At the confluence of digital rights and climate & environmental justice:

A landscape review

Executive Summary

THE ENGINE ROOM

FORDFOUNDATION

ARIADNE
European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights

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Introduction
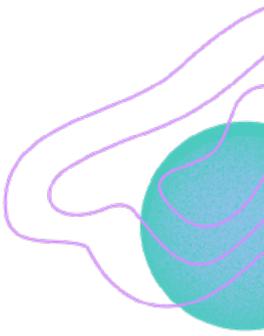
As the effects of the ongoing climate emergency amplify, the fight for environmental & climate justice has become more crucial than ever. While technology is being used to support these efforts, it can also be part of the problem: technological innovation is taking an environmental toll, climate justice activists face increasing digital attacks, social media platforms are full of unfounded claims about climate change, and many of the communities affected the most by the climate emergency continue to lack basic access to digital resources that are needed to adapt to, and mitigate effects of, the climate crisis – from internet access to reliable online information in their own language and cultural context.

With all this in mind, it is clear that an exploration of the intersections between environmental/climate justice (EJ-CJ) and digital rights (DR) movements – with an eye on identifying opportunities for collaboration and support – could help both sectors achieve their respective goals.

In this report, we:
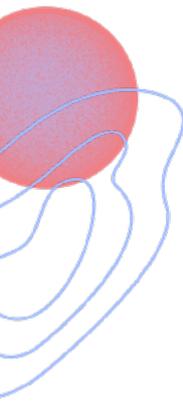
+ **Provide an overview** of some of the key areas where digital rights and allied technology work intersects with environmental and climate justice currently,

+ **Provide qualitative insights** on the needs of, and challenges faced by, practitioners engaged in work spanning DR, tech and EJ-CJ issues,

+ **Identify barriers and opportunities** for an ecosystem that sits between the two, and

+ **Identify opportunities for digital rights funders** to provide impactful support that is grounded in the real-world experiences of different communities and movements engaged in the fight for climate and environmental justice.

The report has been particularly written for:

+ Grantmakers and practitioners in and adjacent to the digital rights sector. These are our main audiences, and this report aims primarily to support the digital rights sector in understanding how to centre EJ-CJ issues in its work going forward.

+ Grantmakers and practitioners with an environmental or climate focus who are interested in exploring the intersections between their work and that of the digital rights sector.

This report is part of a broader body of work commissioned by the Ford Foundation, Ariadne and Mozilla Foundation, who engaged The Engine Room to conduct research to help digital rights funders understand what role they have to play in environmental and climate justice.

Main Findings
Cross-cutting themes and challenges

Six cross-cutting themes resonated across our desk research, community calls, and conversations with actors in the EJ-CJ and DR ecosystems. Each theme represents an area where further research, dialogue and collaboration is needed.

01. The need for connections and shared vocabularies across communities, movements, and sectors

A number of discussion participants flagged alignment in lexicon, approaches to equity, and an analysis of regional power imbalances as important prerequisites for working together on overlapping issues. For example, a gap exists between practitioners and scholars, as well as between countries, where the same issue is described by different terms – these subtle differences in turn emphasise different values and goals.

02. "Our focus on growth is incredibly dangerous"

The question of limitless growth on a planet with finite resources emerged as an urgent intersectional issue for both DR and EJ-CJ fields. Environmental and climate movements have long rallied against an economic paradigm that sees continuous expansion as its core tenet. Now, practitioners from both DR and EJ-CJ interrogate how the adoption of 'sustainable technologies' may feed into this paradigm.

03. Extractive dynamics are a problem across sectors

The extractivism of Big Tech enterprises and the extractivism of fossil fuel companies are increasingly resembling one another – or in some cases,
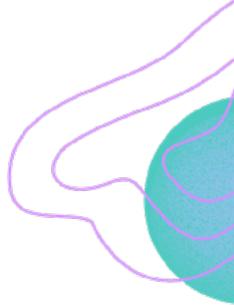
even working together. Some Big Tech companies, for example, have been found to be actively assisting fossil fuel companies to generate more precise and efficient techniques for fossil fuel extraction through the application of machine learning. Drawing parallels between the extractivism in both sectors, DR and EJ-CJ practitioners ask what non-extractive models for technology should look like in an era of accelerating climate crisis.

04 • Both technological and environmental crises can be challenging to visualise and mobilise around

How can we properly understand enormous problems that don't always feel visible? This was a question raised by both DR and EJ-CJ practitioners, who highlighted the difficulties of mobilising different publics and making the drastic shifts needed to address climate and environmental crises and mitigate technological risks. Geographic and social inequities mean that while some groups of people experience direct harm, others remain (for the moment) somewhat insulated from the most severe effects of climate change.

05 • The frictions and contradictions of 'Tech for Climate'

The tension between what technology can offer to ameliorate climate change and the recognition that no technology comes without costs was flagged as crucial in light of the enormous investments being made into different technologies touted for their potential to mitigate the harms of industrialisation and pollution.

06 • Growing and protecting the 'commons' is a priority

Since the 1990 publication of Governing the Commons by Elinor Ostrom, the 'commons' has become a pillar for how we understand, use, and defend environmental resources. The need to strengthen a 'commons perspective' that emphasises the growth and protection of shared, public resources cuts across both EJ-CJ and DR fields. Technologists and data activists on their part have argued for a 'commoning' of technology, data, information, and digital infrastructures in order to build systems parallel to those held under monopoly control by Big Tech corporations.

Key Intersections

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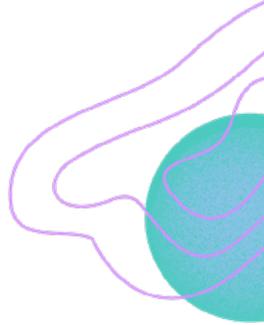
Several key issue intersections arose through our research and we explore them in subsequent sections. These are areas where we heard consensus around specific points of concern, but where the practitioners also identify numerous concrete opportunities – flagged in the body of this work in dedicated sections – for funders, practitioners, organisations, communities and activists to explore in further cross-cutting work.

Key Intersection #1:

✛ Sustainable internet and technology

A number of initiatives in both the corporate and nonprofit technology spheres are tackling sustainability issues, working to increase the efficiency of technological infrastructure and transition this infrastructure to renewable energy sources. This work is being pushed forward by a variety of actors, including Big Tech company sustainability initiatives, small social enterprise actors, nonprofit organisations, and grassroots groups. But the diversity of those involved creates silos, each with different values, approaches and focuses. The sustainability practices of commercial tech actors are currently opaque and inconsistent, 'greenwashing' is common, and there's a sectoral need to develop a more fine-grained understanding of the carbon consumption and environmental impacts of digital technologies.

Opportunities to explore include: exposing Big Tech harms and advancing sustainability goals by pushing for greater transparency and accountability in Big Tech; challenging greenwashing; fostering greater solidarity with social justice groups that are challenging Big Tech and the

environmental harms they cause through a justice-centred lens on tech work; strengthening circular approaches to technology; incorporating learnings for the DR space from the fossil fuel divestment movement; continuing to build out holistic assessment frameworks for tech's impact on society and the planet; and promoting policy at the intersection of digital and climate/environmental issues.

Key Intersection #2:

✚ Access to information and information disorder

The ability to access the internet was repeatedly raised in interviews as a continued problem that affects communities' access to information and thus limits their ability to respond to the climate crisis. For climate and environmental movements and communities affected by environmental and climate change related harms, simply getting online – where more and more climate activism is happening – is a persistent challenge. In parallel, climate-related disinformation continues to spread and grow online – a problem fanned by Big Tech platforms' reluctance to forego digital advertising revenue from climate change denier lobbies and fossil fuel companies, and by a lack of clear legal mandates, both of which have fostered inaction.

Opportunities to explore include: taking action around persistent internet access challenges; creating more inclusive digital platforms that go beyond traditional literacy; further research and advocacy around information disorder; and changing disinformation narratives through creative techniques.

Key Intersection #3:

✚ Safety and defence

With new laws banning protest, and intensified surveillance against climate movements around the world, the climate and environmental justice practitioners we've spoken to have expressed deep concern about the ability of their communities and movements to protest and push back against those perpetrating harm. Figures released by Global Witness in late 2021 show a rising tally of environmental and land defenders killed for their involvement

in conflicts with mining companies, rebel groups, and governments. Much of the targeting of activists has taken place via digital platforms, where they might be identified, trolled, or doxxed; this digital targeting often translates to offline harassment and, in cases involving powerful opposition, has resulted in activists being killed. This scenario means that safety (and digital security) is a fundamental precondition to continuing EJ-CJ work at the present moment.

Opportunities to explore include: growing digital security capacity in EJ-CJ movements, with a focus on transitioning from ad hoc to systemic and long-term digital security approaches; and providing legal support to fight against the criminalisation of activism at the intersections of DR, data, and EJ-CJ issues.

Key Intersection #4:

✚ Data-driven monitoring to understand current and future environments

For decades, scientists, policy experts and communities have collected and analysed data for the purpose of monitoring and tracking changes in the climate and environment. This data has been used to push for new regulation, set climate targets, and end specific environmental harms. More recently, the widespread availability of digital data, cheap sensors, and 'smart' infrastructures have opened up new possibilities for data collection: different kinds of climate- and environment-related data collection efforts can now be found across a range of sectors. In our research, the just and responsible collection, sharing, and stewarding of climate and environmental data emerged as a priority concern.

Opportunities to explore include: strengthening connections between DR data governance and environmental data governance through just, local data stewardship approaches; challenging the data practices of commercially driven 'smart' environments like smart cities and living labs; and bringing responsible data considerations into 'AI for good'/'AI for planet' and data-driven environmental, climate, and sustainability initiatives.

Key Intersection #5:

✚ Migration justice

The climate crisis is already pushing vulnerable populations to militarised international borders, and the deepening crisis will lead to increased migration. Surveillance-intensive border technologies are being used to pre-empt migration and, in their extreme form, to render the journey deadly. For both EJ-CJ and DR movements, preparing for increasing migration, and for the attendant increasing militarisation and digitisation of borders and surveillance of people on the move, can be thought of as being well within the scope of measures and work related to climate adaptation.

Opportunities to explore include: supporting organisations, campaigns and coalitions working on tech, borders and migration, and climate change; supporting petitions and strategic litigation challenging non-transparent data practices and tech use in border management and migration repression; and supporting research and documentation at the intersections of migration, climate change and tech.

Recommendations

01

Support contextual learning and convening opportunities

01.1

Organise & fund convenings for EJ-CJ and DR communities to meet, articulate potential agendas, and map their overlaps: Interviewees flagged the importance of opportunities for DR and EJ-CJ practitioners to learn more about each other's respective areas of focus and current priorities at events such as conferences, workshops, and matchmaking events. One possibility is to invite EJ-CJ groups into DR convenings; another might be to support conference travel for DR groups and funders to join EJ-CJ spaces and deepen their knowledge about current climate priorities.

01.2

Create opportunities for existing and future grantees to learn from one another and explore potential collaborations: Interviewees who have benefited from funding expressed a keen interest in more opportunities to learn about the work of fellow grantees working on DR, EJ-CJ and intersecting issues. This could happen through matchmaking events for grantees – particularly those across different programmes within the same grantmaking entity – to share their work and explore potential avenues of collaboration.

02

Foster the development of cross-cutting projects and programmes

02.1

Support collaborative projects for practitioners across DR and EJ-CJ to work out issue intersections through practice: Speaking of the importance – as well as the challenge – of establishing shared lexicons across different movements, interviewees suggested that opportunities for hands-on work through collaboration on campaigns, research, or implementation projects could help build these shared lexicons. The 'Opportunities' we explore across the five Key Intersections identified in this report offer some compelling potential pathways to explore for collaborations and projects.

02.2

Support the growth of cross-cutting organisational agendas and programmes: At the moment, many EJ groups' engagement with DR topics remain 'boundary concerns' rather than strategic priorities, while many DR groups don't see environmental and climate issues as within their remit. One starting point in fostering more cross-cutting agendas would be to support existing DR organisations with funding to do an assessment of their own strategies and intersections with EJ-CJ issues. Another might be to provide fellowship opportunities for practitioners already working on cross-cutting issues to support DR organisations to bring a climate and environmental lens to existing programmatic agendas.

03

Build the capacity and well-being of both EJ-CJ and DR actors

03.1

Support tech and community maintenance processes: Both DR and EJ-CJ actors noted trouble getting funds for tech infrastructure and maintenance. EJ-CJ actors are in particular need of long-term support on digital security, rather than one-off digital security training or ad-hoc support. Maintenance is also an issue where it concerns communities' ability to steward their own justice-centred tech and data platforms. Funders could allocate portions of grants to be used for the hiring and maintenance of IT and digital security staff or consultants.

03.2

Centre safety and protection in funding approaches, as a part of creating sustainable movements: Prioritising safety and protection – in both digital and physical dimensions – is fundamental to the work of EJ-CJ and DR activists. In addition to digital security support, this includes legal protections. EJ-CJ actors in particular highlighted that grants often do not cover legal support in their structures, presenting an opportunity for DR funders to be mindful of these needs as they enter these spaces.

04

Foster funding strategies that meet movements and communities where they are:

04.1

Make room for informal networks, small groups, and grassroots organisations in funding strategies: As DR funders explore how to support and centre EJ-CJ work in their strategies, EJ-CJ practitioners we interviewed ask funders to create more pathways of support for local grass-roots groups and movements. Some potential avenues to consider include microgrants, matchmaker grants, and equitable grants through partners. Increasing the accessibility of the funding application process is important.

04.2

Fund groups led by Indigenous Peoples to participate in cross-cutting DR and EJ-CJ work: As of 2021, only 1% of climate funding goes to Indigenous-led groups. At the same time, these groups are at the fore-front of essential climate and environmental work around the world. For DR funders working at this intersection, it's critical to include Indigenous-led groups from the outset.

13

04.3

Consider strategies for divestment and reinvestment: At a moment when funders are evaluating their investment strategies, EJ-CJ activists ask funders to take stock of whether they have shares in polluting companies or tech giants. Funders should disclose any potential conflicts of interest, but also consider a more structural approach by exploring divestment from fossil fuel companies and Big Tech companies implicated in extractive practices. Funders should also support investment in responsible innovation that's aligned with environmental and climate justice, and explore learnings from the climate movement's 'degrowth' approach.

04.4

Foster participatory grantmaking: To shift power and decision-making towards communities and actors doing the work, participatory grantmaking can play a fundamental role in making sure funding is flowing to the most relevant and impactful work at the DR/EJ intersection. This can include co-creating funding strategies, changing agendas according to feedback, including community members in application review and creating accountability mechanisms that hold grantmakers accountable.

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