

Climate injustice



(AP Photo/Annika Hammerschlag)

Global, generational, and societal injustices, and the economic system



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The purpose of these educational materials is to help young people understand the climate crisis on a systems level through engaging with the topics and foster agency through the skills and techniques of journalism.

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We cannot be held liable for how these materials are used in practice.

These educational resources have been developed to the best of our knowledge, using reliable and widely-recognised sources. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and clarity, we cannot guarantee that the materials are free from errors or omissions. Climate change is a field of knowledge that continues to evolve, and teachers and learners are encouraged to consult up-to-date scientific sources (e.g. IPCC, IPBES or national agencies) to complement and enrich these activities.

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Learning objectives

1. Analyse how the causes and impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed across regions, and how these injustices manifest in different forms and scales
2. Conduct research to find real accounts of those being impacted, and devise questions for extracting information sensitively

✓ GreenComp alignment:

- Systems thinking
- Supporting fairness
- Exploratory thinking

Unit guide

This class begins with a discussion to get students interpreting a chart and thinking critically. It will help you and them have an understanding of what they already know about climate injustice.

We suggest that you have them read the instructions for the project before beginning your lecture on climate injustice based on the Learn texts, so that they can keep in mind what their task will be.

For the project: depending on time, you can have students go ahead and conduct the interviews and write a report out of it, using quotes, or just have them focus on researching and planning. You can download the unit on Interviewing for more information on finding interviewees and conducting interviews.

Here is the link to the **lesson slides**





OPENING ACTIVITY

Discuss

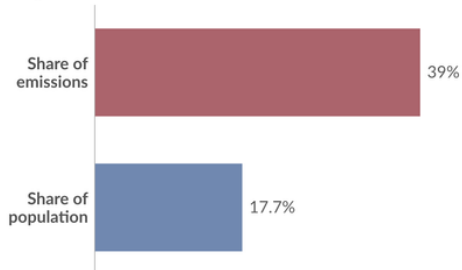
1. Explain what you see on the chart below. If you were to summarise the chart in one sentence what would it be?
2. Do you think what you see is fair? Explain.

Share of global CO₂ emissions and population, 2021

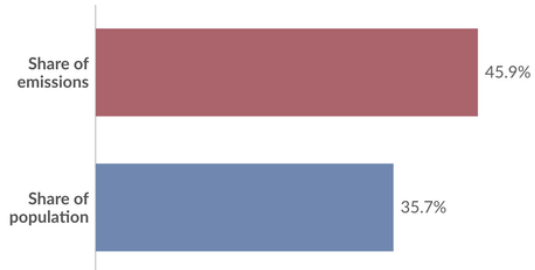
Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from fossil fuels and industry¹. Land-use change is not included.

Our World
in Data

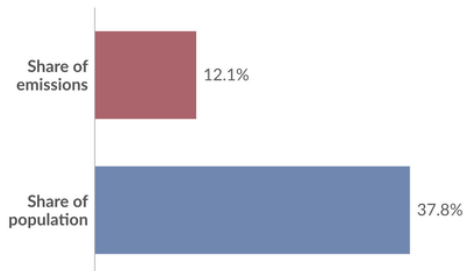
High-income countries



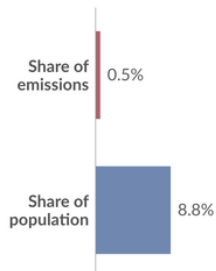
Upper-middle-income countries



Lower-middle-income countries



Low-income countries



Data source: HYDE (2023); Gapminder (2022); UN WPP (2024); Global Carbon Budget (2024)
OurWorldinData.org/co2-and-greenhouse-gas-emissions | CC BY

Figure 1: Chart from Our World in Data¹



Storytelling

"A story is someone doing something because..."

– Dave Tate, Canadian journalist and professor



Any story, fiction or non-fiction, comes alive through zooming in on one person's experience. An anecdote from one person helps an audience relate to the issue.

Your task: Find a human story

People everywhere are experiencing climate change.

After going through the Learn texts on the following pages, can you find one person to tell their story of climate injustice? They are either suffering from the impacts of climate change more than others, or doing something to create change in their community which is more severely affected by climate change than others. This doesn't have to be someone living far a different lifestyle far away. It might be someone within your own community.

Is their income/livelihood/wellbeing (including mental health) threatened from weather changes or environmental disasters? Do they have to move away from their home or their crops are affected by extreme weather? Are they starting a movement to grow trees in a concrete-heavy part of the city to create shade?

What questions can you ask them so that their story will show your audience the importance of your topic?

You can refer to the unit on interviewing and use the [below video](#) for ideas.

Instructions: Find someone, either by looking around your community or searching on social media, who has a story of being impacted by climate change. Brainstorm potential questions for this person, so that they would tell you the details of what is happening to them and why they're doing what they're doing. If you can, reach out and conduct the interview!





This unit will outline how both the responsibility for causing these emissions and the burden of their impacts are unevenly distributed across countries and among groups of people within countries.

1, Global North and Global South

Neither the activities which cause fossil fuel emissions, nor the impacts these cause on the climate, people and biodiversity are evenly distributed globally or socially.

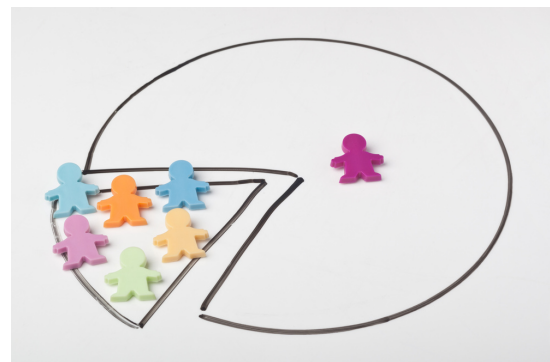
In summary, those most responsible for causing the impacts of climate change are those least likely to suffer from them. Throughout this set of materials, we will be referring to those causing the most impact as the 'Global North'.

The term 'Global North' is widely used in scientific literature around climate change and is used to refer to those countries and members of society around the world which emit most CO₂ emissions, consume most resources and are therefore most responsible for climate change.

Figure 1, on page 6, shows which regions of the world this majorly applies to. The parts of the global population that have a disproportionately large impact on climate, people and biodiversity are usually associated with considerable economic wealth accumulated through colonialism².

This is why terms such as 'rich' or 'highly developed' are sometimes used instead of the 'Global North'.

On the other side of climate change and climate injustice is the 'Global South'. The 'Global South' is usually associated with countries and parts of the global population which emit the least CO₂ emissions and consume the least resources, yet are the most affected by and vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis.



2. The role of our economic system

The Global North profits the most from the current prevailing growth-oriented economic system. This system, built on colonialism and extraction, is the root cause of the climate crisis³.

By growth-oriented economic system, we mean an economy whose primary goal is economic growth, measured through the Gross Domestic Product or GDP. GDP can be defined as a measure of the total market value of all the final goods and services produced in a country in a given period, often annually⁴.



What is the IPCC?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is the world's leading authority on climate science. It was established in 1988 by the United Nations to assess the scientific research on climate change. The IPCC doesn't conduct its own research but brings together thousands of scientists from around the world to review and summarise the latest studies.



However, GDP as a measure does not account how this created income is distributed among the population, does not incorporate any direct measure of wellbeing of the population or the environmental degradation that is caused.⁵

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)⁶, the leading scientific organisation that reviews research on climate change, economic growth is a main cause of increasing CO₂ emissions⁷.

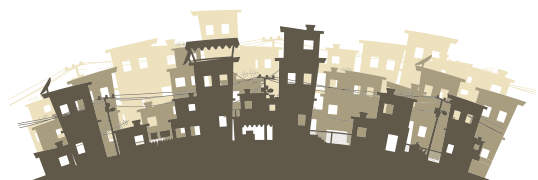
GDP has become more than just a monetary measure of how much we produce and consume within a country, but a measure of a country's 'progress'. Wealthier countries may be labelled 'developed' based on a high GDP per capita.

This also makes them better positioned in the global economy and decision-making spaces than less wealthy and 'developed' countries, even though the wealth of many rich

nations has been built on a history of colonisation.^{8 9}

This label of 'development' often masks significant ecological and social consequences, sometimes displaced onto less 'developed' countries, and growing social divides. Furthermore, never ending economic growth is not possible in our world with finite resources.

Focusing on economic output alone offers a skewed view of what really matters in a thriving society. In the current climate and injustice crises, could we imagine the goal of the economy to change from focusing on economic growth at all costs, to making sure everyone's needs are met, on a flourishing planet where all forms of life coexist in harmony?¹⁰





3. Climate injustice on a global scale

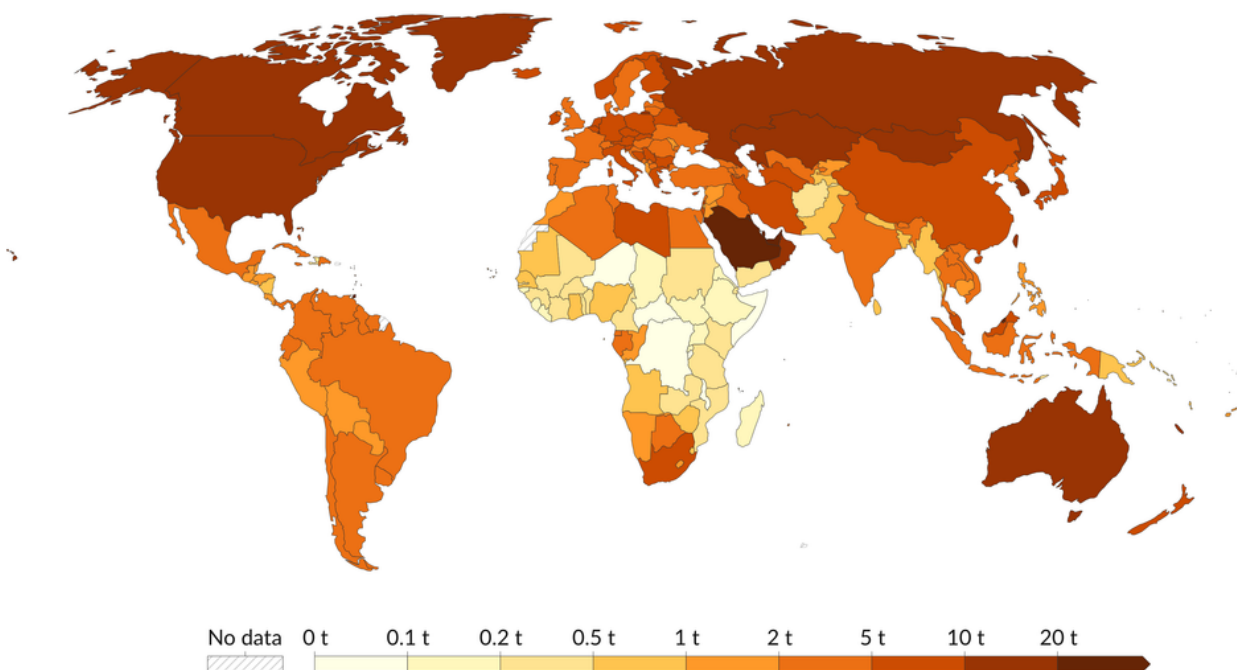
Entire countries do not fit into either category of Global North or Global South, as not everyone within a country benefits from the growth-oriented economic system. However, we can still calculate which countries on average contribute more or less to the climate crisis.

We can also project in which countries, generally speaking, the effects of climate change will be the most severe. By mapping these two out and comparing them, we can clearly see that those countries which are most responsible for the climate crisis are the least affected by it.

CO₂ emissions per capita, 2023

Our World
in Data

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from burning fossil fuels and industrial processes¹. This includes emissions from transport, electricity generation, and heating, but not land-use change².



Data source: Global Carbon Budget (2024); Population based on various sources (2024)
OurWorldinData.org/co2-and-greenhouse-gas-emissions | CC BY

Figure 2: Global per capita emissions per country. Map from OurWorldInData.¹¹

In the above figure we can see the global distribution of CO₂ emissions per capita. Higher emitting countries are currently (and in most cases have been for at least a century) contributing the most to global warming and the ensuing climate crisis. Let's compare it to a figure showing the climate vulnerability of each country.

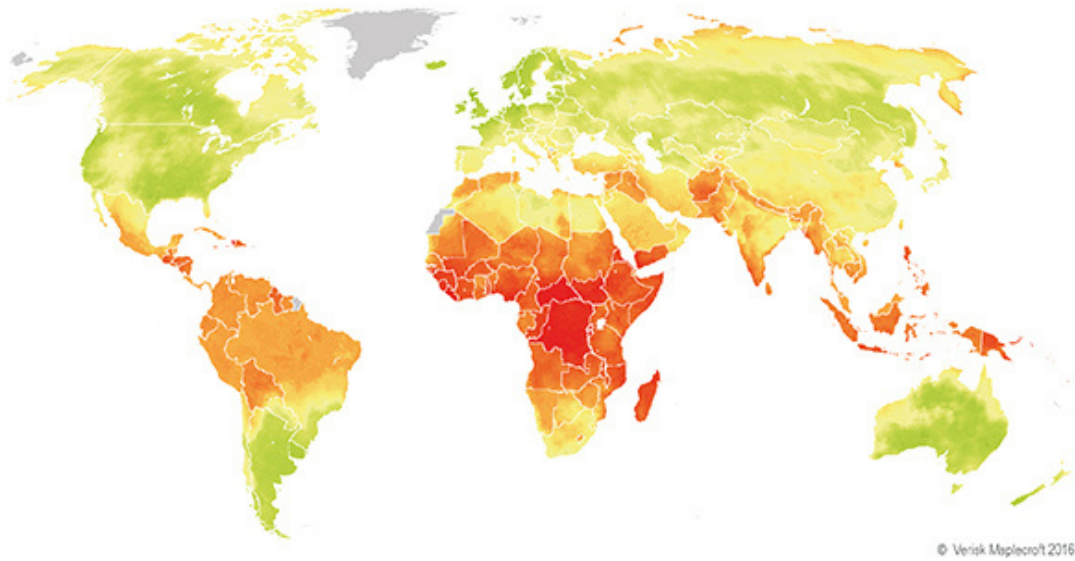


Figure 3: Map showing the average climate vulnerability of each country.
Map from Verisk Maplecroft 12

Discuss:

Comparing the two maps above:

1. Describe the global patterns of climate responsibility and vulnerability.
2. Why are some countries emitting more than others?
3. What do high emitting countries have in common? What sets these countries apart from low emitting countries?
4. Why are some countries more vulnerable to climate change? What do these countries have in common? What sets these countries apart from less vulnerable countries?



When comparing both global distributions for CO₂ emissions per capita and climate vulnerability, we can see the clear separation between Global North and Global South countries. Countries that are most responsible for the climate crisis by emitting the most are the least vulnerable to its effects, and vice versa. This is one of the key injustices embedded in the climate crisis.

We can also put numbers to this phenomenon. The five most vulnerable countries according to the above map are the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Liberia and South Sudan. The five least vulnerable are Denmark, The United Kingdom, Uruguay, Iceland and Ireland.¹³ The average annual per capita emissions of these most vulnerable countries is 0.12 tonnes, compared to 7.78 tonnes for the least vulnerable - nearly 65 times more.

Other indicators of emissions and resource consumption show the same pattern. Historically, the five least vulnerable countries combined have emitted 2,908 tonnes of CO₂ since 1850, compared to 25 tonnes (over 116 times less) for the most vulnerable.

The least vulnerable countries on average consume over ten times more natural resources every year than the most vulnerable (23.6 tonnes per capita and 2.2 tonnes per capita respectively).¹⁴

These injustices are exacerbated when population numbers are taken into account. 3.3 billion people are estimated to live in areas and countries very vulnerable to climate change, compared to 1.8 billion in the least vulnerable areas and countries.¹⁵

This means that not only are the highest emitting countries suffering the least from the consequences of climate change, but globally speaking, a small percentage of the population is contributing the most to the climate crisis which strongly impacts a much larger proportion of population.



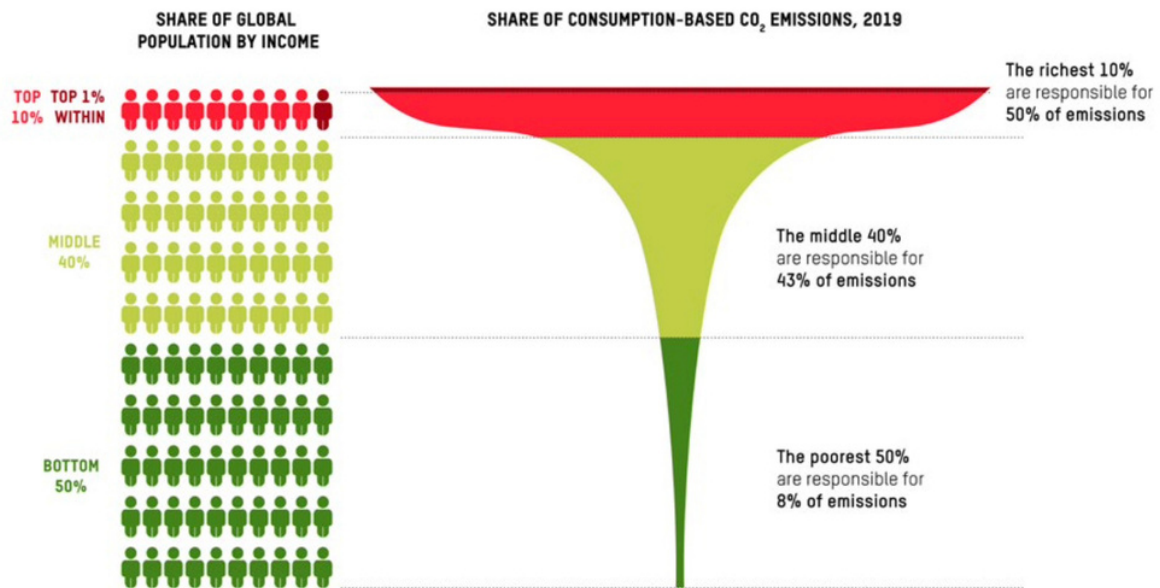


Figure 4: CO₂ emissions based on use of materials, resources and services (consumption) of different levels of income within the global population. Graph from Oxfam¹⁶.

This global scale of inequality is not the only injustice of the climate change crisis where the highest emitters are the least impacted. These next sections will highlight a few other examples.

4. Climate injustice within a country or society



In the previous section we saw that the Global North is more responsible for global emissions and the ensuing climate change effects whilst the Global South is and will continue to suffer more from these effects.

Just as was the case on a global scale, the richer members of society are more responsible for climate change, and poorer, marginalised members of society are more vulnerable and suffer more from climate change consequences.

We can observe a similar phenomenon within a country or society as a whole.

Within a country or society, people can be more or less vulnerable to the impacts of climate change depending on their gender, age, ethnicity, class and caste¹⁷.

Women, youth, elderly, ethnic and religious minorities, Indigenous People and refugees are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change as they have less of an ability to adapt to climate change. Often, this is due to other overlapping and interacting factors such as social exclusion, lack of resources and dependence on natural resources, whose availability is becoming more and more uncertain, and poverty.

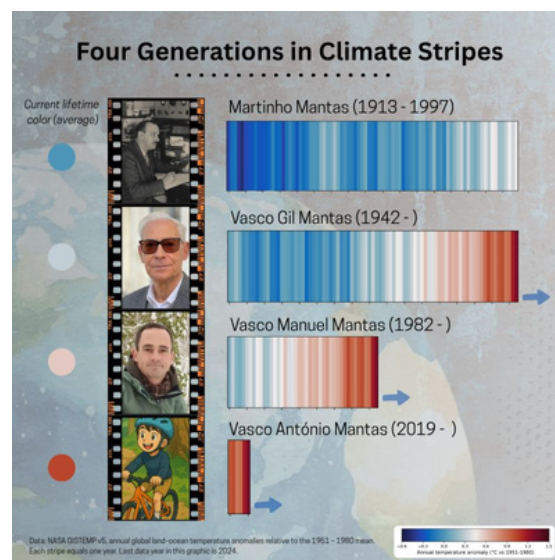


This lack of ability to adapt is one of the main reasons for the vulnerability of the aforementioned groups of people. With climate change, pressure is put on all kinds of systems, including social systems, such as a country, a city or any kind of grouping of people.

This pressure on social systems can come from e.g. water and food scarcity, and extreme weather and climate. Those at the margins of society and/or in poverty will struggle to find or afford alternate water and food sources, or shelter from extreme weather and climate as easily as others.

Knowing who is particularly vulnerable to the climate crisis and why can help us understand some of the factors behind the climate vulnerability map of Figure 3.

Countries with high vulnerability are often those that also face high levels of poverty, a significant number of people without access to basic services, such as water and sanitation, and widespread wealth and gender inequalities.¹⁸



Source: Vasco Mantas on [LinkedIn](#)

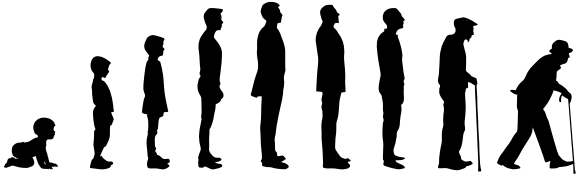
5. Climate injustice on a generational scale

Climate injustice does not only occur across space, but also across time. In a previous section we learnt about how the Global North has most of the responsibility for the climate crisis while the Global South carries the burden of the consequences.

Similarly, previous and current generations have been emitting disproportionate levels of greenhouse gases and consuming unsustainable amounts of resources, with current younger and especially future generations having to bear the burden of the consequences. This injustice is sometimes referred to as 'inter-generational theft', as practices damaging the environment today (and in the past) means future generations are being 'robbed' of a safe future.



CLIMATE INJUSTICE



Show your Stripes is a website that helps visualise climate change through showing stripes of different colours.

If the stripes are blue, it means that the average temperature during that year was colder relative to the average temperature between 1961-2010.

If the stripes are orange or red, it means the average year was hotter. The darker the blue is, the colder the average temperature was. The same goes for the red: the hotter the year was compared to the average of 1961-2010, the darker red the stripes are. You can see visually how much temperature in your country has changed on their website:

<https://showyourstripes.info/c/globe>.

Vasco Mantas made use of climate stripes to portray intergenerational injustice. With the image below you can see how his grandfather's world was still predictable in terms of climate. The stripes during Vasco's father's lifetime turned more red, showing subtle but noticeable shifts. Within his father's lifetime, especially when he was around 20, global warming started to become much more visible. But Vasco's son's whole life will be marked by weather extremes, with the climate stripes going darker red, marking potent global warming.

There is a saying: *We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.*

How do you interpret this saying? What do you think about it?

This facet of the injustices of climate change is very different from the social inequalities exacerbated by the effects of climate change seen in the above sections.

It is important to be aware of these many facets of the climate crisis, which exist in all kinds of dimensions and on all kinds of scales. They highlight the complexity of climate injustice, as it occurs within a high-emitting system that profits a very rich global minority.

These injustices, on all scales and in all forms can however be overcome. As climate change and its injustices are a systemic problem, systemic change is needed to overcome both of these issues.

All solutions to the climate crisis need to also be just and should address the existing inequalities in the world.



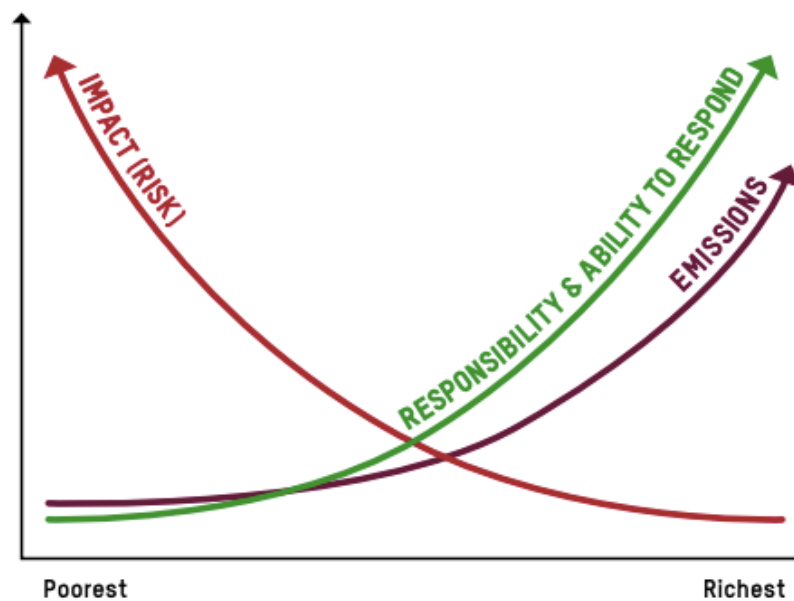


Figure 5: Graph showing how poverty intersects with carbon footprint, vulnerability to climate change effects and responsibility & ability to respond to it. Graph from Oxfam International.¹⁹

6. Climate injustice in a nutshell

Let's summarise how the climate crisis relates to existing inequalities.²⁰

1. Global North countries, certain companies and wealthy individuals are largely responsible for climate change.
2. Global South countries and groups of people who already experience poverty and exclusion are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, whilst having contributed the least to it.
3. Those who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change have the least capability and decision-making power to tackle, adapt and repair the damages provoked by climate change.

Climate change also has an intergenerational dimension to it: young people and future generations will experience the effects of climate change more than their predecessors, despite having contributed the least to climate change.²¹

These patterns of inequality and their intersection with climate change is represented in Figure 5 above, in relation to poverty.

Those on lowest incomes – people and countries – have contributed the least to climate change. Whilst being the most impacted or at risk from climate change, they have the least responsibility and ability to tackle climate change and to respond to its impacts.



This reflects the reality of climate inequality. Oxfam has compared the ability to respond to damages from climate change in the context of floods in Germany (2021) and Pakistan (2022):

German floods
Affected population = 40,000 people
Damage and economic costs = US\$40bn
Funding mobilized through federal and state government flood relief fund for reconstruction = US\$35bn within weeks of the disaster
Pakistan floods
Affected population = 33 million people
Damage and economic costs = US\$30bn ²⁴⁹
Funding pledged by international donors = ~US\$8.57bn as of January 2023 for the next three years

Figure 6: Chart comparing the impacts of floods in Germany and Pakistan, and the mobilised funds. Chart from Oxfam International.²²

We can see in Figure 6 above that, on the one hand, Germany, a Global North country whose GDP per capita is 10 times higher than the GDP per capita in Pakistan²³, and who is in the 'top three global overshooters of their allocated CO₂ emissions budget',²⁴ managed to quickly mobilise almost all the resources needed to deal with the damages provoked by the floods from internal funds.

On the other hand, Pakistan, a Global South country emitting in 2022 less than a third of Germany's CO₂ emissions, only obtained a third of the required funds from international sources, months after the floods.²⁵



7. Introduction to the global economic system

Many scholars trace the shared roots of global inequality and climate change to economic systems shaped by colonialism and extractive capitalism.²⁶

The wealth of many countries in the Global North was built through the violent exploitation of people, lands, and resources in the Global South.

Colonisation was not just about political control - it was about organising economies around extraction, draining resources and labour from one part of the world to fuel the growth of another.

Today, these patterns haven't disappeared. They've just shifted form. Many countries in the Global South continue to serve as sites of extraction, whether for lithium, cobalt, oil, or cheap textile labour, in order to maintain the economic growth and high-consumption lifestyles in the Global North.

Workers tend to be paid very low wages, natural systems are often destroyed, and communities are left with pollution, unstable jobs, or no access to the very energy or products they help create.

You can learn more about how the green energy transition - when fueled by economic growth at all costs - itself perpetuates patterns in which resources are drained from one part of the world to fuel growth in another, in the Unit on Renewable Energy.

This global supply chain of cheap goods and materials drives both climate change and injustice. It creates vast emissions from shipping, industrial agriculture, and fossil fuel use. It then concentrates the harms of this system - such as climate change - on those least responsible for causing it. At the same time, those most impacted are often excluded from decision-making about what a 'green transition' should look like.

Recognising this ongoing legacy of colonisation is key to building truly fair and effective climate solutions, that repair relationships, redistribute power, and shift the goal from endless growth to collective wellbeing within planetary boundaries.

In reaction to these facts, a growing movement including young people, women, disabled people, racialised people including Indigenous Peoples, and activists from Global South countries have been emphasising the inequality dimensions of the climate crisis through the concept of 'climate justice'.²⁷





Vulnerability and environmental action

Use this text for a look into gender inequality and environmentalism

Because of their more direct dependence on the natural environment that they live in, Indigenous Peoples and women from the Global South and rural communities are some of the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

Yet, they are also often at the forefront of the movement for climate and environmental justice.

Women, in particular in rural communities, are generally in charge of collecting water, looking for medicinal plants, growing crops and taking care of domestic animals. This makes them both more vulnerable to adverse climate effects which disrupt the equilibrium of their environment,

and knowledgeable about the way in which their communities can use natural resources in a sustainable way.

Indigenous People, who often heavily rely on local natural resources and have a spiritual relationship with their natural environment, have developed similar kinds of knowledge.

As a result, Indigenous Peoples and women in the Global South have valuable stories and solutions for climate mitigation and adaptation which should be brought to the forefront of climate action, by providing them with (access to) resources, actively involving them in decision making, and enabling them to lead or be an active part of the solution.

Watch [this video](#) on the women of the Mukonka Village in Zambia reviving its ecology, one seed at a time, as an example of how Indigenous women are at the forefront of both climate injustice and its solutions.



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