

Why climate change is inherently racist.

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Adapted for use with students

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, it was the city's black neighbourhoods that bore the brunt of the storm. Twelve years later, it was the **black districts of Houston** that took the full force of Hurricane Harvey. In both cases, natural disasters compounded issues in neighbourhoods that were already stretched.

Climate change and racism are two of the biggest challenges of the 21st Century. They are also strongly intertwined. There is a stark divide between who has caused climate change and who is suffering its effects. People of colour across the Global South are those who will be **most affected by the climate crisis, even though their carbon footprints are generally very low**. Similar racial divides exist within nations too, due to profound structural inequalities laid down by a long legacy of unequal power relationships.

For some, it can be surprising to hear terms such as "racism" used in discussions about climate change. Climate change is often understood as an environmental issue, one that we are all in together, and therefore not something that could be in any way racist. But there are many dimensions to racism. It is not just visible expressions of racism, that you might see in online abuse. Then there is institutional racism, where racial inequality is lurking under the surface. For example, where black people who live in rented accommodation tend to get poorer quality housing than their white counterparts.

With regards to climate change, people of colour still find themselves at a disadvantage, and experience differences in outcomes that are visible in the statistics. This is seen clearly in the Global South, poorer countries generally south of the equator.

Zambia clearly demonstrates this injustice of climate change. Average carbon footprints in Zambia are very low, coming in at just **0.36 tonnes** per person per year – less than **one-tenth of the UK average**. Nevertheless, the country is facing environmental disaster, including a prolonged drought in 2021. This was caused by long term changes in temperature which **left over a million people in need of food assistance**.

For the Zambian climate activist Veronica Mulenga, the justice implications are clear. "The climate crisis affects some parts of the planet more than others," she says. "Those most affected by climate change are black and poor communities. As a continent we are one of the hardest hit by the impacts of climate change and we are left behind as the world progresses toward a low-carbon economy."

When it comes to fossil fuels, there is a double edge to environmental justice. It is often people of colour who put up with the pollution from the fossil fuel industry. Those same communities may find themselves at risk from the long-term effects of the industry, in the form of disasters caused by climate change. A **study of fire risk** in the US found that "wildfire vulnerability is spread unequally across race and ethnicity", with majority

black, Hispanic or Native American districts facing 50% greater vulnerability compared with other groups. Multiple forms of disadvantage are behind that finding, including less money spent on reducing the risk of fire, under-funded emergency services, and lower rates of private insurance.

Jason Hickel has studied **responsibility for climate change** between the Global North and the Global South. "Our study calculated how much each nation has exceeded their fair share of the 'safe' planetary boundary for CO2 emissions," he says. The results are "staggering", he says: the study found the Global North is responsible for 92% of all excess global emissions, while the Global South is responsible for only 8%.

It is the countries of the Global North that industrialised first, and here that the power base of the fossil fuel corporations emerged. Here is where **energy use** and **resource consumption** are highest – and therefore where carbon footprints are largest. People drive **and fly**, often **eat more meat and dairy**, and have fridges and gas boilers in their homes. These are countries with majority white populations. Conversely, the countries with the lowest emissions are mainly across sub-Saharan Africa and South and East Asia, with majority black and brown populations. Even accounting for the **huge emissions from China**, which are **relatively recent**, white people have had **a greater cumulative impact** on the climate.

According to this argument, the ongoing injustices of climate change are based in economic systems that privilege some people over others. All these imbalances of power play into climate talks. Many parts of the temperate north are less exposed to the immediate dangers of climate change, but hold far greater economic and political power.

The nations of the Global North have been able to shape climate policies around their national interests first. For example, the Paris Agreement agreed to limit warming to well below 2C, with 1.5C of warming as an ambition. It is disproportionately people of colour who will pay **the difference for that extra half a degree**. In this way, unambitious targets or protecting fossil fuel investments perpetuates racial injustice. The UN-led talks have also **failed to agree compensation** for the **loss and damage caused to the Global South**.

The response to demands from vulnerable countries for richer countries to take responsibility will determine whether climate change becomes a problem that unites or divides humanity. It may be a moment of shared purpose. Or history may come to know it as the next chapter in a long story of racial oppression, alongside slavery, colonialism and empire.