

# Climate Change Isn't Just an Environmental Issue – It Is a Justice Issue Too

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## **Abstract**

Climate change is often framed as an environmental issue, a challenge for scientists and ecologists to solve. While this is undoubtedly true, it is increasingly evident that climate change is fundamentally a justice problem. It is a problem of equity, fairness, and unequal distribution of burdens and benefits.

## **1 Introduction**

Climate change is frequently seen as a crisis that primarily concerns scientists, environmentalists, and policy-makers. However, it is increasingly evident that climate change is not just an environmental issue, but a profound justice issue. The impacts of climate change are not felt equally across the globe. Instead, they disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, especially in the Global South, despite their minimal contribution to the crisis.

## **2 The Unequal Burdens of Climate Change**

### **2.1 The Disproportionate Impact on Marginalised Communities**

The impacts of climate change are often felt most acutely by those who have contributed the least to global greenhouse gas emissions. Island nations, for instance, face the existential threat of disappearing beneath rising sea levels, while coastal cities in wealthy nations are grappling with the consequences of these changes. Similarly, extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, disproportionately affect marginalized communities who have the least capacity to adapt to these shocks.

In many parts of the world, such as the Global South, climate-induced disasters devastate communities that are already struggling with poverty and underdevelopment. Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central America are facing extreme challenges related to erratic weather patterns, prolonged droughts, and catastrophic flooding, all exacerbated by climate change.

## **2.2 Heat Waves and Urban Vulnerability**

Heat waves are becoming more frequent and intense, particularly in urban areas in the Global South. Cities such as Lagos, Nigeria, and Nairobi, Kenya, are experiencing unprecedented heat stress, which disproportionately affects the urban poor. These populations often reside in densely populated areas with limited access to cooling infrastructure, and are particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of extreme temperatures. Children, the elderly, and people with underlying health conditions are especially at risk.

## **2.3 Agriculture and Food Security**

Agriculture, the backbone of many African economies, is under siege from changing climatic conditions. Erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, and devastating floods are disrupting traditional farming practices and decimating livelihoods. Small-scale farmers, who make up a significant portion of the African population, bear the brunt of these climatic shocks, which can lead to food insecurity and economic instability.

## **2.4 Conflict and Resource Scarcity**

In regions such as the Sahel, desertification is advancing rapidly, exacerbating existing conflicts over scarce resources. As climate change acts as a threat multiplier, tensions between different groups intensify, particularly over access to water, land, and other vital resources. In coastal communities in countries like Nigeria and Mozambique, rising sea levels and coastal erosion are causing displacement and economic hardship, further complicating an already precarious situation.

## **2.5 Health and Disease Burden**

Climate change also affects health, with diseases like malaria and dengue fever expanding their geographic range due to changing climatic conditions. These diseases place immense strain on already fragile health systems, particularly in rural and impoverished regions. The spread of vector-borne diseases exacerbates the vulnerability of communities that are least equipped to handle such health challenges.

# **3 The Climate Justice Framework**

Climate justice is an approach to climate action that seeks to address the inequities and inequalities that are embedded in the climate crisis. At its core, climate justice recognizes that the impacts of climate change are not just environmental, but deeply tied to issues of social, economic, and political injustice.

## **3.1 Key Pillars of Climate Justice**

The concept of climate justice encompasses a broad spectrum of issues, and it is essential that a just transition to a low-carbon economy accounts for the needs and rights of those most impacted. The following six pillars are essential for building a climate justice framework:

1. **Just Transition:** This ensures that the shift to a green economy benefits all, especially workers in carbon-intensive industries. It includes policies that support job creation, retraining, and social safety nets.
2. **Social, Racial, and Environmental Justice:** Climate policies must address systemic inequalities and prioritize the needs of marginalized communities.
3. **Indigenous Climate Action:** Indigenous peoples are vital stewards of the land, holding traditional knowledge that is crucial for addressing climate change. Indigenous rights must be central to climate action.
4. **Community Resilience and Adaptation:** Building community capacity to withstand and recover from the impacts of climate change is a critical aspect of climate justice.
5. **Natural Climate Solutions:** Protecting and restoring ecosystems, such as forests, can provide nature-based solutions to mitigate climate change.
6. **Climate Education and Engagement:** A well-informed and engaged society is key to fostering a climate-conscious world, where everyone can contribute to meaningful change.

### 3.2 Core Principles of Climate Justice

To achieve climate justice, several guiding principles must inform our actions:

- **Human Rights:** Respect and protect the human rights of all individuals, particularly those most affected by climate change.
- **Equity and Fairness:** Share the benefits and burdens of climate action equitably, ensuring that no one is left behind.
- **Participatory Decision-Making:** Decision-making processes must be inclusive, transparent, and accountable, ensuring that those most affected by climate change have a voice.
- **Gender Equality:** Gender equality and equity must be central to all climate policies, as women and girls often bear a disproportionate burden in times of climate crisis.
- **Education and Empowerment:** Education is crucial for empowering individuals and communities to take climate action.
- **Partnerships:** Effective partnerships between governments, civil society, and the private sector are essential for achieving climate justice.

## 4 Conclusion

Climate change is not only an environmental issue but a moral and ethical challenge that requires a fundamental shift in our values and priorities. To address the crisis effectively,

we must center the voices of the most vulnerable populations, ensure an equitable transition to a low-carbon economy, and recognize the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic justice. By embracing the principles of climate justice, we can build a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all.