

Implementing climate justice in Boston's Building Performance Standard

Claudia V. Diezmartínez^{1*}, Benjamin K. Sovacool², Anne G. Short Gianotti³

^{1, 2, 3} Department of Earth and Environment, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

¹cvdiezm@bu.edu; ²sovacool@bu.edu; ³agshort@bu.edu

* Corresponding author

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Boston's [Building Emissions Reduction and Disclosure Ordinance \(BERDO\)](#) provides an early example of how contestations around climate justice are already shaping cities' implementation of climate action on the ground. As a landmark in equitable implementation efforts, BERDO highlights important challenges in putting climate justice into practice, including working within a program's scope and scale constraints, translating justice goals into bureaucratic processes, and managing the potential weaponization of justice claims.

Messages for Policy

- Disputes about climate justice took a central role in the implementation of BERDO, pointing to lessons and challenges for enacting just actions to address building decarbonization in cities.
- Climate justice requires holistic action, but a single program, such as BERDO, is constrained in its *scope and scale*. Acknowledging these limits is vital to building trust between city officials and community members.
- Implementation involves standardizing climate justice into concrete measures. This *bureaucratization* risks reducing justice into box-checking exercises that do not always reflect justice ideals.
- The pursuit of climate justice can be *weaponized* to stall or impede action. If justice efforts are co-opted to advance the agendas of elites, existing inequities could deepen.
- Notions of care, compassion, and other intangibles are key for the everyday *practice* of climate justice. These ideals are exercised through the mundane decisions that cities will take moving forward.
- Climate justice calls for *ordinary innovations* (e.g., incorporating Community Advisory Groups in rulemaking) - small but meaningful changes that reimagine everyday tools and practices in the service of justice.

The policy problem

Cities in the U.S. are taking an important role in the pursuit of climate justice, a movement that recognizes the inequitable impacts of climate change for historically marginalized groups and advances justice through climate action. While city governments are increasingly integrating justice into their climate goals and plans, many questions remain about how cities will be able to operationalize climate justice in practice. Here, we examine how cities are implementing climate justice through a case study of BERDO, one of the first Building Performance Standards in the U.S., representing a growing building decarbonization approach across the country. BERDO is one of the few policies of its kind that explicitly incorporates justice mandates, including the creation of a community-driven [Review Board](#) with significant decision-making authorities over the implementation of the program, and the establishment of the [Equitable Emissions Investment Fund](#) to support building decarbonization in environmental justice communities.

The findings

Our research demonstrates climate justice has been a key component of implementing BERDO. Boston city officials sought to enact climate justice by elevating community voices (advocacy, community leaders, residents) in rulemaking processes, while maintaining the buy-in of parties subject to BERDO (real estate, hospitals, universities, other building owners). In this process, multiple actors could contest and reinterpret the justice mandates embedded in BERDO (e.g., *What does prioritizing benefits for environmental justice populations mean? Who should the Review Board represent?*) (Figure 1). Different actors mobilized arguments about justice to advance their interests (e.g., *protecting tenants versus minimizing regulatory burdens*), ultimately shaping how BERDO has been operationalized on the ground, both in the planning process and the resulting implementation decisions. This unique case study of the implementation of an equity-oriented policy revealed distinctive challenges in operationalizing climate justice, including scope and scale discrepancies, the bureaucratization of justice, and the weaponizing of justice.

The study

We investigated the first two years of the implementation of BERDO with a particular focus on rulemaking, that is, the process through which the City of Boston developed rules and regulations to implement and enforce BERDO. We used a mixed-methods approach that combined five months of participant observation within Boston's Environment Department, twenty interviews with city staff and community leaders involved in the implementation of BERDO, and a systematic content analysis of over 200 policy documents related to rulemaking. This rich combination of multiple qualitative methods provided us with in-depth insight into the social, cultural, and political context in which BERDO is unfolding. This enabled us to directly track and experience the process through which the justice goals and mandates embedded in BERDO were debated, re-interpreted, and ultimately translated into specific regulatory and implementation decisions.

Source research

Diezmartínez, C.V., Sovacool, B.K. & Short Gianotti, A.G. Operationalizing climate justice in the implementation of Boston's Building Performance Standard. *Nat Cities* (2024)

Further Reading

Diezmartínez, C. V. & Short Gianotti, A. G. US cities increasingly integrate justice into climate planning and create policy tools for climate justice. *Nat Commun* **13**, 5763 (2022).

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-022-33392-9> **This paper analyzes how the largest cities in the US are incorporating justice into their climate action plans and introduces policy tools that pioneer cities have developed to operationalize just climate policies on the ground.**

Diezmartínez, C. V. & Short Gianotti, A. G. Municipal finance shapes urban climate action and justice. *Nature Climate Change* **14**, 247–252 (2024). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-024-01924-4>. **This paper analyzes how cities' financial decisions structure the implementation of climate action and highlights ways that climate justice is potentially transforming municipal finance in the United States.**

Hughes, S. & Hoffmann, M. Just urban transitions: Toward a research agenda. *WIREs Climate Change* **11**, (2020). <https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wcc.640> **This paper reviews existing environmental, climate, and energy justice literature in the urban context, putting forward a research agenda focused on just urban transitions.**

Figure 1

Justice contestations in the rulemaking process of BERDO. Different actors framed and mobilized multiple contestations around ideals of justice, equity, and fairness to advance their interests and shape implementation decisions. Disputes centering around justice can be categorized into issues of distribution, procedure, and recognition.

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Competing interests

Claudia V. Diezmartínez continues to be an employee of the City of Boston's Environment Department. The co-authors declare no competing interests.