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## The Climate Justice Discourse in Brazil: Potential and Perspective

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**Milanez and Fonseca** (2011) argue that the climate justice discourse has not been adopted by the media, society or the communities affected by extreme climate events in Brazil. The climate justice discourse has been adapted from the concept of environmental justice and created from the idea that the impacts of climate change affect different social groups in various ways and intensities.

The environmental justice movement claims that different social groups have different levels of responsibility for the depletion of natural resources and, more importantly, that social inequality defines levels of exposure to environmental risks. In other words, their argument is based on the assumption that vulnerable groups are excluded from the policy formulation process and, therefore, are negatively affected by decision-making procedures concerning environmental issues.

In Brazil, the environmental justice movement has emerged quite recently and is mainly represented by the Brazilian Environmental Justice Network. This is a forum for debate and political mobilisation organised by social movements, workers' unions, environmental organisations, ethnic groups and faculty members. The network aims to develop collective actions that challenge environmentally unjust situations, promote the exchange of expertise among groups that face environmental problems, and inspire scientific research that contributes to environmental justice in Brazil.

Within the environmental justice movement, the concept of climate justice has been proposed based on the assumption that the impacts and the capacity to adapt to the consequences of such impacts vary among different social groups. Organisations that advocate for climate justice argue that those least responsible for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions suffer the most severe impacts of climate change. Additionally, there are other aspects that increase the resilience of social groups to the impacts of climate change, such as access to infrastructure and public services.

Milanez and Fonseca (2011) analyse articles published by important newspapers in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo after two major rainfall events produced floods and landslides in these two cities. Although it cannot be explicitly stated that the floods and landslides that are occurring in urban centres in Brazil are consequences of climate change, specialists expect an increase of between 5 per cent and 10 per cent in the amount of rainfall in the southern region and that storms will be more intense in the southeast as a consequence of climate change (Cedeplar and Fiocruz, 2009).

Their findings suggest that the media in Brazil has mostly associated the floods and landslides with land use problems (42 per cent) and failures of engineering projects (33 per cent). In less than 3 per cent of the articles assessed were the extreme climate events and their consequences related to the issue of climate change.

Based on these findings, the authors propose that the adoption of the climate change discourse in Brazil could produce three main positive outcomes.

First, it must be understood that Brazil already plays an important role in the international forums that debate climate issues. Therefore, if Brazilian social groups were to assume this discourse, the concept would gain much more visibility in such forums.

Second, acceptance of the climate justice discourse might increase the chances of the claims of affected groups being heard. Typically, communities affected by extreme climate events have little influence over the decision-making process. Nevertheless, as the debate on climate change is present on social and political agendas at the national and international levels, the debate could strengthen their claims.

Finally, they argue that defining tragedies associated with extreme climate events as effects of climate change could change the course of some public policies. Ignoring the harm done by such events is a barrier to real planning against extreme weather events. For example, in 2011, one year after the episodes described above, more floods and landslides took place in the Friburgo area in Rio de Janeiro state, resulting in more than 900 deaths.

As studies indicate that extreme climate events will become more intense in the near future, delays in the definition of a new line of actions will only increase the negative social, economic and environmental impacts of these events. Therefore, if decision-makers realise the relevance of connecting recent floods and landslides to climate change, it is possible that they will turn current corrective policies into structural policies designed to reduce vulnerability and adapt to climate change.

### References:

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