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Towards More Equitable and Climate Resilient Communities with Jola Ajibade

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Jola Ajibade

[00:00:00] Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship innovations and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

My name is Jola Ajibade. I'm an associate professor in the Department of Geography at Portland State University. My work actually lies at the intersection of climate change, urban resilience and climate adaptation. What do I mean by this? What I mean is that I use environmental justice and political ecology LENS to study the uneven impact of climate change on different [00:01:00] communities, but also the uneven impacts of climate solutions.

Essentially, my work looks at what are the different climate solutions that are available, but also what are the environmental justice issues with those projects. Who benefits and who loses? How do we ensure that climate adaptation and resilience projects are indeed addressing climate impacts, and reducing social vulnerability and not causing more harm? How can our climate adaptation and resilience projects contribute to climate justice and in trying to understand those things, I push for ideas that allow to think about just urban adaptations and just transformations, which means essentially disrupting the current status quo that we have in society and thinking about alternatives, planning processes, our norms, alliances, and relations of production, that can actually lead to a more just livable and sustainable urban futures.

So I have a number of projects. One of the core projects is called Portland Equitable Resilience to Climate Cascading Hazards, called PERCH, and our goal is to identify levels of transformation in how we can actually ensure equitable resilience in the Portland metro area, not just in Portland City.

One of the key goals of the project, or should I say, the key question we're trying to understand is how does climate interact with social vulnerability and baseline resilience factors to create compounding impacts for different groups? Communal resilience. There are different ways people frame the word resilience. So what does community mean? Community means it could be a group of people living in a particular location. Community could mean, you know, the state, the state you're living in. It could mean the city you are living in. It could also mean differences in groups with a particular identity.

And so when I'm looking at the word community, I'm looking at multiple types of communities. From the individual and also from different cities. I work mostly at the urban level. My framing of community often involves urban population in different areas, but then when we're talking about resilience, usually resilience has to do with the ability of people or the capacity that they have to be able to withstand, whether it's an external hazard, or an external stress, or and being able to [typically the world is] bounce back. But again, we know that when we're thinking about bouncing back is not to bounce back to a status quo where it's something that already made you vulnerable in the first place. So you're not, the frame of community of resilience now is not bouncing back, actually passing forward, creating

opportunities that make it better for people to cope with multiple hazards, individual hazards, but also being able to deal with existing socio-economic crises. Not just the climate crisis, right? We have the climate as an issue, but we also have existing social [00:04:00] vulnerabilities and existing poverty. And existing inequality, whether it is racial inequality or gender inequality, makes it very difficult for people to respond to differences. And so when I'm thinking about community resilience, I'm thinking about multiple communities, but I'm also thinking about the capacity of these communities to be able to bounce forward, particularly when they go through multiple crises, some of which may include climate induced crises, but others not only climate induced, but social induced crisis as well. That's one key.

The second issue is the climate drivers, right? So you have the hazards that it could be a wildfire, it could be a heat wave, it could be flooding, or it could be an ice storm. So there, those are the drivers that we see, but what are the big drivers on the climatic side that is shaping these extreme events and what are the odes between the temporal, I'm talking about the temporal threshold and also the special threshold [00:05:00] that actually allows this different assets to up on whether simultaneously or in includes proximity to one another.

The key hazards we're looking at and trying to understand their drivers include, its wildfire, air pollution, ice storm and flooding. And then the thought component is what are the institutional barriers and opportunities for advancing equitable and innovative strategies to mitigate this cascading climate related hazard?

So we're looking at existing policies in the metro region. Looking at policies in Multnomah County. Policy in Washington County, Clackamas County, Yamhill, trying to understand, are there policies that are already thinking or already ahead in identifying compounding hazards or cascading hazards or conservative hazards. Are there ways in which our policy makers are already thinking about that? Or if they're not. Part of our work is to identify the gaps in existing policy and then to prefer recommendation in terms of number [00:06:00] one, we need to start thinking of the multiple hazard and you know, how they're occurring and the different ecological and environmental as well as organizational factors and suddenly social factors that come together to make this hazards more severe on particular groups, but also another key part of our policy analysis that we're doing on this project to understand, how has equity been framed in the past few I would say almost 20 years as the framing of equity in response to, as a change, as it evolved. And is it really taken into consideration the kinds of vulnerabilities that we have now and the different groups, whether it's Black, Latinos, Asian, or even white populations? What are the different groups that have been affected by different cascadian hazards? And where are these people located? What types of other, are they being mostly affected by? What resources are available to them? And what kind of policies do we need to make to be able to catch up with this climate, [00:07:00] impacts that we're seeing?

So those are the very broad goals of the project. Our work actually is one of the first few research that is looking at a grounded approach to starting cascading hazards. When we're talking about cascading hazards we're talking about hazards that have physical connection and so we came up with this theory in part because there has been a lot of research done, as you know in the hazard resilience space to study or to come up with all kinds of indicators, to study social vulnerability people like Susan Kota has done a lot of work in that area. She created a social vulnerability framework. She also created another framework, which is this disaster resilience of place to understand what makes a particular place resilient or not

resilient, things like that, and groups of people living there and there is another framework she had, which is the brick framework, Baseline resilience indicators for communities. But all of these different [00:08:00] indicators, they're not very dynamic, right? This studies resilience or even vulnerability at a point in time, like a snapshot of what's going on. So what we are trying to do with the Crescent Framework, number one, is to build upon what Kota certainly has done with the Soviet framework, also with the break framework. Trying to understand, number one, what is the baseline resilience, Whether it's social resilience, which has a lot to do with community capital, resources that people have, institutions, or also whether we're thinking of institutional resilience or we're thinking about economic resilience.

So we're using some of the framework that she's developed, but we're trying to make them a bit more dynamic, trying to look at them and also bring them into conversations with different drivers of the, you know, climatic drivers that are shaping the impacts of climate change, but also the drivers of different impacts.

What are the drivers that are allowing some groups to be more vulnerable, less vulnerable? In terms of where they live in [00:09:00] terms of the things they're able to do or not able to do. But I think another key component that I find exciting is also the drivers of opportunities, not just at the individual level, but also at the group level.

What are some of the things that are shaping the resources that people have that are shaping the opportunities that become available, both in terms of historical shifts in opportunities, but also contemporary avenues for building solidarity and building grassroots responses to natural disasters that we've seen.

And so for us, the whole idea of the network theory is to bring together the climatic driver, the social vulnerability and the resilience framework, but also the policy side of things as well as the community based resources that are available to help us understand what is going on in the system, right? So we're looking at a metro area as a system and trying to see what are the things in the [00:10:00] system we're thinking about the shifting and changing climatic impacts where we're experiencing, and particularly when it comes to cascading hazards what are the things in the system that makes us vulnerable and also who in the system is most vulnerable. But also how can we use what we have currently, the innovations that we have in the knowledge, the resources, the, you know, all the real groundswell of interest around climate change to sort of shift and change the system in ways that it can be more livable, in ways that it can be more resilient, but also in ways that can be more just, even as we respond to the impacts of climate change.

So that's really the idea of network theory. What are the networks of things that we, you know, that are going on, and how do they shift and change and come together? And what are the actors, you know, in these different spaces? So that's what we're trying to do. But I think it's actually a framework that is promising because of the dynamic [00:11:00] way in which framing residents and vulnerability, but also in the dynamic way in which we're looking at resources.

For responding to this multi-level or multiple disasters that may be cascading or that are currently coming together to create compounding impacts on different communities. One of

the key things is that we can't, we are gonna develop a deeper understanding of the drivers that actually shape particular extreme events, but also shape multiple extreme events.

And so that gives us a sense of what we need to do in terms of mitigating or finding ways to reduce the potential for those drivers to coincide together. So that's one thing in terms of knowledge and application. The other issue is that the information we're gonna also produce allows us to prepare the community for the kinds of responses that will be needed.

And so the knowledge we're gonna generate is going to be helpful in preparedness. Hopefully we don't experience that kind of disaster in a few years to come but at least if it was to happen again, we will be prepared and we will not lose the number of people we lost in 2021. In the States, we lost over a hundred people, I think about a hundred and just in Multnomah County alone we lost 72 people to the heat wave. And so the kind of work we're doing is also up to give a sense of the kinds of risks that we're likely to experience going into the future and where investments are required to mitigate or at least to moderate the impact of those risks and which communities need those investments like now.

So our work also will help inform where we need those resources? What kind of resources do we need to invest, when do we need to invest them, and to what extent the benefits they might yield for the communities, but also for the metro region. So it's been a very rewarding [00:13:00] opportunity to be doing this project and to be learning so much and also to be making, hopefully, a significant impact in our region here.

My name is Jola Ajibade. My research focus is on ways to increase equity and justice in climate adaptation and resilience plans, investments and projects. I also study our climate resilience project. Transforming society for better or for worse.