

In case you missed it—Rural communities and natural resource users' lived experiences of climate injustice

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The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) continued its *Towards climate justice in the Caribbean* webinar series with a session exploring the lived experiences of climate injustice among rural communities and natural resource users across the Caribbean.

Facilitated by CANARI Senior Technical Officer Candice Ramkissoon, the webinar featured speakers from Barbuda, Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Barbados who shared firsthand accounts of how climate change is affecting their communities, livelihoods, cultures and futures.

It was attended by 76 participants from 17 countries and territories, representing a diverse range of stakeholder groups, including community-based organisations, fisherfolk associations, environmental NGOs, Indigenous peoples' organisations, government agencies, academic institutions, consultants and regional networks. Participants also joined from Canada, the United States, Austria, Mexico and Nepal, reflecting international interest in climate justice issues affecting Caribbean communities.

Before the discussion began, CANARI Executive Director Nicole Leotaud invited participants to remember Dr. Shelley-Ann Cox of Barbados, whose work with fishing communities and coastal stakeholders had made a lasting contribution to the region. The session was dedicated to her memory and her commitment to supporting vulnerable communities and amplifying local voices.

1. Setting the stage: Why lived experience matters

Candice opened the session by emphasising that climate change is not a distant threat but a reality already shaping how Caribbean communities live, work and plan for the future. She noted that rural communities and natural resource users—including farmers, fishers, forest users and others whose livelihoods depend directly on natural resources—are often among the first to experience climate impacts and among the first to respond.

She stressed that while science, policy and data are essential for informing climate action, they do not always capture how climate impacts are experienced in everyday life. Listening to lived experiences helps reveal how climate injustice affects livelihoods, identities, cultures and wellbeing, and why climate action must be grounded in local realities.



Credit: Natalie Boodram

2. Participant reflections: What climate injustice means

To open the discussion, participants were invited to reflect on what comes to mind when thinking about climate injustice affecting rural communities and natural resource users.

Common themes included:

- Food insecurity
- Poverty
- Displacement
- Loss of livelihoods
- Water insecurity
- Prolonged drought
- Gender inequality

Participants also highlighted the global dimensions of climate injustice, noting that countries contributing least to climate change often experience some of its most severe consequences. Others pointed to unequal access to resources, barriers to adaptation financing and the challenges faced by vulnerable communities in recovering from climate-related disasters.

3. Barbuda's story: Climate injustice beyond the storm

Brandon Walker: Climate justice is about more than disaster impacts

Representing barbudanGO, Brandon Walker reflected on Barbuda's experience following Hurricane Irma in 2017 and argued that climate injustice extends far beyond the immediate impacts of a storm.

He described three dimensions of climate injustice: distributive justice, procedural justice and recognition justice.

Distributive injustice

Brandon noted that Barbuda contributes very little to global greenhouse gas emissions yet faces severe climate impacts. Hurricane Irma devastated the island, destroying more than 95% of buildings and forcing the evacuation of the entire population. He argued that communities like Barbuda are bearing the consequences of emissions produced elsewhere while having contributed little to the problem themselves.

Procedural injustice

He also highlighted concerns about decision-making following the hurricane. While residents were displaced, development projects moved forward and changes were made to land governance arrangements. Brandon argued that the people most affected by these decisions were often excluded from the processes shaping their future.

Recognition injustice

A central part of his presentation focused on the importance of recognising Barbuda's longstanding tradition of communal land stewardship. He stressed that local knowledge and cultural relationships with land are frequently undervalued in development planning, despite their role in protecting ecosystems and supporting community wellbeing.

Looking ahead, Brandon called for greater access to information, stronger participation in decision-making, direct access to climate finance and stronger coalitions among communities facing similar struggles. He concluded by emphasising that climate justice is not charity but a matter of accountability and fairness.



Photo credit: CANARI

4. Bluefields, Jamaica: Rebuilding after Hurricane Melissa

Deceita Turner: When recovery starts from zero

Representing the Bluefields Bay Fishermen's Friendly Society, Deceita Turner shared the experiences of her community following Hurricane Melissa.

Using photographs and personal testimony, she described extensive damage to homes, fishing infrastructure, community facilities and livelihoods. Buildings lost roofs, boats were displaced, offices and equipment were destroyed, and community spaces that had served as centres for training and organisation were left unusable.

Deceita recounted her own experience of sheltering with family members and neighbours during the hurricane, describing the fear and uncertainty of living through a Category 5 storm. She spoke about the challenges of rebuilding while many families continue to struggle with housing insecurity and limited resources.

She also reflected on the broader injustice of communities like Bluefields experiencing severe climate impacts despite contributing little to the factors driving climate change. Her presentation highlighted the need for affected communities to have a stronger voice in discussions about resilience, adaptation and recovery.

5. Mayreau, St. Vincent and the Grenadines: Small islands on the frontline

Natesha Alexander: Climate justice is about fairness

Natesha Alexander of We Are Mayreau shared the experience of Hurricane Beryl and what it revealed about the vulnerabilities facing small island communities.

She described Mayreau as a small island of approximately 350 residents whose livelihoods depend heavily on fishing, tourism and natural resources. Despite contributing very little to climate change,

the island faces significant risks from changing weather patterns, stronger storms and water insecurity.

Hurricane Beryl caused widespread damage to homes, churches, businesses and community infrastructure. Natesha described the emotional impact of witnessing neighbours, friends and family members lose their homes and possessions, while many residents were left uncertain about where they would live and how they would rebuild their livelihoods.

She stressed that recovery cannot simply be about rebuilding what was lost. Instead, it must focus on strengthening resilience, improving preparedness and ensuring that communities are better equipped to withstand future climate impacts.

Natesha also reflected on what climate change means for future generations. She noted that children growing up in Mayreau are likely to inherit increasing climate risks and greater uncertainty than previous generations, arguing that climate justice must also consider the future being created for those who will live with the long-term consequences of climate change.

For Mayreau, climate justice means:

- Direct access to climate finance
- Stronger and more resilient infrastructure
- Sustainable livelihoods for fishers, farmers and small business owners
- Protection of marine ecosystems
- Inclusion of small-island voices in climate decision-making

Natesha reminded participants that climate change is ultimately about people, families and communities whose futures depend on decisions being made today.

6. Barbados: Giving voice to fishing communities

Sylvia White: "Who feels it, knows it"

Representing Voices from the Shore Theatre Collective, Sylvia White shared reflections from Barbados' fishing communities through storytelling, poetry and community theatre.

Drawing on her lifelong experience in the fisheries sector, she described the realities facing fishing communities as they contend with environmental change, declining resources and increasing uncertainty.

Through performances developed by members of the Voices from the Shore collective, participants heard perspectives on exclusion from decision-making, rising costs, declining opportunities and the growing pressures affecting small-scale fishers.

A recurring message throughout her presentation was captured in the phrase:

"Who feels it, knows it."

Sylvia argued that fishing communities possess valuable knowledge and lived experience that must be recognised and included in climate and development discussions. She also highlighted efforts to engage young people through schools and community outreach, helping to develop an understanding of fisheries, food security and climate justice among future generations.

Reflecting on the recent passing of Dr. Shelley-Ann Cox, Sylvia shared personal memories of working alongside her over many years. She recalled introducing the phrase "nothing for us without us" and reflected on how Dr. Cox embraced and championed that principle throughout her work with fishing

communities. For Sylvia, Dr. Cox's legacy was inseparable from her commitment to ensuring that fishers and coastal communities had a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods.

7. Participant reflections: Climate justice, visibility and local decision-making

The stories shared by speakers opened into a wider conversation, with participants drawing on their own knowledge and experiences to extend, challenge and build on what they had heard.

One participant reflected on the need to distinguish between climate injustices driven by global processes and those arising from local decisions. While acknowledging the disproportionate impacts experienced by Caribbean countries despite their limited contribution to global emissions, she argued that local governance choices, development pathways and democratic processes also influence how climate injustice is experienced within communities.

Another participant drew on the example of Barbuda to argue that climate injustice can also emerge through local development decisions made after disasters. Referring to post-Hurricane Irma development, she raised concerns about the construction of infrastructure and tourism projects in environmentally sensitive areas, including caves and coastal zones. She argued that these developments had altered natural drainage patterns, increased flooding risks and reduced some of the natural protections previously provided by coastal ecosystems.

Responding to the comment, Brandon Walker agreed that some developments had contributed to environmental degradation. He pointed specifically to the removal of sand dunes associated with tourism development, arguing that these natural features had previously played an important role in protecting coastlines and communities from storm impacts.

The conversation also turned to the ways climate injustice is communicated and understood. Participants stressed the importance of keeping discussions grounded in people's lived realities rather than allowing them to become disconnected through technical or policy language.

Referring to the presentation from Barbados, one participant pointed to storytelling, theatre and poetry as powerful tools for making climate injustice visible. Cultural expression, she argued, can communicate lived experiences in ways that resonate emotionally, create understanding and strengthen advocacy efforts.

Participants further explored what resilience should look like in practice. Discussion centred on the need for stronger collaboration between communities, scientists, engineers and architects to identify locally appropriate approaches to housing and infrastructure that reflect Caribbean realities.

Several participants questioned whether repeatedly rebuilding after disasters should be accepted as normal, arguing that the repeated loss of homes, infrastructure and development gains can itself become a form of injustice that continually sets communities back.

Questions of responsibility, participation and decision-making emerged throughout the exchange. Participants acknowledged that while global factors drive climate change, local choices about development, governance and resource management also play an important role in shaping vulnerability and resilience.

Participants also raised the persistent challenge of ensuring that climate finance reaches the communities most directly affected by climate change, noting that resources too often flow through national governments and intermediaries rather than directly to those on the ground.

8. Nature as protection: Lessons from coastal communities

The discussion following the presentations also reinforced the critical role of healthy ecosystems in supporting climate resilience.

A participant raised concerns about development models that prioritise marinas, yachting facilities and other coastal infrastructure while degrading ecosystems such as mangroves. Reflecting on the role of Indigenous and traditional knowledge in building resilience, she questioned whether mangroves had helped protect Bluefields during Hurricane Melissa.

In response, Deceita Turner explained that mangroves had provided important protection during the storm by helping to buffer coastal impacts. However, she expressed concern that many mangrove areas have since been lost or degraded. Looking ahead, she questioned what future storms might mean for communities if these natural protective systems are no longer present.

The exchange highlighted how the loss of ecosystems can compound climate vulnerability, reducing communities' natural defences while increasing exposure to future hazards.



Photo credit: CANARI

9. Closing reflections: What stood out

In closing the session, Nicole reflected on several themes that stood out to her from the stories, experiences and discussion shared throughout the webinar.

Climate justice is about people

She shared that one of her strongest takeaways from the session was the phrase, "Who feels it, knows it," which was a common motif in Sylvia White's presentation. She also noted that the stories presented throughout the webinar reinforced that climate justice is fundamentally about people and about questions of fairness, dignity and opportunity. For Nicole, the lived experiences shared by speakers illustrated why climate discussions must remain connected to the realities faced by communities on the ground.

Climate change repeatedly sets back community-led development

Nicole observed that hurricanes and other climate-related impacts continue to set back community-led development efforts. She noted that although communities are actively pursuing their own development goals, climate change and climate injustice repeatedly undermine these efforts.

Climate injustice takes many forms

Nicole highlighted the different forms of climate injustice referenced by speakers as they described their experiences:

- Recognition injustice, including the invisibility of vulnerable people and communities;
- Distributive injustice, including economic and social inequities;
- Procedural injustice, where affected communities are excluded from decision-making; and
- Intergenerational injustice, reflected in concerns raised about the climate risks and uncertainties being passed on to future generations.

From security to trauma: the lived reality of climate injustice

Nicole reflected on the experience shared by communities such as Mayreau, describing the transition from pride in community-led development and a sense of security to trauma, insecurity, survival and recovery following climate-related disasters.

Agency matters

Nicole identified agency as another key theme emerging from the discussion. Drawing on the principle of "nothing for us without us," which Sylvia White had reflected on in relation to Dr. Shelley-Ann Cox's work, she highlighted the importance of access to information, participation in decision-making, access to justice, direct access to finance, solidarity and coalition-building.

She also pointed to the role of creative expression and storytelling in helping communities communicate their experiences and advocate for change.

Communities have clear visions for resilience

Nicole highlighted the visions for resilience and justice that speakers had shared throughout the session, including direct access to climate finance, stronger homes and infrastructure, sustainable livelihoods, healthy ecosystems and meaningful participation in decision-making.

10. Looking ahead

The session closed with an invitation for participants to continue engaging in the webinar series and with the Caribbean Climate Justice Alliance, which brings together civil society organisations, activists and community actors to strengthen collective advocacy and action for climate justice across the region.

Participants were also encouraged to join upcoming discussions exploring the lived experiences of climate injustice among Indigenous peoples and youth, as well as future sessions focused on agency, participation and access to justice.

Throughout the webinar, both speakers and participants reinforced the belief that climate justice is not simply about addressing environmental change. It is about ensuring that the people most affected by climate impacts are heard, respected and empowered to shape the decisions that affect their lives. As the session repeatedly underscored, meaningful climate action must begin by listening to those who feel its effects most directly.