How to Talk About Climate Justice

Background

The current climate crisis is a result of decades of industrialisation, resource exploitation, and fossil fuel burning, primarily by countries in the Global North, with the richest 10% of the global population being responsible for nearly half of total global carbon emissions. At the same time, countries in the Global South, which are least responsible for climate change and historical emissions, are still facing the brunt of negative impacts. Climate change is therefore inherently a justice issue.

Countries in the Global South are particularly vulnerable to climate impacts not only due to their exposure, but also due to their low levels of capacity to cope. The wealth and resources expatriated from the Global South through slavery and colonialism were fundamental pillars for industrialisation and the resultant rise in carbon emissions. This exploitation left these countries much less equipped to address development challenges such as poverty, health, education, and food and water security, making them less resilient to climate impacts. Climate change is likely to exacerbate these development challenges even further as it poses an additional resource burden on these countries, and limits the carbon space that can be used to meet all their development challenges. At the same time, addressing climate change through mitigation and adaptation can also undermine development due to limited resources. Financial support from countries in the Global North is therefore critical to ensuring that developing countries can simultaneously address climate change and pursue development goals such as poverty reduction and addressing inequality. These financial flows are needed not only for supporting mitigation and adaptation activities, but also to provide compensation for the losses and damages that countries in the Global South face as a result of climate impacts.

Inequalities as a result of climate change also manifest within countries. Marginalised groups such as women, Indigenous Peoples, people of colour, and poorer populations are often much more vulnerable to climate impacts. Moreover, their knowledge systems and cultural values, which contributed to climate change resilience for generations, are at risk of disappearing. The crucial role of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous knowledge in the fight against climate change is hardly considered. This is due to the inherently systemic nature of climate inequality, with political, economic, and social structures designed to maintain the continued extractive exploitation of natural resources and marginalised peoples in favour of continued income growth that only results in prosperity at the top. Just and equitable climate solutions therefore need to ensure that the voices and interests of these communities are at the forefront of climate policy and actions. This can be achieved through just transition policies and processes that ensure support and protection for the workers and communities most impacted by the shift to a low-carbon economy and ensures that no one is left behind through a whole-of-society approach in the transformation of our economy and societies. Ultimately, climate justice calls for a shift away from the current extractive, fossil fuel-based world that is driven by the goal of increasing economic growth and towards one with a common goal of wellbeing for all.
Conversation starter questions

- Do you think the impacts of climate change are fairly distributed?
- Who do you think should be responsible for addressing the climate crisis?
- What do you think fair and equitable solutions to the climate crisis look like?
- Why do you think some people are more vulnerable to climate change than others?
- How can we address climate change and development challenges at the same time?
- Did you know that 6% of the global population of Indigenous Peoples have been contributing to the protection of more than 80% of global biodiversity?
- How do we address the systemic challenges causing climate and social injustices?
- How does the ‘urgency’ to address climate change differ between countries and contexts?

References and resources

- https://demandclimatejustice.org/
- https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0189-7
- https://www.climatejusticesyllabus.org/
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- https://us.boell.org/en/2021/03/19/racism-and-climate-injustice-0
- https://climatenetwork.org/our-work/worldwewant/
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