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## Environmental Justice Activists React to Candidates in Flint Debate

By RUTH MCCAMBRIDGE | March 9, 2016

March 8, 2016; Inside Climate News (<http://insideclimatenews.org/news/08032016/environmental-justice-racism-flint-water-crisis-hillary-clinton-bernie-sanders-debate-climate-change>)

Writing for *Inside Climate News*, Lisa Song reports that some environmental activists believe that in the Sanders/Clinton debate, both candidates failed to connect the dots when it comes to the disproportionate effects of environmental and climate disasters on communities of color. Song reports that advocates urged the two candidates to take on the issue of environmental justice explicitly.

Well-known environmental advocate Robert Bullard, dean of Texas Southern University's School of Public Affairs and an advisor to Clinton on environmental justice, commented, "I was looking for more specifics in terms of policy, plans, proposals and strategies that would lift up environmental justice and climate justice, and to bring home the point that...race is playing [a role] in terms of making communities more vulnerable."

Bullard said that the candidates could have used the debate to acknowledge and bring attention to the larger systemic problem, which includes Chicago neighborhoods that are "devastated with pollution" and Native American tribal lands in Louisiana sinking from sea-level rise.

Daniel Faber, a sociology professor at Northeastern University and an adviser to the Bernie Sanders campaign on the subject of environmental justice, said both candidates hurt their campaigns by sidestepping the issue, but that Sanders "missed a golden opportunity" to not only address the issue head on but to cite his environmental justice record, which includes co-sponsorship of a Congressional environmental justice bill.

Before the debate, a petition asking for "a real debate on the problems of racial justice, environmental racism, and the solutions of climate justice" had been circulated. Sponsored by 18 environmental and social justice groups, including 350.org, Climate Hawks Vote, the Indigenous Environmental Network and Presente.org, there were 95,000 signatures.

In the past, both Sanders and Clinton have raised the issue of demographics relative to the Flint crisis, but at the debate they spent their time criticizing the Republican state government's role in the water crisis and restated their commitment to climate action.

On their websites both candidates are more explicit. "Like income inequality, environmental inequality is rapidly growing in the United States," according to BernieSanders.com. "The environmental violence being inflicted on these communities of color is taking a terrible toll, and must be made a national priority. [...] We need to mitigate climate change and focus on building resilience in low-income and minority communities."

Meanwhile, the Hillary for America website says, "As president, Hillary will make environmental justice a priority by working to reduce air pollution, investing in the removal of toxins like lead, developing greener and more resilient infrastructure, tackling energy poverty, and boosting efforts to clean up highly polluted toxic sites."

Despite some sense of missed opportunity, advocates were pleased by the fact that the debate was held in Flint and that the candidates got as close to the issue as they did. "Flint has brought the epidemic of environmental justice and systemic racism to the forefront of not only this debate, but also the presidential election," said Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition. Michael Garfield, director of the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, marveled at the fact that the candidates "spent nearly a half hour talking about safe drinking water, environmental health and justice issues, and climate action...Has that ever happened before in a Presidential debate? It's about time!!"

It's hard to gauge the impact of a single debate, but it's worth noting that Sanders won the Democratic Michigan primary last night (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/09/us/politics/primary-elections-michigan.html>) in what some are calling the biggest political upset in modern political history (<http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-the-stunning-bernie-sanders-win-in-michigan-means/>). —Ruth McCambridge

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