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Local Cures for the Climate Crisis

Book and event seek community remedies for intertwined issues of climate change, public health and social justice

The open-access book “Health of People, Health of Planet and Our Responsibility”—which casts global climate change as a public-health crisis—was never meant to just sit on a shelf or in a hard drive. The volume grew out of summits in Vatican City, organized by Monsignor Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (PAS), and PAS council member Veerabhadran Ramanathan of Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego, on the moral imperative to protect both nature and society. From the beginning, the book was meant to serve as a starting point for taking urgent actions.

To this end, the book’s editors and contributors gathered again, this time together with representatives from 15 different San Diego and Tijuana community organizations and with UC San Diego leadership, for a two-day virtual meetup Oct. 13-14.

The event was convened by three UC San Diego professors: public health scientist Dr. Wael Al-Delaimy of the School of Medicine and the Institute for Public Health; political scientist Fonna Forman of the Division of Social Sciences and the Center on Global Justice; and Scripps Oceanography climate scientist Ramanathan.

Al-Delaimy and Ramanathan are, with Sánchez Sorondo, co-editors of “Health of People, Health of Planet and Our Responsibility.” Forman is a contributor.

“The book is important, and it has hit a chord. There have been more than 190,000 downloads of chapters,” Al-Delaimy said. “But we need to act and, to do that, we need to reach out into communities, listen to them and get people involved.”

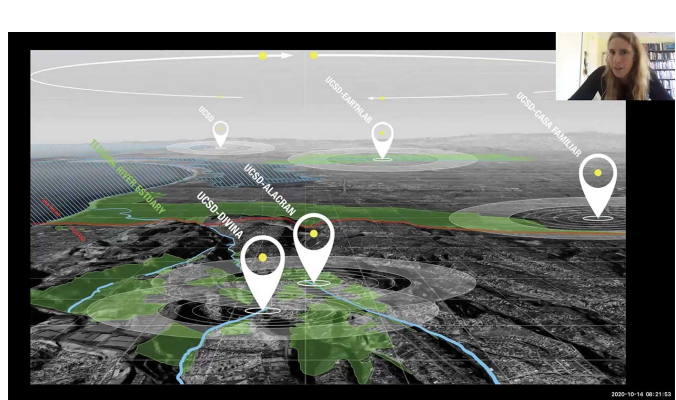
Al-Delaimy said each chapter of the book, written by a different collaborator, from scientists to politicians to grassroots organizers, is structured to identify an issue and propose a remedy, based upon science and empirical data. Some remedies are sweeping, such as implementing new national policies, but others focus on aspects of society and individual social action.

The virtual meetup, Forman said, was specifically geared toward connecting with community groups to gather ideas for moving forward together, university and communities in partnership, on the intertwined issues of climate change, public health, and social justice.

The event was originally planned long before COVID-19 and was converted from an in-person town hall to an online format because of it, but the pandemic added both urgency and poignancy.



At the virtual event, public health scientist Dr. Wael Al-Delaimy noted the “amazing array of backgrounds” coming together for this cause and emphasized the importance of listening to and working together with communities.



Social scientist Fonna Forman spoke about the importance of social justice and also discussed the work of the university’s Community Stations initiative, in “stations” on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana border.

“People of color, refugees, undocumented migrants, indigenous people and other marginalized populations around us share unique vulnerabilities and health disparities,” Forman said. “Just as they are most affected by the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, they are also most affected by the impacts of climate change.”

One aim of the meeting was to gather input for a proposed community-based initiative at UC San Diego that would work at the intersection of health and climate. Key questions included: How can scientists and social scientists better engage the public? And how can universities and communities partner more effectively to both increase public knowledge and mobilize action?

“Our state is a leader of climate mitigation,” said Ramanathan, “but in terms of coping—the technical term is adaptation—it’s still in a crisis mode. Our governor is basically fighting fires.”

Ramanathan said he believes UC San Diego may be uniquely positioned to do this work, and he doesn’t know of any other group doing something similar.

Thinking about adaptation at the local level is especially critical for the next 10 years, he said. “Each community, each city needs to form a plan for how we’re going to meet this runaway train,” Ramanathan said.

Organizations represented at the meeting included Casa Familiar and Groundwork San Diego, both of which are partners with the university’s [Community Stations](#) initiative, the FarmWorker CARE Coalition, Somali Family Service, Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental, the Leichtag Foundation, United Women of East Africa, Kurdish Community Center, Campaign for Climate Change, Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, Muslim Community Services and Jewish Family Service.



Jerry Brown, former governor of California, said we must mitigate climate change and also adapt to its consequences by working with cities and neighborhoods on local priorities.

Former California Gov. Jerry Brown spoke at the event, as did fellow book contributors Maria Neira, director of the World Health Organization’s public health and environment department, PAS President Joachim Von Braun and UMass Boston Chancellor Marcelo Suárez-Orozco. U.S. Congressman Scott Peters sent a video message. Welcome remarks were delivered by UC San Diego Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla and deans Cheryl Anderson, Margaret Leinen and Carol Padden.

“I think the planet is going to be OK,” said Brown. “It’s the living species that we have to worry about.” The effects of climate change will get worse before they get better, he said, and even as we strive to accelerate reductions in carbon emissions, we must figure out how to adapt. It’s vital, he emphasized, to get a sense of local priorities and ask people on the frontlines: “What do we do now?”

Next steps, said Al-Delaimy, are to translate ideas from and inspired by the e-book and meetings into pilot projects “with minimal or no funding and the hope that they attract support so we can go bigger.”

One such pilot, Forman said, may be a proposed course for UC San Diego where students would learn more about the intersection of public health and climate change. The course would build on [Bending the Curve: Climate Change Solutions](#), first piloted by Forman and Ramanathan at UC San Diego and now taught (and also available as an online course) throughout the UC system. Further, said Forman, who is an affiliated faculty member of the new Climate Action Lab in the UC San Diego



UC San Diego Center on Global Justice undergraduates lead an environmental workshop in 2017 at the UCSD-Divina Community Station in Tijuana's Laureles Canyon. Photo courtesy Fonna Forman.

Division of Social Sciences, instructors could tap students' energy and drive to reach out and connect through internships with youth in communities struggling with the health impacts of climate change.

Another may be to reach out to local doctors, said Al-Delaimy. Health care and climate have only recently become intertwined in the minds of people closest to the issues, he said. At the local level, among individual physicians and their patients, they likely remain separate. "Doctors have a lot of influence in their communities, but most aren't involved in the health impacts of climate. They should be," said Al-Delaimy. "They're the ones who are going to treat people for smoke inhalation from wildfires or illnesses caused by flooding and its effects."

A local doctor's involvement need not be grandiose. It can be as simple, Al-Delaimy said, as educating patients about how their health is affected by the consequences of climate change, such as increasingly frequent and intense heat waves or persistent air pollution.

More ideas yet to come, as Al-Delaimy, Forman and Ramanathan will continue meeting with interested community groups.

[Download "Health of People, Health of Planet and Our Responsibility"](#) from Springer Nature.

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