

Michael Méndez, *Climate Change from the Streets: How Conflict and Collaboration Strengthen the Environmental Justice Movement*

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. 304 pages. For order info, click [here](#).

Overall

This book explores the ways that environmental justice activists engage in California's climate policy planning process. Using the concept of "climate change from the streets," Méndez explores how activist's embodied knowledge can serve as an important tool in mitigation and adaptation planning. While the current model of policymaking does not often account for this qualitative, experiential knowledge, Méndez documents how environmental activists challenge mainstream assumptions, create coalitions, and build tools that allow for a multiscalar, intersectional approach to climate change policymaking. This clear, readable book would work well in an undergraduate or graduate level course.

Author

Dr. Michael Méndez is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Planning and Policy at the University of California, Irvine. He most recently served as the inaugural James and Mary Pinchot Faculty Fellow in Sustainability Studies at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Méndez has more than a decade of senior-level experience in the public and private sectors, where he consulted and actively engaged in the policymaking process. This included working for the California state legislature as a senior consultant, lobbyist, gubernatorial appointee, and as vice chair of the Sacramento City Planning Commission. His work focuses on the intersections between sustainability, health, and justice.

Research Methods

Méndez collected his data over the course of 15 years. During this time, he conducted a multi-sited ethnographic policy analysis. Due to his professional background, he was given insider access to decision making processes surrounding climate change policy implementation in the California state capitol. This meant a significant portion of his data came from observations at public hearings, conversations with stakeholders, and textual analysis of climate policy. In addition to his observations, Méndez draws upon semi-structured interviews with activist, traditional environmentalists, business leaders, and senior government officials. An exceptional work of engaged scholarship.

Context

The case studies unfold across the state of California. Aside from his insider status in California's state level politics, which provided him with unique and rich access points, Méndez also chose to focus on California because of the broad success the state has had in implementing climate policy. California serves as an important site for experimentation around climate change mitigation and adaptation and can provide clear models of how advocacy and policy can cross

multiple scales and address the ways in which climate change intersects with various social categories.

Carbon Reductionism vs. Climate Change from the Streets

A central element of Méndez's argument rests on the distinction between two different climate perspectives, which are rooted in stakeholder worldviews. While a focus on "carbon reductionism" was popular among scientists and policymakers, environmental justice activists developed the approach of "climate change from the streets," which could at times put these various stakeholders at odds.

- *Carbon reductionism*: The climate worldview of "carbon reductionism" focuses almost exclusively on greenhouse gas reduction potential. People who subscribe to this worldview rely heavily on scientific framing and support from the scientific community. They also emphasize geographically neutral, cost effective, market based solutions that target mitigation rather than adaptation.
- *Climate change from the streets*: People who hold this worldview focus climate policy that yields substantial health benefits through the reduction carbon dioxide *and* of other pollutants that negatively impact health. Environmental justice activists also prioritize local expertise, community based solutions, multiscale climate policy, and a holistic understanding of the multiple harms that pollution and a changing climate have on human bodies in specific local settings.
- *Policy perspective*: these worldviews are not fixed, but can be deliberately negotiated and mutually interrogate and inform each other, resulting in common ground. This is most likely to occur when there are genuine partnerships among community residents, scientists, government agencies, and other institutions. The California Environmental Justice Advisory Committee was an important venue for engaging the differences in various approaches, and especially for arguing for more robust opportunities for public participation. Méndez fully recognizes the risks of over-privileging any one perspective, including romanticizing embodied knowledge.

Climate Embodiment

- Méndez proposes that environmental justice activists view climate change as an embodied phenomenon, which impacts their lives in multiple, intersecting ways. This focus on *climate embodiment* means that activists' expertise is often rooted in experience, and the evidence that they are drawing from is often community based and qualitative. Using the illustrative case of Richmond, California, Méndez explores the ways in which this form of evidence and understanding can be at odds with scientists and policymakers, who are often looking at singular rather than cumulative impacts. Organizations such as Richmond's Asian Pacific Environmental Network emphasize the ways that residents embody the cumulative impact of pollution from industrial facilities, like the Chevron refinery.

- Méndez highlights that climate embodiment and the knowledge associated with it is often met with resistance because of the emphasis placed on traditional scientific assessments as a foundation for climate planning. He argues that a carbon reductionism worldview can create strict boundaries between science and local expertise, which can be counterproductive. Méndez argues that environmental justice activist's engagement with climate embodiment can be seen as an important rupture in technical practice, where activists are challenging the very process by which technical knowledge is produced. These challenges are highlighted clearly in Chapter 3, where Méndez details the complex, contentious arguments between environmental justice activists and policymakers, scientists, and mainstream environmentalists around Assembly Bill 32 (the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006), which required sharp reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

Activists argued around the equity of the bill, the scale of the bill, and the evidence presented by policymakers and scientists, all exacerbated by two different worldviews: “carbon reductionism” and “climate change from the street.” The most contentious issue was the role of “cap and trade,” supported by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF).

However, this struggle fostered opportunities for coalition building and provided a strong foundation for the next round of environmental policy development in California.

- Méndez wraps up his discussion of climate embodiment by advocating for more inclusion of embodied climate knowledge in environmental decision-making. He also reminds his reader that no solution is a fix-all, and the inclusion of embodied knowledge alone cannot ensure that decision-making processes are representative and democratic.
- Additionally, in later chapters, Méndez highlights examples of this worldview in action outside of California. Using the example of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) carbon offsets, Méndez details the collective anti-REDD statement created by more than 30 Latin American and US organizations that was drafted and distributed to policymakers at the Governors' Climate and Forest Task Force gathering.
In California, a translocal coalition of Indigenous rights groups and California environmental justice advocates spoke out against the REDD programs during a capitol lobby day and the NO REDD Tour. To account for the ways in which activists notions of justice are rooted in local, embodied knowledge, translocal coalitions have built links between local struggles, international organizations, and global climate change regimes.
- The book draws upon a broad array of scholarship, and especially upon Jason Corburn, *Street Science: Community Knowledge and Environmental Health Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), though with further distinctions among research, regulatory, and street science (Table 2.1).

Méndez also builds upon the important work, Phil Brown, [*Toxic Exposures: Contested Illnesses and the Environmental Health Movement*](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Oakland Climate Action Coalition

Méndez details the organizing efforts in Oakland to provide an example of how environmental justice activists were able to utilize their “climate change from the streets” worldview to shape local environmental policy. The Oakland Climate Action Coalition was established in 2009. Housed in the Ella Baker Center, the Oakland Climate Action coalition consists of over 50 wide ranging local organizations. The Ella Baker Center staff was able to provide meeting space and staff to coordinate the coalition. Through collaborative experimentation, the coalition was able to bring the intersectional perspective generated by embodied knowledge and a local, community focus to the forefront of climate policy in Oakland.

Accounting for Success

- According to Méndez, a primary factor that accounts for the coalition’s strength and success were the diversity of its members. Together, the coalition became a powerful force that provided multisector expertise on a large range of issues like transportation, affordable housing, energy, urban agriculture, adaptation planning, and community engagement.

Among coalition members and allies were EJ groups, the Sierra Club, NRDC and EDF, as well as such groups as the Greenbelt Alliance and the U.S. Green Building Council.

- Additionally, the coalition found ways to localize climate change for community action. To transform how climate change was perceived in Oakland, the coalition convened and funded 14 workshops, used youth engagement programs to further localize climate knowledge, and used their platform to engage in local electoral politics. In total, the coalition was able to engage 1,500 residents to develop local solutions to climate change, compared to the 200 individuals who attended the city-sponsored events.

Garrett Fitzgerald, Oakland’s city sustainability coordinator, welcomed the participation of the coalition in climate planning. (He has since become the strategic collaborations director of the [Urban Sustainability Directors Network](#), thus leveraging this experience among its two hundred or so member cities).

- With the help of grants provided by the California Energy Commission and the San Francisco Foundation, the coalition was able to develop its own local adaptation planning data and models. Using some of the newest approaches to social vulnerability and adaptation modeling, the coalition was able to identify the potential impacts of climate change on population groups connected to particular places and communities. This multidimensional view considered climate variability and its political, institutional, economic, and social contexts and helped to alleviate the “burden of proof” that environmental justice activists often face when engaged in climate policy planning.

- Méndez details six ways in which Oakland is an innovative case compared to most other municipal climate policy planning efforts:
 1. It included local, embodied knowledge in the development of climate policy.
 2. Public participation was embedded in the regulatory science and policy processes.
 3. Its understanding of climate risks and impacts focused on the human scale.
 4. Measures were chosen for their potential health benefits.
 5. Adaptation plans focused on socially vulnerable communities.
 6. The climate action plan included explicit references to equity and environmental justice.

Climate Change Community Benefit Fund

While environmental justice activists pushed back against the cap and trade program associated with bill AB 32 (chapter 3), they found ways to experiment with intersections of state policy and local solutions. Activists, particularly members of the California Environmental Justice Alliance, pushed hard for the creation of the Climate Change Community Benefit Fund, which directed a significant portion of cap-and-trade revenue towards communities most affected by air pollution. The climate fund supports local solutions that jointly reduce global greenhouse gases and co-pollutant emissions and seeks to create green-collar jobs in communities with high unemployment.

The first attempt at securing this fund via AB 1405 failed when Assembly Republican senators questioned why these funds should go to low income communities. Governor Schwarzenegger then vetoed the bill. With the help of key political allies, environmental activists had to strategize and find ways to build up their practical authority. They did this by experimenting with the creation of a measurement tool that would systematically and spatially identify communities vulnerable to the impacts of climate change *and* most burdened by multiple sources of pollution. In contrast to the top-down approach initially taken in the AB 32 scoping plan, Mendez draws his readers attention to the ways in which climate justice activists spearheaded an experiment that challenged institutional practices and created new, multipurpose solutions through the proposal of a Climate Change Community Benefit Fund.

Reviewed by Ann Ward, managing editor of [CivicGreen](#).

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