

## Climate justice: international and national implications for the Caribbean

Guest blog for the “Caribbean Voices for Climate Justice” series by Adelle Thomas, Ph.D., Caribbean Science Lead, Climate Analytics & Senior Fellow, University of The Bahamas

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Climate justice highlights that the causes and impacts of climate change are neither distributed nor experienced equally and that there are structural, systemic and historical factors that have led to these inequities. Although [climate justice has been a key advocacy issue for many years](#), the term has only recently become recognised in mainstream climate change discussions. For decades climate change has been framed as a purely environmental or physical problem with relatively straightforward causes and effects: humans emit greenhouse gases, these gases cause global warming and environmental change, a changed environment then affects people. Attention has thus largely been paid to technical solutions: how can greenhouse gases be reduced, what are basic levels of adaptation that can reduce risks? However, climate justice turns this logic on its head and exposes that the causes and effects of climate change are far more complex and require much more nuanced and inclusive approaches.

But what does climate justice mean for the Caribbean? For this region of colonies and former colonies, of global immigrants and indigenous people, of the very poor and the extremely wealthy, climate justice is a critical lens to understand these differences and how they influence the way in which climate change is experienced.



Damage in aftermath of Hurricane Dorian in Bahamas © The Heritage Partners

At the global scale, climate justice has been an inherent framing for how Caribbean nations have engaged with international climate change policy. Within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Caribbean countries have long advocated for special attention to be paid to the particular circumstances of this region of small island developing states (SIDS). SIDS are responsible for less than 1% of the global emissions that drive climate change but are consistently recognised as among the most vulnerable to climate impacts. This disproportionate risk has [led to the Caribbean experiencing a plethora of extreme events and resulting damages](#), despite contributing the least to climate change related hazards.

To address this disparity, [loss and damage is a key climate justice issue that Caribbean countries have pushed for in the UNFCCC](#). Loss and damage can be understood as the negative impacts of climate change that either cannot or have not been adapted to. Since the very inception of the UNFCCC, Caribbean SIDS have underscored that developing countries need funding and support to address loss and damage, which should be provided by developed countries that are responsible for these impacts.

However, loss and damage has lagged far behind progress on mitigation and adaptation in the UNFCCC. To date, loss and damage has no specific funding streams, is not a recurring agenda item for negotiations and has been found through subsequent reviews to be an area where the UNFCCC has much work to do. The challenges of addressing loss and damage in the UNFCCC exemplify the hurdles of both acknowledging and rectifying climate injustices.

Climate justice also helps to unpack the historical underpinnings of why the Caribbean is highly vulnerable to climate change in the first place. As [highlighted by Dr. Leon Sealey-Huggins](#), “the reliance of many Caribbean economies on sectors that are threatened by climate change, notably, tourism, agriculture and fishing, is not merely a feature of geography, but a condition with historical antecedents...precipitated by countries’ insertion into a vastly unequal global system of relations post-independence.” The [characteristics of Caribbean nations that are acknowledged as contributing to high vulnerability to climate change](#) stem from our colonial and imperialist histories. High levels of debt, reliance on imported goods, food insecurity, concentration of people and assets along the coast, dependence on sectors that are tied to environmental conditions – these are all characteristics that are systemic and are a result of centuries of exploitation. For Caribbean countries that have only relatively recently gained independence, it is formidable to be confronted with reducing such deeply ingrained vulnerabilities to climate change.

However, climate justice must also be used as a framework to address climate change within our countries. There is increasing evidence that different communities within SIDS experience the impacts of climate change much differently. For example, in The Bahamas, while the 2019 Hurricane Dorian devastated wide areas on Abaco and Grand Bahama, it was in migrant Haitian communities where there were the highest levels of destruction and death. Haitian migrants also [risked deportation if trying to access official assistance](#), further adding to challenges of trying to recover from the storm with limited means. This exemplifies the climate injustices that are alive and well at the subnational scale in the Caribbean – those least equipped to respond to the impacts of climate change are often those that are most impacted.

Thus, when developing responses to climate change within the region, we must not only [prioritise just approaches that do not further ingrain already existing inequities](#) but also recognize and rectify these injustices. The [Bali Principles of Climate Justice](#), articulated in 2002 by an international coalition of groups, offers guidance on approaches that can inform just climate action in the Caribbean. As a region that is facing climate injustice on a global scale, it is critical that we do not continue to perpetuate these injustices within our countries. Climate justice should thus be central in our national and subnational policies, programs and projects on climate change, and should also more broadly inform overall approaches to development in the Caribbean.



**About Adelle Thomas:**

Dr. Adelle Thomas is Caribbean Science Lead with Climate Analytics and Senior Fellow of the Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience Research Centre at the University of The Bahamas. As a human-environment geographer, her research has focused on adaptation, loss and damage and the vulnerability of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to climate change. Dr. Thomas has worked for over fifteen years on intersections between climate change adaptation, disaster risk management and sustainable development. She has authored a variety of academic publications and has also served as a Lead Author on several Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports including the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, the Fifth Assessment Report and the upcoming Sixth Assessment Report, focusing on key risks across regions and sectors.