

# Climate justice

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2018 took place on 16-18 April in London and was jointly organised by the Government of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2018 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of 'Inclusive Governance: The Challenge for a Contemporary Commonwealth'. It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF 2018 series elaborates on the issues covered in the London Declaration on Inclusive Governance for a Renewed Commonwealth.

## Introduction

---

Institutional responses to climate change have predominantly been about adapting to its impact. However, this approach places the burden on people and places at the margins, particularly in small island states in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific regions, where climate change impacts continue to be catastrophic.

### Communities on communal and customary land in the Pacific have been overlooked'

The CPF 2018 session Climate justice: an inequitable burden, sought to better understand what climate justice means for people experiencing climate change's most adverse consequences and to explore how to transform the dominant narrative.

Climate justice goes beyond a technical account of the causes of climate change and acknowledges the legacy of displacement and expropriation that frontline countries have endured. It also examines the role that prevailing modes of production, exchange and consumption play in exacerbating climate change.

## Issues and strategies

---

### What about 'over development'?

Climate change is typically discussed in terms of its geophysical and environmental impacts: a rise in carbon emissions is a result of development that must be solved by science, economics and engineering – and these solutions are universally applicable to all. Participants pointed out that this type of technocratic universalism can fail to challenge the root causes of climate change and places the burden of adaptation on the poor and climate vulnerable states.

The differences in the standards of living between developed and developing countries has received little attention in the climate adaptation discourse. However, consumption patterns and standards of living in most developed countries cannot continue to be supported and are a large part of climate change's cause. As one panellist emphasised: '[When] we talk about underdevelopment, we also need to talk about overdevelopment.'

### **History and climate change vulnerability**

Participants argued that colonisation has made some small island states more vulnerable to climate change. They explained that wealth generated in Commonwealth countries was expropriated to fuel the European industrialisation process which ultimately generated a significant portion of the carbon emissions responsible for climate change. Centuries of exploitation then depleted resources which formerly colonised countries might have used to build climate resilient infrastructure. Furthermore, the legacy of colonialism continues in the social relations and political arrangements of the institutions responsible for financing climate change mitigation measures; these institutions also shape adaptation narratives, policy and practice.

### **Relocation: intersection of land, resources and identity**

Over the past decade, low-lying island nations which are losing land to rising sea levels have become a global spectacle. Relocation is presented as a straightforward adaptive solution, but for people in this dilemma, it remains highly undesirable. Many people in the Pacific are haunted by past relocation programmes that took place during the British colonial period from which lessons can be learned.

The relocation of 500 i-Kiribati families to the Solomon Islands in the 1950s disrupted and displaced communities resulting in a loss of their land, livelihoods and historical records. Islanders were not compensated

and although granted citizenship in the Solomon Islands, they continue to face discrimination. Their experience shows that there is a complex but poorly understood nexus between land, resources and identity; unfortunately, the main proponents of relocation do not give ample consideration to people's connectedness to the land and the nigh impossible task of compensating for its loss.

### **Longer term solutions? Appropriate land-use planning and sustainable investment**

There appears to be a poor understanding of what sustainable and climate resilient investment looks like. Governments repeatedly use climate adaptation funding for short term infrastructure projects to create jobs and promote political agendas, rather than investing in longer-term solutions. The uncomfortable reality is that many island populations are concentrated in coastal zones. Airports and road infrastructure are at sea level and in many islands a large proportion of freshwater comes from underground aquifers, which, when sea levels rise and salinity intrudes, can compromise entire water supplies.

Participants observed that because relief aid is framed around market-based logic, it can only compensate for homes on private land. Communities on communal and customary land in the Pacific have been overlooked in rebuilding programmes and repeatedly relocated. Resources need to be used for thorough research, better land use planning, and sustainable alternatives for people and livelihoods, rather than short-term solutions.

### **Fossil fuel extraction: still the overriding development pathway of choice**

The case of Ecuador was presented to participants to illustrate the dominance of extractives-led development. It also exemplifies the lack of development choices and any alternative vision. In 2011, an alliance led by the Ecuador government offered to halt oil extraction plans in its Yasuní rainforest national park if it could

raise 50% of the revenue lost by not mining its oil reserves. However, funds were not forthcoming and under pressure to alleviate poverty and provide basic services to its people, the Government reversed its decision in 2016.

In Jamaica the recent prospect of finding fossil fuel reserves has been met with celebration - as it would in most countries were this the case. In our current economic paradigm, finding oil is regarded as, 'our time for development'; even in countries vulnerable to climate change, there are often only a few voices raised in caution.

## Justice for small island states

### Reparative justice

Participants argued that legacies of colonialism, migration and reparative justice all feed into questions of climate justice, and need to be addressed in considering how to respond to climate change in a way that acknowledges the past but also paves the way for a just future. Although the details of what reparative justice would look like are still to be worked out, essential to that is thinking about the political and historical perspectives to the current climate vulnerabilities of countries, challenging our current development pathway and reframing the funding landscape. One example of reparative justice was discussed: the 'climate damages tax', which was recently proposed by Pacific Island campaigners and the Vanuatu government. The tax would be levied on the profits earned by fossil fuel producers and used to mitigate climate change impacts.

### Reexamining 'adaptation'

Securing climate justice and fulfilling the promise 'to leave no one behind' requires resisting the overwhelming preference for adaptation, which secures a privileged future for a fraction of the global population. The solution to climate change is often framed in financial terms: funding should flow from

the developed world to vulnerable states. But this is increasingly seen as a form of leverage for high carbon emitting countries. Therefore, a climate just future means also finding alternative lifestyles and pursuing alternative, non-fossil-fuel driven approaches to development, particularly in developed countries.

### Migration justice

Climate justice must involve 'migration with dignity', which involves the right of people to be involved in decision making about their relocation, coupled with sufficient recognition of the trauma displacement causes. The socio-cultural importance of land, access to resources and its importance to identity and livelihoods must be considered. Displaced communities need access to the legal system and should be able to participate in decision making that affects their lives. Host governments of countries where people have been relocated need to take greater account of the issues and concerns of these communities, ensuring their equitable access to the resources needed to settle and to contribute as full citizens. The preoccupation of many nation states on securing their borders over protecting vulnerable life can, in some cases, demonstrate a disregard for human life.

### Consultation, listening and awareness raising

Participants felt a strong need to encourage less heard voices to emerge through wider use of communications, films, storytelling and sharing experiences. Education and awareness raising on climate change must be undertaken in countries with policies that continue to precipitate climate change, as well as in countries suffering the most adverse impacts. In education and awareness raising, imparting a sense of urgency without giving rise to fatalism is important.

### A fairer form of politics

Inclusive and participatory forms of governance are central to a climate just

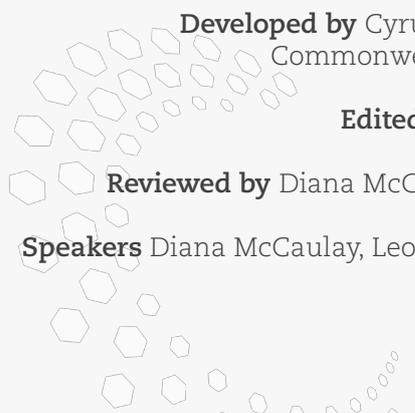
future. The Commonwealth can play a convening role in bringing countries together to work towards solutions, to amplify the voices of affected member countries, and to encourage peoples' stories to be heard and told. Inclusive governance requires working with and recognising the critical role that civil society plays in promoting solidarity, critiquing current practices, and in holding governments to account for their actions and commitments. Civil society also plays an important role in evaluating the use of resources, the nature and quality of investments made to address climate change, and in mobilising support for a fairer form of politics in society.



## References

- Sealey-Huggins, L. 2017, *1.5°C to stay alive: climate change, imperialism and justice for the Caribbean*, *Third World Quarterly*, 38(11), pages 2444-2463
- Taba, T. 2011. *Sapon Riki Ba Kain Toromon: A study of the I-Kiribati community in Solomon Islands*, University of Hawaii, accessed 18 October 2018, <<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/24272>>
- Vidal, J. 2011, *World pays Ecuador not to extract oil from the rainforest*, *The Guardian*, accessed 18 October 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/dec/30/ecuador-paid-rain-forest-oil-alliance>>
- Vidal, J. 2016, *Oil drilling underway beneath Ecuador's Yasuni national park*, *The Guardian*, accessed 18 October 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/26/oil-drilling-underway-beneath-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park>>





**Developed by** Cyrus Rustomjee, Chief Rapporteur,  
Commonwealth People's Forum, April 2018

**Edited by** Gillian Cooper and Leo Kiss

**Reviewed by** Diana McCaulay and Leon Sealey-Huggins

**Speakers** Diana McCaulay, Leon Sealey-Huggins, Tammy Tabe,  
and Alok Jha (chair)

**Design by** Leo Kiss

**Disclaimer**

The Commonwealth Foundation encourages the use, translation, adaptation and copying of this material for non-commercial use.

We ask that appropriate credit be given to the Commonwealth Foundation. The perspectives expressed are the views of the author while documenting the opinions expressed by participants of CPF 2018 in their deliberations and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Commonwealth Foundation