







# Designing for Climate Justice

## A Conversation with Dr. Dorceta E. Taylor

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**I**n this conversation, Nonprofit Quarterly's president and editor in chief, Cyndi Suarez, and preeminent environmental justice scholar Dorceta E. Taylor discuss the distinction between the climate change and climate justice narratives, why the distinction is critical, and what's needed in order to address the climate crisis in ways that are equitable, effective, and transformative on a global scale.

*Dr. Taylor is senior associate dean of diversity, equity, and inclusion and a professor at the Yale School of the Environment. In 2014, Dr. Taylor authored the landmark national report The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations, Government Agencies, which looked at close to two hundred environmental organizations in the United States and brought into focus the staggering injustices for people of color vis-à-vis these organizations. Dr. Taylor has published such influential books as, most recently, The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection (Duke University Press, 2016), which examines how conservation ideas and politics are tied to social dynamics such as racism, classism, and gender discrimination.*

*Cyndi Suarez is NPQ's president and editor in chief. She is author of The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics, in which she outlines a new theory and practice of power. She has worked as a strategy and innovation consultant with a focus on networks and platforms for social movements. Her studies were in feminist theory and organizational development for social change.*

**Cyndi Suarez:** Welcome, Dr. Taylor.

**Dorceta Taylor:** Thank you very much for having me.

**CS:** I'd like to begin with distinguishing between climate change and climate justice, as I know you make this distinction in your research. Why do you make this distinction? How do we define these terms?

**DT:** Great question. When we think of climate change—or the way climate change has historically been framed—it looks at the science, and it looks at how changing climate and the conditions related to that might impact us as a global species, and impact trees, forests, wildlife, et cetera. What that framing doesn't do very well, or at all, is take into consideration disproportionality. Changing climate is affecting humanity, but it affects people differently.

Take the U.S., for instance. There are disproportionate impacts on Native communities in Alaska, along the Pacific Northwest coast, and in California. If you go to the Florida Gulf Coast or up along the South Atlantic, you see disproportionate impacts there, too—the effects of rising seawater, bigger storms, more frequent storms. You see those events disproportionately along the East Coast and the Gulf Coast, and you see them affecting Black people in those communities in very negative ways, disproportionately with respect to how they affect higher-income whites, for instance.

The discourse around climate change points out the challenges that we're facing and the imminency of the problem and the dangers—but it completely misses the intersectional analysis of how poverty, race, and class are going to make some people more vulnerable.

Internationally, we see some of the same events. There is sea-level rise in Europe, too. But if we look at what's happening in Africa, in Southeast Asia, in island nations, we're seeing much more significant impact being meted out in Brown communities, Black communities, and poor and low-income communities than in some of the upper-income communities, where people can afford to leave, to beat the storm. They can fly out in their jets; they can get on their yachts. *They can leave spaces. They can migrate to other countries.* So, climate justice is a corrective: it says, climate matters—it matters in a huge way; but the justice piece has to be a part of the analysis if we are to understand just how much more dangerous and life-threatening what we're talking about is for some people than for others.

**CS:** You've also looked at the organizations, and the funding, and seen that disconnect replicated there, right? Can you talk a bit about what you found?

**DT:** Our preliminary analysis shows a huge disparity in the amount of grant dollars going to low-income communities of color, and disparities related to the race of the person who runs the organization. If you are white and you run an environmental organization, your average grant dollars are a lot higher than if you're a person of color running an environmental organization. We're also seeing these disparities according to race and topic.

Take, for instance, three organizations—two led by people of color and a third headed by a white leader. If one of these, the first, works on climate justice or environmental justice, their average grant dollars are lower than those of the second organization, which works on issues unrelated to equity and justice. And we see quite clearly that if we take organizations that work solely on equity and justice—so, environmental justice, climate justice, et cetera—but the head of that organization is white, like the third, they get more grant dollars

than if they are people of color. So, we're seeing these disparities that no one's really thought to look for in the bigger picture. We also see a difference if the organization focuses most of its effort on people of color. Regardless of whether it's led by whites or not, it gets lower grant dollars than if it doesn't focus on people of color as the main target group.

We're going to be doing much more detailed analysis later this year, and on a much larger scale. We will examine about thirty thousand grants made by several hundred grantmakers, over a five-year period. But those are the dynamics showing up—dynamics that, for instance, a recently formed group called Donors of Color Network has picked up on and started to question why it's happening,<sup>1</sup> and is asking: How can we expect to mitigate climate change, mitigate some of the dangers of environmental injustice, if we're not funding the frontline communities that need more help and are also doing significant work in this area? Why isn't the funding there? The Donors of Color Network has put out an ask to environmental foundations to dedicate at least 30 percent of their funding dollars to low-income communities, communities of color, communities/organizations led by people of color.<sup>2</sup>

**CS:** I'm wondering what you see as the inversion that's needed—and where it's needed the most—where there are the least resources. What do you see being the trajectory if we keep going this way?

**DT:** If we keep going this way, we're going to hell in a handbasket. And we probably won't even have a basket to go to hell in. We are in big trouble. Because, as we started the conversation, these communities were being hardest hit by some of the mega events that we've been seeing—events like Katrina. We saw Maria, how devastating it was to Puerto Rico, to the Virgin Islands, to other parts of the Caribbean. We see these mega tornadoes, tsunamis that are incredibly dangerous and



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that do extensive damage in communities. So, if these are the same communities that are getting very little funding, they simply will not be able to recover; they won't be able to have that resilience to bounce back, and bounce back either to the same level or better. The capacity is wiped out. If people are forced to leave these communities every time they get devastated, you're also just wiping out your human infrastructure, your organizational infrastructure. It makes very little sense.

The other thing that we see happening when we look at funding is what people of color are asked to do with the amount of funding they get. If you give an organization \$100,000, for instance, and you're asking them to do youth engagement, work around disparities in health exposures, work around food justice, you're asking them to do eight or nine things with \$100,000 (all of which require a lot more than \$100,000 to do), then you're really reducing the effectiveness of those activists and those communities. The funding is too little and the ask is too big. If you look at Big Green organizations—your top ten/top twenty environmental organizations—they will usually get \$2 or \$3 million. And they're asked to put that money to one or two issues. So their asks are very targeted, they get money for very targeted actions—whereas people-of-color organizations, organizations in low-income communities, are getting a tenth of the money and being asked to do maybe three or four times more work.

**CS:** I was in Puerto Rico last year, and in the five days that I was there I saw the whole electricity system shut down on the island. It was during the earthquakes. And I was talking to a colleague of mine earlier this week who does environmental work in Puerto Rico, and I asked him what it's been like since Hurricane Maria, especially after COVID. And he told me that he and his wife went away for a vacation, and that when they came back, it hit them, what they had gotten used to living with. And that it is now



something that people are used to living with. Electrical poles that are leaning and could fall on people and kill them. Electricity going out twice a week, which apparently is the average there now. Water that is not really safe to drink. Streets filled with holes. Because there's not much government infrastructure anymore.

When I went there, it was very stressful, I have to say. It's like being in a place that has just had a huge event—except it's years later. And my colleague said that people have gotten used to it. It's a very politically engaged community, but apparently there are few civic engagement or leadership development groups, and no one's really funding for organizing.

**DT:** Foundations, philanthropy, are very uncomfortable with putting money into communities of color as general support grants. Something like organizing would come under "general support," which you can use for staffing, for mobilizing the community, for paying community members—you can do a variety of things with it. Frankly, philanthropy does not trust Brown and Black people enough with the funds to put those kinds of dollars in. They will always trust Big Green organizations, big nonprofits that are loaded down with staff. They trust those organizations enough to give them a million, two million, three million, five million, but they will not put that kind of money in communities of color, in organizations within communities of color. We're perfectly capable of managing that money, managing it appropriately, and getting bigger impact. Because those are the communities that know how to really get people to the table, get the work done, who know what the problems are.

**CS:** So, let's imagine we had that. I know you have a lot of great ideas and recommendations for what can be done if we invest in these communities. You've talked about how one of the reasons climate work is so racialized is because of where people of color live and the unequal policies. Can you talk about what you're seeing and what could actually change if we did invest in these communities?

**DT:** There are some innovative things going on around the country, even with such limited funding and trust from foundations. Communities of color are not waiting to die by the ocean or be drowned out of their communities, like what we saw during Katrina, and Maria, and in Houston—people are not waiting anymore. So, if you look across the country, you will see communities of color working on solar energy projects to lower energy bills in low-income homes, et cetera. You will see the organizing that's going on in Flint since the water crisis. You will see that communities are developing what they're calling *regenerative programs*, to consider the whole community and how you lift it *all* up. You see this happening on Native reservations, where they're not just looking at one program and saying, let's work on one program and get that fixed. They're looking at the whole community—jobs, infrastructure building. They're looking at ways to be resilient when that next storm, that next flood, comes in.

We're seeing this in Detroit, in Flint, in New York—if you look at work that's being done by people in organizations like UPROSE and WE ACT. Really cutting edge. And it goes from the basis of community organizing—that's at the base of it—all the way through to, let's figure out how to put solar panels on a home; let's train youth how to do this; wind energy; let's put electric cars in low-income neighborhoods. Things that I'm sure Tesla folks are not thinking about when they're building their cars, because they're thinking about the upper-middle-class white client who can afford that second or third car that you plug in and take to Whole Foods and

look very cool doing it. What people in low-income communities are thinking about are things like what if the taxi drivers in their neighborhoods had electric vehicles? It could cut down on their costs. It could help. What if the neighborhoods had more hybrid cars and electric vehicles? What would that mean for the carbon footprint of those neighborhoods? And can they get solar and wind into the communities so you're cutting down on people's energy bills, you're owning it cooperatively, you're feeding back into the grid, you're making money? If you look at California—Oakland—you see these kinds of programs at Green For All and GRID Alternatives. These are the innovative ideas coming out of low-income communities.

What is *not* there is funding to, for instance, put solar panels on every rooftop in the South Bronx, in Detroit. What would that mean for energy generation but also income and being able to survive in those communities? In places like Puerto Rico, they're portable—portable solar packs—so that when the electricity goes off on the main grid, you can generate yours. And they're almost like generators—you can generate your own energy. Why doesn't everybody in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have one of those things? So that your medicine doesn't go bad, so that you aren't suffering from heat stroke because your home is too hot in the summer. Some of these solutions are actually relatively easy to implement. What's happening is the government is overlooking these communities, and foundations are reticent to put their dollars in to get those things directly to the people and to start seeing some impacts. We're just seeing folds, cracks, as we look at all the spaces where we need these inputs of dollars to get these communities to be more resilient. And again, in the era of COVID, you know, when you look at food security, for example—all of those things have huge impacts on communities of color on top of the impacts of the pandemic.



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**CS:** You’ve also talked about larger policy that could be really helpful if we were to invest in these communities. You’ve talked about how we actually have the technology in place along the coast that’s effective already, that other countries have been using. Can you say more about that?

**DT:** If you go to parts of Europe, for instance, good portions of those countries are below sea level, and they build very substantial water control systems. They don’t just have a little dirt levee—they don’t just say, you know, “We’re going to put up a levee. Good luck, folks, if that is breached.” If you look at a place like New Orleans, there are so many cities in Europe that are just as low or lower, with the same kind of geographic setup, where you have water coming from the north into a city that’s very low lying, and that water has to go out to the ocean. You see this all the time in European cities, but, recent unexpectedly catastrophic flooding in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands notwithstanding, they have good drainage, they have control over that water flow, and they can release and remove that water without having entire cities go underwater the way we saw New Orleans go.

And they have plans for egress. We saw what happened in New Orleans during Katrina. Folks who tried to get out and tried too late wound up stuck on bridges or stuck in the city, because it wasn’t possible to get out quickly. Even cities like New York. If we had a massive catastrophe in New York City, how would we move people to safer outlying areas? How many millions of people can we move? How long would it take to do that? Do we have the infrastructure? Do we have the underground train infrastructure? Do we have the above-ground highways? Are we going to try to move all of New York City out on its bridges? From a logistical point of view, it’s just not making sense that we’re not investing, and the people who will invariably be left behind are old people, people of color, people with

disabilities, poor people—who cannot exit in that first wave or don’t have transportation to exit. Storm events like Sandy and Henri exposed the vulnerabilities of the New York metropolitan area. The extensive flooding that accompanied these storms crippled big swaths of the metro area. The storms also revealed that the infrastructure could not cope with the demands put on it. And of course, with quickening pace and more catastrophic climate change events, even those countries with superior disaster readiness will need to do much better.

In Beijing, they move millions of people underground traveling at high speed day and night. I remember being stunned when I was there. I’ve never been on a train with that many people in my life as I was on a Sunday at about 7:30 a.m. in Beijing. And they do this in part to deal with the horrendous traffic jams and air pollution that they have. And they’re ahead of the U.S., in that they plan to go below their first underground layer and create another that mimics what they have at that first subterranean level, so as to be able to move ten to thirteen million people if necessary quite rapidly.

We have a political system here that treats the word *infrastructure* as a radical or weird or too-far-left idea: “Don’t do anything about infrastructure!” So, we’re basically setting ourselves up for some very major problems as we move forward.

**CS:** What I hear you saying is that we really need to think about what infrastructure is now. And we need to think collectively about some of these things that currently are privatized or left to the individual to figure out. And maybe that everything has to be thought of that way—almost like designing for crises, right, because of the times we live in? Is that what you’re saying?

**DT:** I’m saying we have gotten away so far for a very long time as global populations, as human



beings, without asking the “What if?” questions enough. It’s like during the seventies and eighties, when we built a large number of nuclear facilities throughout the world but didn’t ask the basic questions, “What happens to the waste?” and, “Can we handle the waste safely?” “What happens if we have multiple kinds of catastrophic breakdowns in these kinds of facilities? Do we have the capability of dealing with them?” We’ve seen Fukushima, we’ve seen Three Mile Island, we’ve seen Chernobyl. And these are like poster children. If you look at all of those, it sometimes comes down to very simple issues that no one stopped to consider and ask: “Such and such could happen; how do we deal with this eventuality?”

So, it’s the same thing with infrastructure. We’ve built the bridges, the roads, the tall buildings. But—and—we haven’t asked the question enough: “Are we capable of handling what comes from it?” Some of our infrastructure is very old. We build the structures and sometimes we just leave them there. We’re at the point where some of them will not be able to last much longer without either a complete redo, or rethinking or redesigning how we do it. And if we’re unwilling as a country, now, to put that next wave of funding into really looking at our infrastructure, at how we can build in better ways and more efficiently . . . Well, it takes such big fights just to get the basic infrastructure pieces into perspective. Are we ever going to be able to get to that point—and really, it’s not a luxury—where we’re looking at the bigger picture of infrastructure?

When we think of infrastructure, we tend to think of roads, bridges, et cetera. But it’s also our housing. It’s the roads in the cities. We just came back from Michigan, and all the roads in the rural areas are being resurfaced. There are no potholes, but they’re being resurfaced, they’re being dug up, they’re being rebuilt. If you go to Detroit and Flint, there are potholes there; those roads are in such bad shape. But the money is not going into those communities. It’s



going into the rural communities, the sparsely populated parts of the state, the northern part of the state that gets much less traffic than the southern part. So the question becomes, Who’s distributing these infrastructure dollars? And why are they bypassing the areas that in many ways need them the most to areas that could probably wait another few months or a year before perfectly good roads are dug up to be resurfaced?

**CS:** I was interviewing Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley the other day, and we talked about infrastructure, because that’s something that she’s really trying to move forward. And we talked about how it’s all about the infrastructure and the budget right now, because it’s in communities of color and in poor communities where it would have the highest level of impact. I heard an episode on NPR recently about the roads in the U.S., how the building of a subway cost something like ten times what it costs in a comparable city anywhere else, because of environmental policy.<sup>3</sup> And I don’t remember what the outcome was, but there was this tension between the cost and the environment. And the fact that we have laws, and the way that the laws are implemented, actually cause more cost. So even that has to be redesigned so that it works in a way that doesn’t drive up costs. And that’s why we don’t build these things. So it seems like there are a lot of things to figure out about the system.

**DT:** Yes, it makes sense to look at environmental policies to see where they could be tweaked to be more effective. Some of those policies are put in place for very good reasons, so the cost can be factored in right away. The challenge is probably not usually the environmental



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legislation that prevents the road construction; it's more the politics of it, and who the politicians are who have the power and the clout to get the money into their communities.

**CS:** Yes, what they were saying in that episode was that a lot of it was left to people to fight on their own, as individuals. And that was where a lot of the cost was, because it was used in different ways. Can you talk a bit about the environmental justice fellowship that you started, and where that is now?

**DT:** I have two diversity fellowships. One, for undergraduates, is called the Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program. As of October 2021, this fellowship will be renamed the Yale Conservation Scholars—Early Leadership Initiative. I've been able to fund about forty undergraduates every year. They get two years of funding, and they go and work in an environmental nonprofit, in government, or with a professor, researching. And what that does for the undergraduates is give them that research experience, that work experience, and if they want to go to graduate school, it helps them to get there. Or if they want to go into the workforce, they can take that leg up—they don't have to start at the very bottom rung of an organization. We do a lot of career development, a lot of programming. I'm wrapping that up this year, and I'm going to start a new one.

Then, for graduate students, I have another internship opportunity, called the Environmental Fellows Program. This year, we had thirty-three graduate students, our largest cohort ever. Thirteen of them are PhD students; twenty are master's students. They have to complete at least a year in graduate school to be eligible. We place the Fellows all over the country—again, in environmental grantmaking organizations, because one of the things I think can be a solution to not seeing funding come into communities of color is to have more grantmakers, more program officers, who are people of color, who understand these communities, and who can have that trust to



put the money in. So, some of our fellows from the Environmental Fellows Program were in environmental grantmaking organizations. Some were in community groups. It's another way for me to put resources directly into the organizations that need them. It's to say, "Here's a free intern; you pay nothing." We cover the cost of the Fellows, because I go and get the grants for that cost. We placed interns at We the People of Detroit, at UPROSE, at WE ACT—all over the place.

**CS:** WE ACT?

**DT:** WE ACT is short for We Act for Environmental Justice, and it's in Harlem. It's Peggy Shepard's group, and they work on everything from climate justice, air pollution, and health disparities to voter registration. That's one of the big things we're seeing in a lot of environmentally based communities of color organizations—massive voter registration. You look at the flipping of Georgia—and it wouldn't have happened without all those environmental justice groups on the ground helping to organize those communities. When you listen to how groups like Race Forward—and we put a fellow in Race Forward this year—organized community, they were using an environmental justice lens to get people excited, to get them interested, to get them to the polls, and to get them standing at those polls twice, for a whole day or so, to vote. So, we're connecting all those dots the same way environmental justice groups are doing.

**CS:** Can I ask a question about the voter engagement in these organizations? Can you say a little bit more about what's driving that as a strategy now? What are they trying to move?

**DT:** That's always been a part of environmental justice and climate justice, but after 2016,

when people saw what happened in states like Michigan. . . . It's unclear if all the Black votes were ever counted in places like Detroit. And just looking at how the maps of some of these states lay out, it becomes clear that massive mobilization of communities of color was needed to get those states to flip Democratic. So, this happened all over the country—it wasn't just We the People of Detroit. It was an on-the-ground door to door: go in and talk to people, make sure they are registered, take them to the polls. All of that stuff is being done across the country. We saw it in Chicago, in Georgia, in Alabama—all of these states that at first look like they don't have that many votes to flip, or where it might look like people are not going to go to the polls. That on-the-ground organizing was unbelievable. And people make the connection between their electric bills and who's in office. When your energy bills are higher than anyplace else in the country, you begin to take notice. Flint pays one of the highest water rates in the country for water that they still cannot drink—five or six years after the crisis. Next, Detroit has very high water rates, as well as a high number of water shutoffs. There are high electric and gas bills as well as high rates of utility shutoffs in these and similar cities. However, corporations that are behind on their utility bills do not experience utility shutoffs. It is the low-income people, people of color, whose water and energy are shut off. So, communities of color are starting to connect these dots.

Between that and your kids having no playgrounds to play in, your trash not getting picked up, that facility down the road polluting your air, your water, your land, no grocery stores to shop in. . . . And if you look at the community organizing of Race Forward and similar organizations, they connect all of those pieces and then say, "You've got to go out to vote, because either you put people in office who will help you to change conditions in your community or you're going to live with the problems, and it's going to get worse."

**CS:** So, same thing they're finding in Puerto Rico.

**DT:** Yes. Right. You know, Alabama is Puerto Rico is Atlanta. . . . People are looking at Alabama and saying, "If we could flip Georgia. . . ." You can use a similar kind of logic in the Black Belt: get every conservative, churchgoing farmer to understand how his or her livelihood on the farm is connected to these bigger pieces—and get them to vote along with your suburban ring, your white allies, and the new immigrants. Because a lot of people didn't realize that suburban areas around cities like Atlanta now have an influx of Latinx and Asian and Arab populations—and that if you organize and flip those groups or get them to vote with you that first time, you've changed the dynamics. Michigan is like that, you know—Detroit and some of the suburbs, Flint, Ann Arbor, Lansing/East Lansing, Grand Rapids, Ypsilanti. If all of those go democratic, you win the state.

**CS:** It was like the climate report that came out this week<sup>4</sup>—you know, pointing out that in order to make any change on climate, we need to be able to move policy. And it's been a big thing to do as organizers: to make policy pass.

**DT:** Right.

**CS:** Thank you so much, Dr. Taylor. We've covered a lot. I have one last question. When we spoke earlier, you said you notice that the number of Black journalists covering climate justice has increased since last year. Can you speak about that?

**DT:** You're welcome, Cyndi—and thank you for having me. So, regarding the influx of Black journalists, it's something that I think has been happening quietly but quickly since the George Floyd massacre. And you know, prior to last year, if I got requests to do radio interviews, TV, et cetera—if I got contacted by, say, thirty journalists, maybe one or two (if I were lucky) in every two or three years would be Black. It's completely split since last year. BNC, Black News Channel, has been in touch



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with me two or three times just since last fall. The NPR stations, which are notoriously primarily white, now have young—*young*—Black journalists who are not just contacting me for news stories but for their own segments. They’re doing a lot of podcasts. In St. Louis . . . and all over New England I’ve been contacted by all these young African-American NPR-style journalists. I just did a segment with 1A, which I listen to in my car religiously, and both of the journalists were African American. In addition to that, I’m noticing a lot more print journalists who are also African American— and Latinx— contacting me. So, everything from *Bloomberg News* to *Gizmodo* to the *Wire*—all these news sources now have sourced people-of-color journalists. And then you have the independent ones—Hip Hop Caucus, for example, which runs its own podcast—reaching out to people like me to do interviews with them. So it has created a space for, especially, Black journalism, that I’ve never seen before. And then, of course, you have the traditional news outlets, like the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

They also now have more people-of-color journalists. But the big stories, the big scoops, are now coming from this new breed of journalists, who can get people like me to talk to them. And, you know, they’re getting really incredible stories now that are certainly getting the word out. And they’re on it at every turn. They seem to be more flexible than, like, a *New York Times*, which is still asking traditional questions. And by the time the old outlets get around to figuring out that environmental organizations are predominantly white, these younger journalists are scooping that story. And the story around funding and environmental organizations. A lot of journalists of color have picked up on that and are putting out the stories now.

## NOTES

1. See “Climate Funders Justice Pledge,” Donors of Color Network, accessed September 26, 2021, [climate.donorsofcolor.org/](http://climate.donorsofcolor.org/).
2. Ibid.
3. Jerusalem Demsas, “Why does it cost so much to build things in America?,” Vox, June 28, 2021, [www.vox.com/22534714/rail-roads-infrastructure-costs-america](http://www.vox.com/22534714/rail-roads-infrastructure-costs-america).
4. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, August 7, 2021), [www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_SPM.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf).

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