

Protecting Communities from Sea Level Rise

Prompt

Who should be making decisions on how we protect communities facing unequal impacts of rising sea levels?

The effects of a changing climate are not felt equally by all people. Often, communities of color and low-income communities suffer the most from pollution and environmental changes. This is true for communities along the US coast that are facing excessive impacts of flooding caused by rising sea levels and warming temperatures. What is the most effective way to protect these communities? Who should make decisions about how we address sea level rise?

Write a letter to the president arguing who you think should be making decisions about protecting communities facing unequal impacts from sea level rise. Use evidence from the sources to defend your claim, and be sure to acknowledge and address counterclaims to your position.

Source 1

Miami: A Case for National Help

In Miami, communities of color are facing new challenges around climate change. Communities of color mostly live inland so they are not being directly hit by rising sea level. However, white residents living on the coast are moving inland due to sea level rise. This is making the price of houses in Little Haiti rise as shown in a 2018 Harvard Study. Little Haiti is a working-class African American neighborhood. Many residents had to move away because they did not have enough money to live there anymore.¹ Sea level rise is affecting the whole city. Both those living on the coast and inland are at risk.

Luckily, the national Army Corp of Engineers has created a plan to protect the city. The *Miami Herald* describes the new plan. They will build new storm surge barriers. These barriers act as

¹ N. Green, "As Miami Faces Threats From Sea Level Rise, Some Worry About Climate Gentrification," *NPR*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/02/784225385/as-miami-faces-threats-from-sea-level-rise-some-worry-about-climate-gentrification>.

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walls keeping water out. Pump stations will drain water from low areas. They will even raise buildings to protect them from floods.²

And this is all the work of the federal government. The city of Miami by itself does not have the resources or money to enact a plan this big. The federal government has promised to pay 65% of the total cost. They also are providing engineers and scientists for the project. They have talked to local leaders and national experts about the plan. They even have meetings for community members to learn about the plan.

The plan will help protect coastal residents and stop the rise of prices inland. Low areas will be better protected. The plan will keep hundreds of thousands of Miami residents safe, all because of the federal government

Source 2

Louisiana: The Need for Community-led Programs

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005. It showed the unequal effect disasters often have on communities of color and low-income communities. The hurricane flooded low areas of the city, mostly home to African American residents. These residents also had less access to cars or other ways of leaving the city. But the problem did not end with the storm. The rebuilding of New Orleans was a failure of the federal government. It did not include the very people affected by rebuilding. The city still faces inequality today, as the *New York Times* writes about in "Don't Repeat the Mistakes of Katrina Recovery."³

A similar case is Louisiana's new Master Plan to solve sea level rise. It ignored the voices of people most affected. The plan refuses "to acknowledge that not all objectives were treated equally," according to Kindra Arnesen. Arnesen is the owner of a fishing business in south Louisiana. She is talking about the promise to include community voices. She believes that promise has been broken. She shares her anger over this in an interview with the *New York*

² A. Harris, "Feds have \$4.6 billion plan to protect Miami-Dade from hurricanes: walls and elevation," *Miami Herald*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/environment/article243276326.html>.

³ A. Horowitz, "Don't Repeat the Mistakes of the Katrina," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/opinion/hurricane-katrina-irma-harvey.html>.

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Times.⁴ The project may help those living in Louisiana in the long-term. Still, Arnesen worries that low-income locals will be left behind.

Federal and state plans do not work well. They leave out the people who are affected the most. These people are often part of low-income communities and communities of color that have been left out of plans like these for too long. The plan will protect lots of people, but will hurt the most vulnerable. Large plans like this also cost a lot. The Louisiana Master Plan costs \$50 billion.⁵

However, there are new calls to put money into local plans created by communities of color. This would be in place of current national plans. These national plans rarely serve local communities best. These communities have unique takes on climate change and its solutions. We need to start listening to them. It is time to give them a seat at the table. It is long overdue.

Source 3

The Benefits of Local Decision-Making

There was a new study in the journal *Science* in 2017. It showed that the effects of climate change will hit the countries' poorest counties the worst. Many of these areas are mostly home to people of color.⁶ One of the major threats is sea level rise. Sea level rise is the increasing height of the world's oceans. This is happening because ice caps are melting faster than we have ever seen.

It should be these communities then that make decisions about climate change. Most decisions about city design are made locally today. Decisions on transportation, water, and energy systems are made by cities. Federal and state governments do not know best. Often, they know little about how cities work or what residents need. Locals are better at finding problems and solutions that actually help them.

⁴ N. Rich, "Destroying a Way of Life to Save Louisiana," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/21/magazine/louisiana-coast-engineering.html>.

⁵ N. Rich, "Destroying a Way of Life to Save Louisiana," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/21/magazine/louisiana-coast-engineering.html>.

⁶ S. Hsiang, R. Kopp, A. Jina, J. Rising, M. Delgado, S. Mohan, D. Rasmussen, R. Muir-Wood, P. Wilson, M. Oppenheimer, K. Larsen, T. Houser, "Estimating economic damage from climate change in the United States," *Science*, June 30, 2017,

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In Maryland, Ellicott City experienced unparalleled flooding in both 2016 and 2018 due to heavy rain. In response, the local government is investing in a series of projects including adding retention ponds, digging a tunnel near Main Street to redirect water from the historic downtown.⁷ Combating the effects of climate change at the local level allowed leaders to review various plans and select one in about a year, although the work will be completed over four to five years.

William Stiles is the leader of Wetlands Watch. The group gives local governments advice on how to deal with flooding and sea level rise. Stiles knows that local money is low. But he also knows that, "There is no coordinated strategy nationally."⁸ The federal government does not have a plan to solve sea level rise. And the few plans they have created are rarely feasible or even helpful.

The role of the federal government should be to provide local governments and communities with resources. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, is a great example. NOAA creates reports on sea level rise across the nation. They give cities and states information, but leave the decisions to others. The federal government should give money to local governments to deal with sea level rise. They should not make decisions about what those solutions look like.

Locals know their communities' needs best. So they should be the one making the decisions.

⁷ E. Logan, "How will Howard pay for its \$140 million plan to ease future Ellicott City flooding?," *Baltimore Sun*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/howard/ph-ho-cf-funding-ellcott-city-0514-story.html>.

⁸ J. Morrison, "The Cost of Rising Seas: More Than \$400 Billion (and Lots of Angst)," *Wired*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-cost-of-rising-seas-more-than-dollar400-billion-and-lots-of-angst/>.