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Morgan, Courtney

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Conceptions and praxis of justice:

an analysis of activist perspectives from within current South African climate justice movements



Master of Arts by Dissertation in Geography

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Courtney Morgan

Supervisor: Dr Siân Butcher

848201

Abstract

This research seeks to investigate how climate justice movements in South Africa conceptualise and operationalise justice. Justice is relevant to the discussion around climate change because there is an unequal experience of the crisis. Those who are affected most by the climate crisis are those who, historically did not create the issue and now bear a higher environmental and climate disadvantage. They are also not economically, or socially equipped to deal with the effects of climate change. Justice is also a concept which is often researched philosophically or theoretically and not as an implementable practice, it is complex because it is defined differently by different groups. To conduct this research, a feminist, qualitative approach was taken, using in-depth semi-structured interviews with activists who have been key in initiating and organising climate justice movements in South Africa, and document analysis. The activist participants shared insights into the history of current climate justice movements in South Africa; their own conceptions of justice shaped and shifted through their involvement in struggle; challenges facing current climate justice movements and those obstructing the building a united climate justice movement. The participants also detailed practices they employed for operationalising their conceptions of justice, both in current movements and what is needed for a united climate justice movement in the future. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that South African climate justice activists, because of their involvement in other social movements have a necessarily multi-faceted conception of justice, in the context of a highly complex issue and are facing unique and unprecedented challenges as a movement. Additionally, that these multi-faceted, socioeconomic, ecological, intersectional, systemic and democratic conceptions of justice forged through struggle make a significant offering to the understanding of justice, beyond the climate justice movement. This dissertation also argues that in the movement, there is a need to build convergences and solidarities across sectors, movements and groups of society in a way that does not compromise the radical demands of the climate justice movement.