

00:01

I've got to start by admitting that in many ways me giving a talk about how climate action can help Black communities is surprising. I grew up poor and Black with a single mother in Tottenham, one of the most deprived areas in London, in the 1970s and '80s. Climate change was the last thing on my mind. And representing Tottenham as its member of Parliament for the past 20 years, my focus has been on trying to reduce the deprivation I grew up around.

00:30

In the past, the climate crisis never featured at the forefront of my politics because it was never one of the most immediate challenges my constituents were facing, or at least it didn't feel like it. Rising sea levels feel unimportant when your bank balance is falling. Global warming is not your concern when you can't pay the heating bills. And you're not thinking about pollution when you're being stopped by the police. And so perhaps this is why as the Black Lives Matter movement roared across the world, there's been so little mention of saving Black lives from the climate emergency.

01:04

For too long, those of us who cared about racial justice treated environmental justice as though it was elitist. And at the same time, the leaders who did focus on climate change were usually white and rarely bothered to enlist the support of Black voices in their work. Even progressive allies sometimes took our votes for granted and assumed that our community didn't care or wouldn't understand.

01:30

The truth is the opposite is true. Black people breathe in the most toxic air relative to the general population. We are more likely to suffer from respiratory diseases like asthma. And it is people of color who are more likely to suffer in the climate crisis. This is no coincidence. The cheapest housing tends to be next to the busiest roads, and many of the lowest paid jobs are in the most polluting industries. People of color consistently lie at the bottom of the housing, educational and employment ladders. This story connects Black communities across the world, from London to Lagos to LA. Black Americans are exposed to 56 percent more pollution than they cause. White Americans breathe 17 percent less air pollution than they produce. It gives a whole new meaning to the Black Lives Matter slogan "I can't breathe."

02:34

We all rightly know the name of George Floyd, who was murdered by the police. But we should also know the name of Ella Kissi-Debrah. Ella, a nine-year-old mixed-race girl from South East London, was killed by a fatal asthma attack. Evidence suggests this was caused partly by the unlawful levels of air pollution near her home.

02:59

And it's not only urban areas where Black lives are disproportionately under threat from climate change. My parents' home country of Guyana is one of the most vulnerable countries on Earth to the effects of climate change. So far, Guyana has contributed relatively little to the climate emergency, but it's one of the countries facing the most serious threats from it. While the annual carbon dioxide emissions per head in the United States is a staggering 16.5 metric tons, in Guyana it's just 2.6. It is a pattern repeated across the globe. Those countries that have contributed least to the climate breakdown, mainly in the global south, will suffer the most from floods, droughts, and rising temperatures. This is a pattern of suffering with a long history.

03:53

The exploitation of our planet's natural resources has always been tied to the exploitation of people of color. The logic of colonization was to extract valuable resources from our planet through force, paying no attention to its secondary effects. The climate crisis is in a way colonialism's natural conclusion.

04:17

The solution is to build a new coalition made up of all the groups most affected by this emergency: Black people in American cities who are already protesting that they cannot breathe; people of color in Guyana watching sea levels rise to the point where many of their homes become uninhabitable; young people in places like Tottenham, London, afraid of the world that they will grow old in; and progressive allies from all nations, of all races, religions, creeds and ages on their side, all demanding recognition that climate justice is linked to racial justice, social justice and intergenerational justice too. And let me say something about how we build this new movement and what it must look like.

05:02

First, we need a recognition that the climate movement is not only about protecting the planet. It is primarily about caring for the people who live on the planet. Globally as well as nationally, we need to recognize structural imbalances and inequalities. A radical green recovery plan should

provide jobs to the people who've been disenfranchised for centuries, new jobs planting trees, insulating buildings and working on green technologies. We cannot tackle the climate crisis without addressing racial inequalities. And we cannot solve racial inequalities without fixing the economic system. The new deal the economy needs is not only green, it's green and Black.

05:50

Second, we need more Black leaders. It cannot be right in 2020 that almost all the leading climate change activists we recognize are white. At Davos this year, five young female members of the Fridays for Future movement came together to give a press conference at the World Economic Forum. This is a picture the Associated Press put out. Here is the original image. As the Ugandan activist, Vanessa Nakate, herself put it afterwards, "You didn't just erase a photo, you erased a continent." We need to look at who is being cropped out of leadership positions in environmental organizations too.

06:39

People of color makeup around 40 percent of the United States population. So why is it a University of Michigan study found that the percentage of minorities in leadership positions in US environmental organizations is less than 12 percent? Global organizations should consider moving their headquarters to the global south and urban areas that are most affected by the climate emergency. There should be new scholarships and bursaries in environmental science for people of color. Educate yourself. Join great movements that recognize the links between climate and race. To name a few, the Black Environment Network and Wretched of the Earth.

07:22

And finally, racial injustice and climate injustice are both rooted in the evil notion that some lives are more important than others. If you march to say Black Lives Matter in Minneapolis, London or Sydney, please also march for the Black lives on the Caribbean island of Haiti as its children are displaced by storms. Please also march for the Black lives being lost in Darfur, the first climate change conflict. And please also march for the Indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest, as Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro weakens its protections.

07:59

If we are serious about protecting Black lives in the Global South as well as the north, we need to strengthen international laws. We need a way to apply international criminal laws, like war crimes or crimes against humanity, to the planet. We need a new international law of ecocide to criminalize the willful and widespread destruction of the environment, a law that criminalizes the most severe crimes against nature itself, even for acts don't involve direct human suffering.

08:31

Economics, race and class are at the center of today's political struggles. The Black Lives Matter movement needs to wake up to climate injustices just as the climate movement must make every effort to include the reality of people of color.

08:48

Young Black boys growing up in single-parent households in Tottenham won't have the opportunities I had in a world ravaged by climate chaos. My distant cousins and relatives growing up in Guyana won't have a future if their homes are drowning under water.

09:05

Now is the time for Black and climate movements to come together unequivocally and say, "We can't breathe."

09:14

Thank you very much.