
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ADVOCACY: Public efforts (by individuals or groups) to influence policies, funding, or planning—often to promote climate justice, equitable adaptation, or community resilience.

ANTHROPOGENIC: Refers to environmental changes caused or influenced by humans, directly or indirectly.

CARBON FOOTPRINT: The total amount of greenhouse gases (like carbon dioxide or methane) generated by the actions of an individual, organization, product, or event.

CLIMATE CHANGE: A change in the average temperature and precipitation (like rainfall or snowfall) conditions over a long period of time due to natural processes or human activities. (NASA)

CLIMATE RESILIENCE: The ability of social, economic, and environmental systems to cope with, anticipate, and recover from climate disturbances (like floods or droughts). (NOAA)

CLIMATE ADAPTATION: The process of adjusting human or natural systems in response to actual or expected climate effects, to reduce harm or take advantage of new opportunities. (IPBES)

CLIMATE HAZARD: A natural or human-induced physical event (e.g. floods, storms, extreme heat) that may cause loss of life, injury, or other health impacts as well as damage to property, infrastructure, and livelihoods. (Lisa Dale, Columbia University)

CLIMATE MITIGATION: Actions aimed at limiting the magnitude or rate of climate change—typically by reducing greenhouse gas emissions or increasing capture of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, such as through reforestation. (IPBES)

CLIMATE JUSTICE / ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: A principle that addresses how the benefits and burdens of climate change and its responses are shared—emphasizing the fair treatment of all people, regardless of race, income, and background. The intent is to ensure that no community, especially those most vulnerable to climate harms, bears a disproportionate share of harm.

COOLING CENTRES: Publicly accessible, air-conditioned spaces (like libraries, senior centers, community centers) opened during heat waves to help people cool off safely.

COMMUNITY GARDENS & COMMUNITY FOOD PANTRIES: Shared, local spaces for growing food (gardens) or distributing it freely (pantries), improving access to fresh, healthy food in underserved/food insecure communities.

DANGEROUS DISREPAIR: refers to a building's condition that poses a significant risk to the health, safety, or well-being of its occupants and the public. This status goes beyond simple neglect and involves severe deterioration that can lead to injury, illness, or structural collapse

This list was created by the NYC Faith Sector Climate Adaptation Working Group, convened by Rebuild by Design and the NY Disaster Interfaith Services.

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DEVELOPERS (context: climate resilience/urban planning): refers to the actors (governments, urban planners, researchers, businesses, communities) involved in the process of designing, building, and managing cities to withstand and recover from climate change impacts

DISCRETIONARY FUNDING: Government funds allocated and decided annually by officials (not automatic spending), often used for grants to local resilience or community programs.

EXTREME HEAT / HEAT INDEX / HEAT STROKE / HEAT SAFETY

- **EXTREME HEAT:** unusually high temperatures that stress health and infrastructure
- **HEAT INDEX:** “feels-like” temperature combining heat and humidity
- **HEAT STROKE:** serious heat illness involving high body temperature and confusion
- **HEAT SAFETY:** guidelines to prevent heat-related illness—stay hydrated, avoid exertion during hottest parts of day, seek shade or cooling (US EPA)

FOOD EQUITY / FOOD JUSTICE: Ensuring all communities have equal access to healthy, affordable food and decision-making power over local food systems—connecting climate justice with public health.

FLOODING: when water from storms, rivers, or coastal surge inundates land and structures

FLOOD BARRIERS: physical or engineered structures (e.g., levees, sea walls, removable gates) designed to keep flood and sea water out

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE: An approach to water management that incorporates both the natural environment and engineered systems to provide clean water, improve air quality, and other benefits to communities. Green infrastructure such as parks, green roofs, or wetlands are able to protect, restore, or mimic the natural water cycle that enhances community safety and quality of life. (American Rivers)

GREEN JOBS: Employment in industries or sectors that contribute to preserving or restoring environmental quality—such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, and conservation. (EPA)

HOME BUY-OUTS: Voluntary programs where homeowners choose to sell their property (often in flood-prone or hazardous areas) to government agencies buy homes in flood-prone or hazardous areas, allowing residents to relocate before repeated disasters occur without losing their entire property’s value.

LAND USE: the process of creating and implementing regulations and plans for the development and use of land to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and community needs, ultimately guiding where residential, commercial, and industrial areas are located and how natural resources are managed for sustainable outcomes (see also zoning)

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LOSS AND DAMAGE: A climate justice concept addressing communities enduring impacts they cannot adapt to—compensation and support for irreversible losses due to climate events.

REGENERATION: Renewing a community or neighborhood through sustainable design and investment—often including new green space, affordable housing, better infrastructure, jobs, and environmental improvements.

SUSTAINABILITY: Meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs—balancing environmental protection, social equity, and economic viability. Sustainability is based on a simple principle: Everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. To pursue sustainability is to create and maintain the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations. (EPA)

TIPPING POINT: a critical threshold in the Earth’s climate system where a relatively small increase in temperature can trigger a dramatic and often irreversible change, leading to cascading and long-lasting impacts

UV INDEX: A standardized scale indicating strength of ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun—helps people know how strong the sun is and when to take sun protection precautions.

URBAN HEAT ISLAND: An urban area that is warmer than nearby areas within a city or rural areas due to concrete, buildings, reduced greenery and airflow. The difference in temperature between urban and less-developed rural areas has to do with how well the surfaces in each environment absorb and hold heat, with concrete and pavement absorbing and re-emitting heat. (NASA)

ZONING: Local government rules that determine how land can be used in different areas—e.g., residential, commercial, industrial, open space.