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The 4Rs of Climate Work: A Case Study of AmeriCorps

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Introduction

How are federal service corps programs working to address the climate crisis? This paper provides an overview of the ways that climate-related work is being undertaken in our nation's service and presents a framework that classifies how service corps programs are doing climate work. I integrate data collected from open-ended semi-structured interviews about the climate-related service being coordinated by AmeriCorps to map out the various ways that the agency is connecting individuals and organizations to support communities as they tackle the climate crisis.

This whitepaper is broken into three sections: first, I present the data and methods employed; second, I present a framework for understanding climate-related work, which falls into four categories—Reduction, Resilience, Response, and Recovery; and third, I discuss the implications of this work and present a summary of next steps in the project.

4Rs of Climate Work:
REDUCTION in emissions,
RESILIENCE to help
communities prepare for
climate change-exacerbated
events, **RESPONSE** to climate
change-exacerbated events, and
RECOVERY from climate
change-exacerbated events.

Data and Methods

Data for this paper were collected through a series of interviews that the research team conducted with the leadership at AmeriCorps, the small federal agency focused on national service and volunteerism.¹ Both agency leaders and those who oversee specific programs at the agency were asked to participate in an interview. The goal of the interview was to map out the range of work that each program was doing broadly, as well as to understand how each program was integrating aspects of climate change into their specific service efforts.

A list of the top twelve individuals working on programming across the agency was compiled. This list included those who are leading the various programs at the agency, along with members of AmeriCorps leadership who are involved in shaping the agency's climate-related work. Open-ended and semi-structured interviews were completed with eleven leaders from across the agency (the response rate was 92%): two from the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), AmeriCorps Seniors, and AmeriCorps VISTA, one from AmeriCorps State and National, and two advisors who work on climate-related special projects across the agency.

All interviews were transcribed and coded into general themes using NVivo. After coding the data into broad themes in software, analysis followed an iterative process that involved hand-coding the data from the relevant general themes into subthemes and then recoding these data once again to fit the emergent conceptual model.² In total, the data were coded and re-coded four times to distill the main themes and sub-themes. This whitepaper includes the results of the analysis regarding the climate-related work that the agency is doing and how the programs are defining their work.

¹ For details, see <https://americorps.gov/about>

² For details, see John Lofland and Lyn H. Lofland, "Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Research and Analysis," *Belmont, CA: Wadsworth*, 1995; Robert Stuart Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (Free Press, 1994).



As interviews were conducted for background and the interview data were collected from organizational leadership “off-the-record,” the identities of the speakers are not identified in this paper. In all cases, quotes have been edited to remove repetitive phrases and words such as “y’know, like, um, and kindof,” which have no bearing upon the content of the statements.

A Framework for Understanding Climate Work

In the results that follow, I begin by discussing the ways that leaders at AmeriCorps spoke about the challenges of defining the agency’s climate-related work. Then, I present a framework for understanding this climate-related work by classifying it into what I call the 4Rs of Climate Work:³ **Reduction** in emissions, **Resilience** to help communities prepare for climate change-exacerbated events, **Response** to climate change-exacerbated events, and **Recovery** from climate change-exacerbated events. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ways this framework can be employed by the agency to strengthen the climate-related work underway at AmeriCorps.

The Challenge of Climate-Related Work

Many members of AmeriCorps leadership explained that there is no consensus about how the agency is doing its climate work. This finding was consistently mentioned by AmeriCorps leaders when discussing all levels of the agency. Across the programs, we heard similar comments about how interpretations of what is “climate-related service” varies. As one leader put it, “even within the agency, we define it differently.”

“If you would ask the five people in my programming team, they would probably define [climate-related service work] in different ways.”

The inconsistency regarding how climate-related service was defined was also noted within programs: “If you would ask the five people in my programming team, they would probably define [climate-related work] in different ways.” Given the various ways that climate work is defined differently across the agency, leaders acknowledged that grantees also find it challenging to connect the work they are doing to climate

change. In one leader’s words, “grantees would never say that they were working on climate if you asked them.” When outlining one program’s work around resilience and climate adaptation, a different leader noted that AmeriCorps members “wouldn’t make that connection [to climate]...I think it all comes down to getting people [to understand] how they use the terms that we have and what terms need to be used.”

In other words, analyses of these interview data highlight the need to classify climate-related service work in a cohesive and coherent way. In addition, as I will discuss in the conclusion of this paper, these findings suggest that the agency would benefit from everyone—people serving within the agency as staff, along with participants (AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Senior volunteers), partners, grantees, and sponsors—utilizing a consistent language for referring to the varied aspects of climate work.

AmeriCorps’ climate-related work can be separated into four categories that span the climate mitigation-climate adaptation divide. Climate work at AmeriCorps aims both to reduce greenhouse

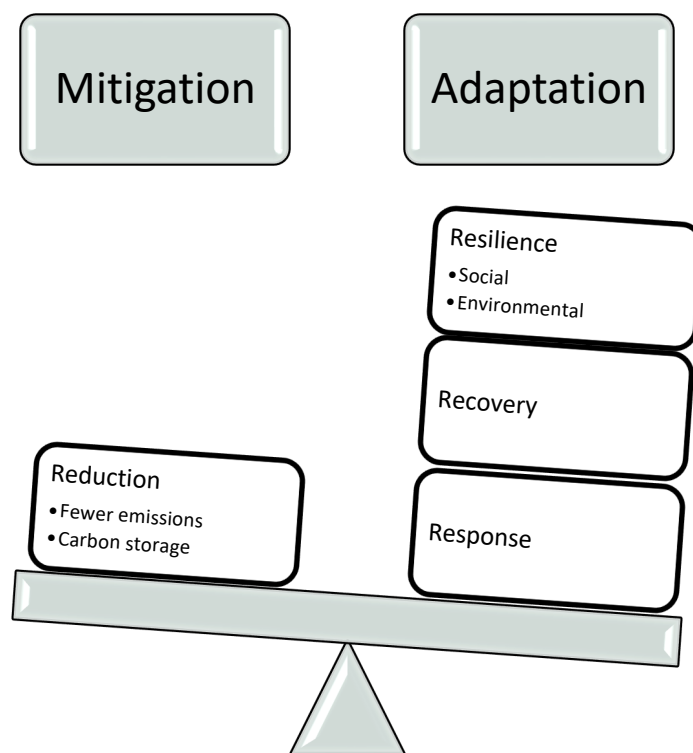
³ I use the shorthand of “climate work” to refer to climate-related work being undertaken by this agency throughout the paper.



gas emissions, as well as to prepare communities to be able to withstand events that are exacerbated by climate change and/or respond to and recover from these events after they take place. The following conceptual diagram presents the relationship among the four different components of climate work being undertaken by AmeriCorps.

This diagram illustrates the complex relationship among these different types of climate work: **the more people mitigate climate change** by reducing greenhouse gas emissions going directly into the atmosphere and/or drawing down emissions that have already been released into the atmosphere, **the less climate change-related adaptation will be needed.** Climate adaptation addresses the fact that, as the world warms, climate shocks—“deviations from normal environmental patterns in the form of drought, flood, heat wave, or other extreme events that have been exacerbated by climate change”⁴—are expected to become more severe and coming more frequently.⁵

Figure 1: The Relationship Between the 4Rs of Climate Work



⁴ For details, see Dana R. Fisher, *Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shocks to Climate Action* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2024), 3; see also Idean Salehyan and Cullen S. Hendrix, “Climate Shocks and Political Violence,” *Global Environmental Change* 28 (September 1, 2014): 239–50, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.07.007>; Gernot Wagner and Martin L. Weitzman, *Climate Shock: The Economic Consequences of a Hotter Planet*, 1st Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Meredith T. Niles and Jonathan D. Salerno, “A Cross-Country Analysis of Climate Shocks and Smallholder Food Insecurity,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 2 (February 23, 2018): e0192928, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0192928>; Samuel Sellers and Clark Gray, “Climate Shocks Constrain Human Fertility in Indonesia,” *World Development* 117 (May 1, 2019): 357–69, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.02.003>.

⁵ for details, see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group 1, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chap. 11, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-i/>.



R1: REDUCTION

The first R is the reduction of the concentrations of greenhouse gases that are accumulating in the atmosphere, or what many policymakers and researchers refer to as ‘Mitigation.’⁶ Climate mitigation involves both reducing the amount of greenhouse gases being emitted, as well as implementing strategies that absorb the carbon that has already accumulated. The United Nations Environment Programme summarizes: “Mitigation can mean using new technologies and renewable energies, making older equipment more energy efficient, or changing consumer behaviour. It can be as complex as a plan for a new city, or as simple as improving a cook stove design. Efforts around the world range from halting and reversing deforestation, high-tech subway systems to cycle paths.”⁷

Most service work that has a direct effect on reducing emissions involves energy-related projects. Leaders described weatherization programs and programs related to clean energy: “[In the energy bucket, there’s] weatherization, energy audits, some solar installation like grid alternatives.” Another leader provided more details about how their specific work reduces emissions: “Doing weatherization will help people lower their utility bills, which gives us a nice bipartisan way to talk about some of our climate work.”

Although a number of AmeriCorps leaders spoke about a wide range of service work that *could* be undertaken to reduce humans’ contribution to climate change, the examples of actual projects described by those overseeing specific service programs were much narrower. Some leaders mentioned specific programs that focus on wildfire mitigation. They listed a number of climate benefits that occurred when the destruction of trees by fire was limited: more trees mean more natural carbon sinks, and less emissions of carbon into the atmosphere from burning trees. One program leader provided an overview of the climate benefits of their wildfire-focused service programs: “How do we minimize the likelihood of large-scale wildfires? We’re trying to push to more of the mitigation work... [including] prescribed burns, reforestation, debris removal, hazardous fuel reduction, moving into more of that type of space.”

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The Other Three Rs: Resilience, Response, and Recovery

In contrast to the actions that AmeriCorps is taking to reduce human contributions to climate change by reducing or removing carbon emissions, the other Rs—Resilience, Response, and Recovery all focus on adapting to our changing climate.⁸ The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change provides an overview: “Adaptation refers to adjustments in

⁶ for an overview, see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group 3, *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), doi: 10.1017/9781009157926.

⁷ <https://www.unep.org/topics/climate-action/mitigation> (Accessed 3 June 2024).

⁸ For an overview, see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group 2, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>.



ecological, social or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects. It refers to changes in processes, practices and structures to moderate potential damages or to benefit from opportunities associated with climate change.”⁹ I disaggregate this adaptation work into three distinct categories: Resilience, Response, and Recovery. Resilience involves preparing communities *before* they are affected by climate change or a climate change-exacerbated event takes place. Response and recovery, in contrast, involve work that takes place *after* a climate change-exacerbated event.

Overall, the adaptation-focused service work is quite varied. This work involves preparing communities to be more capable of supporting their populations as the world warms, as well as helping communities when they experience the effects of climate change.

R2: RESILIENCE

Resilience involves preparing for the expected consequences of the climate crisis, which include both social and environmental changes. Most of the resilience work being undertaken by AmeriCorps focuses on social preparedness. Throughout our interviews, we heard about how AmeriCorps is engaging in a range of efforts to build capacity in communities to prepare for climate-exacerbated events and disasters. Leaders provided examples of how their work aimed to limit the climate-exacerbated effects of wildfire, hurricanes, and more. “[We are] now thinking about things that we can do in advance that might...minimize the negative impacts for people.”

Others were more specific about working to prepare for disaster: “In our training, what we are trying to do is reach as many of the grassroots mom and pop national service entities so they understand how they can organizationally prepare for a disaster, how they can prepare their members, how they can prepare their staff, and how they can help prepare the community that they are serving.” During our conversations, there was clear consensus that disasters are defined by the social consequences of extreme events, which are being exacerbated by climate change. Thus, there was an expectation that social resilience can limit disaster. As one leader explained, “if we are better prepared, we have less disasters.”

Beyond the focus on disaster, many programs are also working to build civic capacity more generally in underserved communities. Leaders pointed out how these efforts will make communities more resilient “through environmental education, urban revitalization and green economics.” They continued, this work includes “coordinating and recruiting volunteers, planning events and community engagement.” To that end, some programs work to expand community capacity by placing members “with local nonprofits...to do grant writing, designing databases and maps, conducting community outreach, recruiting volunteers for environmental stewardship projects, and cultivating new partnerships that support sustainable community development.”

Programs that involve gardening and expanding access to food were also mentioned repeatedly as a way of cultivating resilience. As one leader noted, “a functional food bank that is in that community is a really helpful start to that community being able to provide food when a disruption happens.” Another leader spoke about how their work building and maintaining community gardens cultivates resilience. The community gardens “work with the food bank to make sure that people are getting food...One of the things that we are starting to scope out and think about is...community resilience in terms of food security.”

⁹ <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/the-big-picture/introduction> (Accessed 3 June 2024).



Leaders also spoke about how much of their food system-related work was not considered climate-work even though it was helping to cultivate community resilience: We “are working in urban centers that are thinking about solving a food desert problem by integrating gardening... We're doing it under our healthy futures work. We're doing it around the hunger initiatives, but our community activists and organizers... get that they can both solve and impact hunger and also address some climate issues that are happening in the communities that they're serving as well.”

Another leader mentioned resilience-work focused on retraining individuals in energy-dependent communities for work in other sectors. These programs cultivate social resilience as areas transition away from fossil fuels. In addition to supporting workers in these areas, the programs help to identify and secure resources to support the local energy transition.

Again and again, leaders highlighted the ways that these various programs have numerous benefits to communities, including helping to make them better prepared to withstand the effects of our changing climate. Even though the resilience-focused work is quite varied, it all involves preparing communities to be more capable of supporting their populations as the world warms and the country transitions away from fossil fuels.

R3: RESPONSE

In contrast to the resilience work that focuses on preparing communities *before* climate change-exacerbated events occur, response takes place directly *after* disasters hit. This type of climate-work involves some of the less glamorous climate work. Program leaders referred to this type of work as the ‘mucking and gutting’ of structures post-disaster to make them safe and habitable again.

Response to climate change-exacerbated events was mentioned frequently throughout the interviews. Although disaster response is not commonly discussed as climate work, as climate shocks hit communities more frequently and with more severity, service corps programs are being called on more frequently to provide the labor to support a response to the immediate effects of these events. Many programs at AmeriCorps support response to extreme events, including “responding to fires or responding to hurricanes.”

While disaster response is the explicit focus of some programs at AmeriCorps, those leaders who work in this area lamented their being unable to work on recovery and resilience as well. As one leader explained, “the agency’s priority for us is immediate disaster response in partnership with FEMA. There is so much more we can be doing as far as long-term recovery and community resilience...When we respond to a disaster, we don't want to just come in and leave.”

A number of leaders echoed this sentiment, stressing how response is connected to recovery after a disaster or climate shock, but then explained that they do not have the resources to do the work that is needed. In the words of another leader, “it's a big country...we keep having responses...And so the opportunity to talk about preparedness, resilience and mitigation is pretty limited.”

Leaders from throughout AmeriCorps expressed their hope that they will “find ways for national service to be a continued support as far as strengthening these communities and building resilience.”



Leaders from throughout AmeriCorps expressed their hope that they will “find ways for national service to be a continued support as far as strengthening these communities and building resilience.” Although resilience was the overall goal, most leaders reported that they did not have the capacity to follow through beyond responding directly to disasters.

R4: RECOVERY

Recovery is the work that comes *after* the initial response to a climate-exacerbated event/disaster. It involves rebuilding communities after disaster hits so that the people and the environment are better prepared to withstand a changing climate that includes more frequent and severe climate shocks. Recovery work includes “technical expertise on how to stand up a long term recovery...[and doing] volunteer management across several different organizations where nobody's really in charge.” It is important to remember that this R—recovery—is quite similar to Resilience. However, in our framework, Resilience involves preparing *before* a climate-exacerbated disaster and Recovery comes *after* one.

Even though many leaders noted that they wanted to connect their response efforts to recovery, most reported not having the resources to do so. Given that fact, one leader explained how they aimed to bundle recovery preparations into their response work: “We try to get as much of that technical support and technical expertise into the community when we're there for response, so that when we pull out, they're able to carry on a little bit more smoothly.”

Leaders recounted how some programs had continued to work on recovery efforts post-disaster after some well-known disasters. Since Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, for example, AmeriCorps has continued programs that support community recovery: “When New Orleans happened...[we were there and we] continue to have a really large presence there.” Leaders also provided examples about how AmeriCorps has integrated recovery work into their efforts in Puerto Rico since Hurricane Maria devastated the island in 2017: “one of our largest food security initiative projects that we're funding across the country right now is in Puerto Rico. Those members were all redeployed to do disaster response in the immediate after-effects [of Hurricane Maria]. They have been incredibly helpful in helping the island [recover and] restitch their food delivery processes and making sure that communities get access to food.”

“One of our largest food security initiative projects that we're funding across the country right now is in Puerto Rico. Those members were all redeployed to do disaster response in the immediate after-effects [of Hurricane Maria]. They have been incredibly helpful in helping the island [recover and] restitch their food delivery processes and making sure that communities get access to food.”

Another leader described the ways they aim to support communities: “How do we rebuild confidence and trust in the communities, in our leaders? And [AmeriCorps members] do that while also planning after school programs...and figuring out how to get people food access.” This type of recovery work was referred to as “truth and reconciliation work” by some leaders.

As can be seen in this discussion, the climate-related work that focuses on adapting to our changing climate—resilience, response, and recovery—are all related. The more communities invest in resilience, the easier it will be for them to respond and recover from climate-exacerbated events.



Discussion & Conclusion

As interviews from leaders at AmeriCorps make abundantly clear, there is a range of climate work being undertaken in our nation's service; this work is much more detailed than the broad general classifications of mitigation and adaptation that are the standard for thinking about climate change. By expanding our conceptualization of this work into the 4Rs, it is much easier to identify and interpret the full range of ways that service corps are working directly to address the climate crisis.

The following table provides an overview of the 4Rs with examples of each category based on ongoing work at AmeriCorps.

Examples of AmeriCorps' Ongoing Climate-Work	
Reduction	All efforts the reduce concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, including weatherization, energy audits, clean energy installation, wildfire mitigation
Resilience	Social preparedness to limit effects of disaster (wildfire, hurricanes, etc), civic capacity building, and efforts to support and strengthen the food system and community development
Response	Responding to disasters (wildfire, hurricane, etc) including mucking and gutting of buildings
Recovery	Rebuilding communities after disaster hits so that the people and the environment are better prepared to withstand a changing climate, including food delivery, volunteer management, and all sorts of community support.

The aim of this whitepaper is to provide an overview of how exactly AmeriCorps' service corps programs are working on climate change. By presenting a clear classification of the various ways that AmeriCorps programs are doing climate-related work, this paper provides an important first step in understanding climate-related service work so that it can be employed more effectively as it expands both within and beyond our federal government. This framework also provides a first step in developing metrics to evaluate the effects of the full range of climate work being undertaken by AmeriCorps.

In the coming months, our team at American University will apply this framework to provide guidance and training for a sample of service corps programs as they expand their climate work with support from our AmeriCorps research grant. We are developing and evaluating a curriculum that will provide details about the 4Rs of climate work and how the service programs are working on aspects of climate change. Our hope is that this training will be a resource for everyone involved in the AmeriCorps' climate work. If people serving within the agency, along with members, partners, and grantees utilize the consistent language of the 4Rs to refer to their climate work, it will make it easier to connect the service work to climate change and evaluate the effects of the service.

The curriculum will be piloted in fall 2024, as we evaluate the effects of the climate-related service work on the people participating and the communities in which they work in a sample of programs. While we conduct pilots with programs across the country, we will also work with these programs to develop metrics that can be used to measure the environmental effects of the full range of climate work being done by AmeriCorps and its partners.



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