate regulations and other policies**

***The Idea:*** Set specific job creation targets in specific industries

Guarantee unemployment relief, training and job transition assistance to any worker whose job is lost due primarily to climate change legislation

***The Details:*** Increase current federal funding for research, development, and commercialization of climate-friendly products and services made in the U.S.

Invest in training programs for workers who will make energy efficient homes/buildings, improve the efficiency of existing homes and buildings, or be employed in an a climate-friendly industry

Conduct studies after one, five, and 10 years to determine which workers are most vulnerable to the effects of climate impacts and policies, and make recommendations on how to address those needs

Encourage manufacturers of energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies to locate in communities negatively affected by climate policies



## **Goal #4: Congress should help low-income and working families adapt to and recover from the environmental impacts of climate change**

***The Idea:*** Identify the biggest threats to people living in poverty and at-risk communities and target resources to meet their greatest needs

***The Details:*** Commission studies by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) after one, five, and 10 years to ascertain impacts of climate change on working families and low income households and to recommend plans for addressing their adaptation challenges

Set aside funding for adaptation projects for working families and low-income households based on the findings of the NAS reports

Assign a liaison within relevant federal agencies to assist, learn from, and collaborate with faith-based organizations in meeting adaptation needs

## International Agenda

**Goal #1: The United States should assist countries with the fewest resources and the highest exposure to the dangers of climate change -- and who have contributed the least to global warming pollution -- in adapting to climate change and developing low-carbon economies.**

***The Idea:*** Set aside 10 percent of all revenues generated by climate change legislation for international relief, adaptation, and mitigation programs

***The Details:*** Educate the American public about the necessity of investing in international climate fairness programs for environmental and security reasons.

Target funding to Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States to help vulnerable populations respond to adverse climate impacts and climate change policy, starting with the development of long-term adaptation plans

Designate a portion of relief and development funding to expand current emergency and disaster relief efforts and to build a sufficient disaster relief fund for future years

Promote cooperation among government relief and development agencies and faith-based organizations (FBOs) and utilize FBOs in the development and implementation of adaptation programs

Require funding for adaptation programs to be in addition to and not in lieu of other federal funding for overseas relief and development efforts

Ensure transparency and accountability through an annual evaluation of adaptation funding and the results of adaptation projects

## **Goal #2: Congress should use climate change legislation to deepen understanding of climate change impacts on vulnerable populations**

**The Idea:** Fund ongoing studies to explore the range and depth of environmental and economic consequences of climate change and climate change regulatory policies

**The Details:** Commission studies by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to examine the best practices for responding to water scarcity, drought-related famine, climate change refugees, and climate-related health concerns

Use results of NAS studies to guide investment in climate adaptation demonstration projects, such as the development of early warning systems that track droughts, floods, famines, pests

Invest in appropriate training and technical assistance to least developed countries as they draft National Action Plans for Adaptation.

Require all future U.S. government overseas disaster relief and development projects to include a climate change impact assessment to determine the needs and distribution of resources for water security, food production, healthcare and sanitation, and refugees

## **Goal #3: Congress should support “dual benefit” mitigation programs that will help reduce poverty and empower vulnerable populations**

**The Idea:** Promote the development and use of appropriate climate-friendly technologies that will create new businesses, new jobs, and new opportunities for economic growth

**The Details:** Target U.S. investments at mitigation programs that have a proven track record of advancing economic development

Promote citizen participation in the development of energy options that best meet local and regional needs.

Provide incentives to the private sector to assist citizens in least developed countries in adopting efficient renewable and sustainable energy technologies.

Utilize and work with and through faith-based relief and development organizations in the development and implementation of mitigation programs



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