

We Must Act for an Environmentally Sustainable Future

**The Fight for Environmental
Sustainability Is Also the
Struggle for Equality**

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 390,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

Larry Brown, President

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The Struggle for Environmental Sustainability Is Also the Struggle for Equality

Economic and social inequality are intimately linked to ecological degradation and climate change. Inequality, within and among nations, has contributed to environmental damage and a changing climate. As a result, environmental and climate change have uneven impacts across communities and countries, with poor and marginalized populations bearing the brunt.

Perhaps no greater evidence exists of how global inequality contributes to environmental destruction than a recent report by CDP, formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project. CDP “runs the global disclosure system that enables companies, cities, states and regions to measure and manage their environmental impacts.”¹

Their 2017 report, the Carbon Majors Database, found that 100 global companies contributed almost 71% (1 trillion tonnes) of all greenhouse gas emissions. Since 1988—the year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established—more than half of global industrial emissions can be traced to just 25 corporate and state-owned entities, with ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, and Chevron among the highest emitters.

The CDP report argues that the scale of these emissions is large enough to have contributed significantly to climate change.

If fossil fuels continue to be extracted at the same rate over the next 28 years as they were between 1988 and 2017, says the report, global average temperatures would be on course to rise by 4°C by the end of the century. This is likely to contribute to catastrophic consequences, including species extinction, pollution and global food scarcity.²

While many of these companies and governments are happy to tell the world’s citizens to recycle and conserve more, they are responsible for causing the greatest amount of damage to the planet.

Economic and social inequality contributes to the growing crisis of environmental degradation. One way in which inequality fuels environmental destruction is that the rich consume an ever greater proportion of the planet’s resources. Oxfam, the global charity organization, has reported that

Climate change is inextricably linked to economic inequality: it is a crisis that is driven by the greenhouse gas emissions of the “haves” that hits the “have-nots” the hardest.

Strikingly, our estimates of the scale of this inequality suggest that the poorest half of the global population—around 3.5 billion people—are responsible for only around 10% of

total global emissions attributed to individual consumption, yet live overwhelmingly in the countries most vulnerable to climate change.

Around 50% of these emissions meanwhile can be attributed to the richest 10% of people around the world, who have average carbon footprints 11 times as high as the poorest half of the population, and 60 times as high as the poorest 10%. The average footprint of the richest 1% of people globally could be 175 times that of the poorest 10%.³

This is true both among and within countries. The largest polluters are the most affluent households from rich countries.⁴ It is becoming increasingly recognized that because the wealthy countries of the Global North are responsible for a large share of climate change and environmental degradation, they have a large burden to take action to combat climate change. This equity principle is reflected in the Paris Agreement's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).⁵

Interestingly, in more equitable affluent countries such as South Korea, Japan, France, Italy, and Germany, the rich don't just pollute less; the average pollution is lower too, because the bottom half of these populations pollute less than the bottom half in the US, Canada, or Britain, despite being better off.⁶

In addition to unequal responsibility for contributing to climate change, there is a trend of unequal climate impacts. We know that economic inequality contributes to a host of social problems—poorer health and education outcomes, reduced happiness, and more.⁷

It is also true that those who suffer most from these effects of inequality are disproportionately affected by the cost of environmental damage. This pattern is evident both within and among countries.

On a global scale, the World Bank reports that the majority of the world's population lives in countries where their poorer citizens are the most exposed to disasters like droughts, floods, and heat waves.⁸ The wealthier countries tend to have better infrastructure and systems in place to respond to environmental disasters. This is also true within a country, as poorer people experience the impacts of environmental damage much more than their wealthier counterparts.

In Canada, Michael Buzzelli has reported on how disparities in social and economic status affect how communities experience environmental problems. For example, studies in Hamilton and Toronto find that neighbourhoods with lower incomes, lower education, and predominately single-parent families experience higher exposure to pollution.

It must also be emphasized that inequalities in wealth are not the only sources of disparity in the impact of environmental destruction. Increasingly, the impact of environmental racism on Indigenous communities and communities of colour is being

acknowledged. Currently, Indigenous and vulnerable communities in Canada experience disproportional effects of climate change, water contamination, waste disposition, toxins, and pollution from the nearby toxic facilities. These include industries such as landfills, industrial power generation stations, incinerators, sewage treatment plants, factories, refineries, pulp and paper mills, oil and gas extraction, and hazardous waste storage.⁹ Furthermore, it is the women in these communities that face the brunt of environmental degradation and pollution.¹⁰

Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated this extremely well:

The world's governments have pledged to build a better future where no one is left behind, yet the most basic conditions for people to survive and thrive are out of reach for many. Over 90 per cent of us breathe dirty air and over 90 per cent of those who die as a result are in low- and middle-income countries, with women and young children disproportionately affected.

It is a cruel irony that the wealthiest in society—who benefit most from the activities that pollute our environment—have the most options to avoid the impacts. The poorest—who rely most on our environment for food, water, shelter and income—have the least access to safe alternatives. This creates a destructive cycle of poor health, poverty, inequality and migration that is hard to break.¹¹

A crucial part of addressing the uneven effects of environmental degradation is a just transition. Just transition means that the shift to a zero-carbon economy must be productive and equitable for the workers and communities affected.¹² The workers who move to new jobs in a decarbonizing economy should not have to see a cut to their pay and benefits, or have to move across the country to find work.

In a successful and just transition, green jobs must be good jobs—ones that ensure a fair and decent living for people in the communities they live in.¹³ This will require governments to invest in workforce development, apprenticeships and job training, social security programs, and targeted policy packages for fossil fuel communities.¹⁴

This is not an exhaustive overview of the interconnections between economic and social inequality and environmental destruction. Instead, this is intended as a call to action: to make the argument that the struggle to achieve environmental sustainability must be inextricably linked to efforts to oppose inequality in all its forms.

In the words of Wangar Muta Maathai, who was a Kenyan environmental and political activist and Nobel laureate:

Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and, in the process, heal our own—indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder.

Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come.

¹ <https://www.cdp.net/en/info/about-us>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change>

³ https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/mb-extreme-carbon-inequality-021215-en.pdf

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/jul/04/is-inequality-bad-for-the-environment>

⁵ <https://unfccc.int/process/the-paris-agreement/nationally-determined-contributions/hdc-registry>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/jul/04/is-inequality-bad-for-the-environment>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/09/society-unequal-the-spirit-level>

⁸ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/22787/9781464806735.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.enrichproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Environmental-Justice-Article.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.503.1447&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/4d93ac32-en.pdf?expires=1571170922&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=D3440039B602FFD311AC4ECC64D997CD>

¹²

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2018/01/Making%20Decarbonization%20Work.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/climate-change/task-force-just-transition/final-report/section-5.html>

¹⁴

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2018/01/Making%20Decarbonization%20Work.pdf>



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