



Tackling the Climate Crisis—Towards a Just, Sustainable, and Public Future

An Environmental Justice Approach

2023





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 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.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, Secretary-Treasurer



An Environmental Justice Approach

The effects of climate change and environmental degradation do not affect everyone equally—both between and within countries. And we do not all contribute equally to climate change. Indeed, inequality and climate change stem from the same unequal, exploitative economic system. To understand the climate crisis, and to devise solutions, we need to start by recognizing this relationship.

Global Context

Economic inequality is a driving force of climate change. According to the Global Carbon Project, just 23 wealthy countries in the Global North are responsible for half of all historical CO₂ emissions, while over 150 countries are responsible for the other half.¹ Canada is among the top 10 emitters, despite having only 0.5% of the world's population; hence the need for Canada and other wealthy countries to contribute their fair share of emissions reductions.²

Countries in the Global South are experiencing the worst effects of climate change, such as hunger, rising sea levels, and displacement,³ despite that they are less responsible for causing it. Wealthy countries in the Global North not only bear greater responsibility for the emissions that are causing climate change but they also have the means to transition to a green economy and to support those in the Global South in their efforts. The Paris Agreement incorporates this concept of equity as a guiding principle, recognizing parties have “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.”⁴

The uneven contributions to climate change are clear on an individual/class level as well. According to a 2020 report by Oxfam, the carbon emissions of the richest 1% are more than double the emissions of the 3.1 billion people that make up the world's poorest half.⁵ And we have seen that wealth inequality has only gotten worse during the pandemic.⁶ Meanwhile, people living in poverty are more vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change. Specifically, they are more likely to lose their livelihoods and to be displaced by extreme weather events.⁷

The relationship between climate change and income and wealth inequality is not a coincidence; they are inextricably linked.⁸ Therefore, efforts to combat the climate crisis must be linked to fighting inequality as well.

Environmental Racism

The unequal impacts of climate change are evident within countries too. The climate crisis has disproportionate impacts on BIPOC communities in Canada.

Environmental racism is

racial discrimination in the disproportionate location and greater exposure of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities to

contamination and pollution from industry and other environmentally hazardous activities; the lack of political power these communities have to fight back against the placement of these industries in their communities; the implementation of policies that allow these harmful projects to be placed in these communities; the slow rates of cleanup of contaminants and pollutants in these communities; and the lack of representation of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities in mainstream environmental groups and on decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies.⁹

Environmental racism, a form of systemic racism, contributes to health inequities.¹⁰ Just one stark example is the location of Chemical Valley, a highly concentrated area of petrochemical refineries near Sarnia, Ontario, right beside Aamjiwnaang First Nation. The exposure to chemicals has threatened the health of the community's water, air, and residents.¹¹

Impacts on Vulnerable Populations

The climate crisis is posing disproportionate risks to people with disabilities, to seniors, and children. For example, a report by Human Rights Watch found that the extreme heat wave in BC in 2021 led to “profound mental and physical health impacts” on both people with disabilities and older people, who experience a higher risk of heat stress.¹² The report also found that “inadequate government support compounded risks for people with disabilities and older people.”

During storms or floods, people with disabilities face barriers to evacuating, such as finding accessible transportation or services, and ensuring their health care or other services will follow them.¹³ This means that climate change responses need to consider the range of impacts and needs in the community.

Compounding Gender Inequality

Women, girls, and gender diverse people, especially those who are BIPOC, living in poverty, or living with disabilities, are more severely impacted by the climate crisis. During extreme weather, disasters, and displacement, they are more likely to experience loss of livelihood, economic insecurity, health issues, and death.¹⁴ These events are also correlated with an increased risk of gender-based violence.¹⁵

NUPGE's report, *Environmental and Climate Change: A Gender Perspective*, outlines these and other gendered impacts, as well as the importance of women and gender-diverse people's leadership in sustainability and climate action.

Climate Migrants

Climate change is forcing people from their communities. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees,

the increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as abnormally heavy rainfall, prolonged droughts, desertification, environmental degradation, or sea-level rise and cyclones are already causing an average of more than 20 million people to leave their homes and move to other areas in their countries each year.¹⁶

Canada is not immune. In 2020, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that 26,000 people in Canada were displaced due to disasters.¹⁷

Climate change impacts, such as growing food and water insecurity, can also worsen living conditions, or make it harder for displaced people to return.¹⁸ All of this increases the risk of conflict, another cause of displacement. Notably, people living in poverty are more likely to be displaced. This is an issue that warrants a global response.¹⁹

Fighting for Environmental Justice

Without proactive intervention, the climate crisis will reinforce and exacerbate inequalities, as we have seen with the COVID-19 pandemic. The climate crisis and the inequality crisis are tied together. And so must the struggles for change be connected. This is the lens that has informed NUPGE's approach to environmental and climate issues, and it must continue to be.

We must push for climate action alongside our fights for anti-racism, Indigenous sovereignty, justice for people with disabilities, gender equality, refugee and migrant rights, etc. This approach also informs our advocacy for a Just Transition, or an energy transition that puts workers and communities at the centre, to which section 5 of this paper is devoted.

An environmental justice approach must also involve foregrounding the voices of the communities and workers who are on the front lines, and ensuring affected communities are empowered to lead the way on solutions.

Respecting Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty is particularly important, as NUPGE has written about.²⁰ Indigenous peoples have demonstrated how to live sustainably for generations, and they continue to be at the forefront of fights to protect the land, water, and ecosystems. And they are having an important impact. A recent study by the Indigenous Environmental Network found that Indigenous resistance to fossil fuel expansion in Canada and the US has stopped or delayed a large amount of GHG emissions—an amount equivalent to at least 25% of the annual US and Canadian emissions combined.²¹ This underscores the importance of not just involving, but following the leadership of, those on the front lines.

Notes

- ¹ Nadja Popovich and Brad Plumer, "Who Has the Most Historical Responsibility for Climate Change?" *New York Times*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/11/12/climate/cop26-emissions-compensation.html>.
- ² "Canada's Fair Share towards limiting global warming to 1.5°C," Climate Action Network Canada, February 12, 2019, <https://climateactionnetwork.ca/2019/12/02/canadas-fair-share-towards-limiting-global-warming-to-1-5c/>.
- ³ Robert Kennedy, "Climate vulnerable in the Global South demand COP26 action," *Al Jazeera*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/11/climate-vulnerable-in-the-global-south-demand-cop26-action>; "Unprecedented Impacts of Climate Change Disproportionately Burdening Developing Countries, Delegate Stresses, as Second Committee Concludes General Debate," Press release, United Nations, October 8, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gaef3516.doc.htm>.
- ⁴ "Paris Agreement," conclusion date: December 12, 2015, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris_nov_2015/application/pdf/paris_agreement_english_.pdf.
- ⁵ "Carbon emissions of richest 1 percent more than double the emissions of the poorest half of humanity," Press release, Oxfam Canada, September 21, 2020, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/carbon-emissions-richest-1-percent-more-double-emissions-poorest-half-humanity>.
- ⁶ Toby Sanger and Erika Beauchesne, *It's time to tax extreme weather inequality: How progressive tax reforms can help pay for the pandemic and build a better future* (Ottawa: Canadians for Tax Fairness, November 2020), https://www.taxfairness.ca/sites/default/files/2022-07/report_-_its_time_to_tax_extreme_wealth_inequality_nov2020.pdf.
- ⁷ "Climate change link to displacement of most vulnerable is clear: UNHCR," *UN News*, April 22, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1090432>; "Tackling the climate crisis," Oxfam Canada, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/5-natural-disasters-beg-climate-action>.
- ⁸ Bruce Campbell, "Climate crisis and extreme wealth inequality: joined at the hip," *The Monitor*, August 31, 2021, <https://monitormag.ca/articles/climate-crisis-and-extreme-wealth-inequality-joined-at-the-hip>.
- ⁹ "Resources," The ENRICH Project, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.enrichproject.org/resources/#Glossary>.
- ¹⁰ Dr. Elaine MacDonald, "Environmental racism in Canada: What is it, what are the impacts, and what can we do about it?" Blog, Ecojustice, September 1, 2020, <https://ecojustice.ca/environmental-racism-in-canada/>.
- ¹¹ Paleah Moher, "Mapping project shows links between poor environment, historical racism," *The Global and Mail*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-mapping-project-shows-links-between-poor-environment-historical-racism/>.

-
- ¹² “Canada: Disastrous Impact of Extreme Heat,” Human Rights Watch, October 5, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/05/canada-disastrous-impact-extreme-heat>.
- ¹³ Marianne Dhenin, “How Disabled People Are Left Behind in Climate Disasters,” *The New Republic*, August 31, 2023, <https://newrepublic.com/article/174497/disabled-people-left-behind-climate-disasters>.
- ¹⁴ World Health Organization, *Gender, Climate Change and Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2014), https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/reports/gender_climate_change/en/.
- ¹⁵ “Facts and figures: Humanitarian action,” UN Women, May 2017, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-action/facts-and-figures>; Justine Calma, “Yes, trans rights are an environmental issue too,” *The Grist*, October 29, 2018 <https://grist.org/article/transgender-rights-climate-intersectionality/>; Amnesty International, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind Report: Gender, Indigenous rights, and energy development in Northeast British Columbia, Canada* (London: Amnesty International, 2016), <https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/amnesty/files/Out%20of%20Sight%20Out%20of%20Mind%20EN%20FINAL%20web.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ “Climate change and disaster displacement,” UNHCR, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html>.
- ¹⁷ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Internal Displacement in a Changing Climate* (Geneva, 2021), https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/grid2021_idmc.pdf.
- ¹⁸ UNHCR, “Climate change and disaster displacement.”
- ¹⁹ “A Rights-based Approach to Climate Migrants,” Public Services International, December 18, 2019, <https://publicservices.international/resources/news/a-rights-based-approach-for-climate-migrants?id=10483&lang=en>.
- ²⁰ NUPGE, *We Must Act for An Environmentally Sustainable Future: Valuing Indigenous Knowledge* (Ottawa: NUPGE, November 2019).
- ²¹ Dallas Goldtooth et al., *Indigenous Resistance Against Carbon* (Washington: Oil Change International, August 2021), <https://www.ienearth.org/indigenous-resistance-against-carbon/>.

nupge

COMPONENTS



B.C. GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



CANADIAN UNION OF BREWERY AND GENERAL WORKERS



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF SASKATCHEWAN



MANITOBA ASSOCIATION OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS



MANITOBA GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



NEW BRUNSWICK UNION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EMPLOYEES



NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR ASSOC. OF PUBLIC & PRIVATE EMPLOYEES



NOVA SCOTIA GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES UNION



ONTARIO PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEES UNION / SYNDICAT DES EMPLOYÉS DE LA FONCTION PUBLIQUE DE L'ONTARIO



PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND UNION OF PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES



SASKATCHEWAN GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of the Public Services International.