



SYSTEM CHANGE NOT CLIMATE CHANGE



SO WE BROKE THE EARTH'S CLIMATE – NOW WHAT?



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— with the consequences.² With each passing climate disaster, we're learning how unequal those impacts are. At a community and global scale, those who have been made the most vulnerable are paying the highest price. They are also often the ones least responsible for the pollution causing this crisis.³

Poor and disabled people suffer through heat waves without air conditioning. First Nations communities are destroyed by wildfires because of their remote location while resort towns with million dollar vacation homes are often prioritized with firefighting resources.⁴ Subsistence farmers displaced by drought are forced

These are not natural features of our biosphere. They are the result of a inequitable socio-economic system that prioritizes profits and power, not people or the planet.

to make dangerous journeys as wealthy nations deny them the right to seek refuge. These are not *natural* features of our biosphere. They are the result of an inequitable socio-economic system that prioritizes profits and power, not people or the planet.

Thankfully, it will always be possible for that to change.

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change called for

“rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes” to avert the worst of climate catastrophe. That hasn't happened yet. But the world is finally taking action to reduce pollution and the way we do it matters. It's not enough to simply plug clean energy into a world designed to

consume resources at maximum speed. Nobody knows exactly what it looks like for billions of humans to live on this planet in a more permanent way, although Indigenous peoples have certainly managed before. What's obvious is a world that prioritizes its limited energy and resources for the benefit of all looks far different than our current lifestyle of frivolous consumption for a privileged few.

Those who have been left behind — or trampled upon — by the current economy deserve top priority when determining what comes next. As the transition to clean energy picks up pace, we must avoid making the same mistakes. Hopefully, these technologies that allow us to harness energy from the sun, wind, water and earth can deliver us enough time to collectively determine what's actually important for us to live a good life — and what we should be left for the history books.

Read on for an exploration of what climate justice could look like in a world where we do things differently.



Photo top: Donnie Creek wildfire in 2023, an area full of fracking operations, largest in B.C.'s history. (WC files).
Youth4Climate Strike 2019 (WC files).
Photo bottom: Resident escaping 2018 flood in a kayak in Fredericton, N.B. (Stephen MacGillivray).

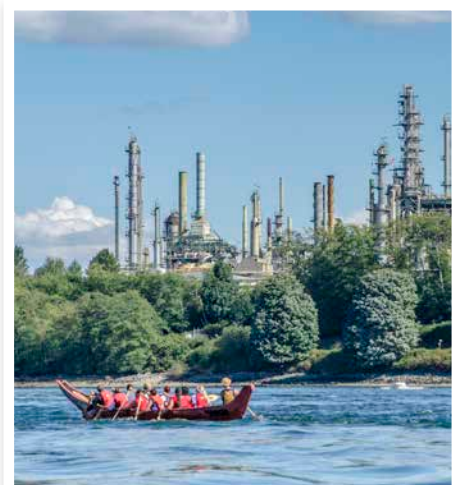


Photo: “Many People, One Canoe” Salish First Nations Gathering to Protect the Salish Sea (Michael Wheatley).

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CLIMATE DISASTERS HIT VULNERABLE PEOPLE HARDEST

It can be hard to think of extreme weather events as discriminatory. Floods, wildfires, heat waves, storms and droughts affect us all. But they don't impact us all equally. Existing inequities in our world are amplified and intensified when these disasters strike. Within our communities and all over the world, the people most likely to lose their lives and livelihoods to climate change are the ones who are already struggling to survive.⁵

When the Pacific northwest experienced a catastrophic heat dome in 2021, most of the 619 people who passed away in B.C. were disadvantaged people with disabilities and seniors who often lived alone.⁶ Chronic diseases like

schizophrenia, substance use disorder, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, depression, anxiety and diabetes were prevalent. Low-income neighbourhoods were hardest hit, with less tree canopy and air conditioning to cool people down. Climate change's disproportionate risks for vulnerable

people are not academic — these tragic deaths bring that home.

Livelihoods of low-income workers are also more at risk of disruption from climate disasters.⁷ Lost wages due to closures and unsafe working conditions are common during extreme weather events. Migrant workers in the agricultural sector are particularly vulnerable to loss of income, risks to their health or loss of employment and therefore deportation during and after heatwaves, floods, droughts and wildfires.⁸ Everyone has a right to refuse unsafe work, but it's much harder to do that for low-wage earners, or temporary foreign workers who could be deported if they do.

Of course the greatest injustice of

climate change plays out on the global scale. Poor countries that are the least responsible for climate pollution are the most vulnerable to its impacts, because people rely directly on the land and water for their food and livelihoods.⁹ Wherever people try to lift themselves out of poverty or simply continue living off their land, extreme weather knocks them back down. Climate change drives people from their homes into unsafe situations like informal settlements in urban areas or treacherous journeys across

international borders. Women and LGBTQ people are particularly at risk in these conditions, with human trafficking, sexual violence and challenges finding employment or housing.¹⁰

Climate justice demands we work to reduce these vulnerabilities just as hard as we do to limit pollution from the burning of fossil fuels. That could mean providing air conditioners to low-income people with disabilities, fighting for workplace health and safety laws that account for extreme weather, joining migrant workers in their calls for permanent residency status for all, or demanding wealthy governments pay poor countries for the loss and damages caused by their pollution. As global temperatures rise, solidarity within and across communities will keep us safe.

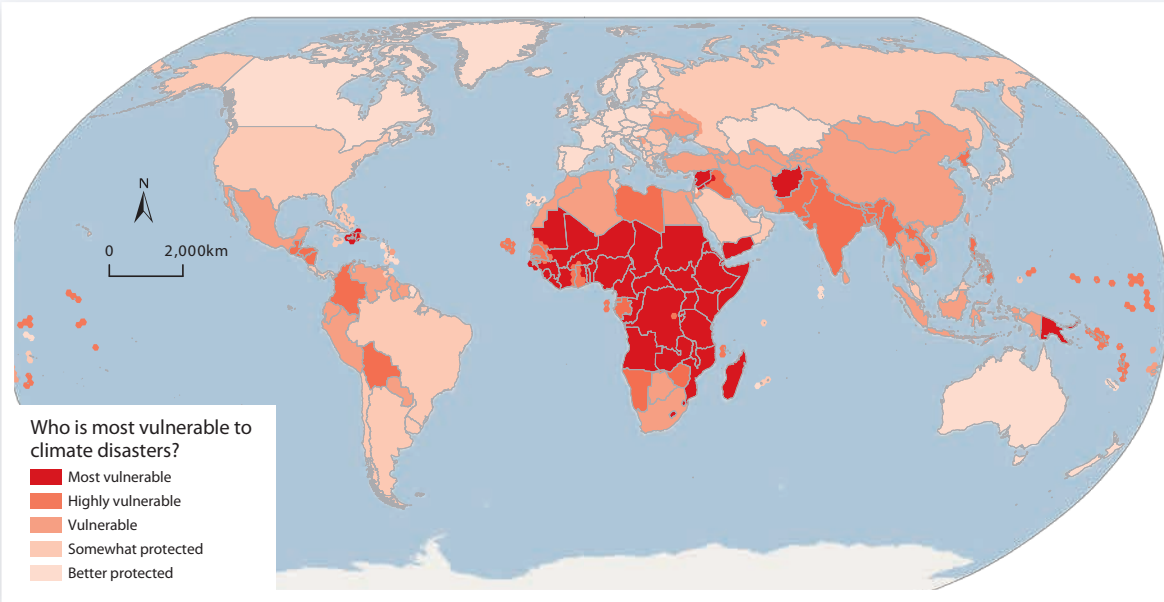


Photo: Floodwaters as high as 50-150 cms caused by overflowing Sunter River, Cipinang Melayu Village East Jakarta, Indonesia (Kompas/Hendra A. Setyawan).

WE MUST HOLD ONTO OUR HUMANITY AS THE WORLD WARMS

Fossil fuels have inflicted tremendous harm upon our world. If we're not careful, the transition to clean energy will repeat the same problems. While the stark reality of climate change demands the world act as fast as possible, we cannot allow the costs of action to be paid in human lives.

Indigenous rights

Here in Canada and around the world, companies and governments must respect Indigenous rights to grant or withhold consent for renewable energy or critical minerals projects on their territories. We must stop flooding Indigenous peoples' homelands for megadams and poisoning their traditional foods with mining waste. Many First Nations across Canada are excited for the opportunities renewable energy and responsible mining

can offer, but governments must avoid pitting nations against their neighbours and secure free, prior and informed consent of all affected Indigenous peoples.^{11 12 13}

Labour rights

As the climate movement encourages the transition to an electric world, it's also our responsibility to ensure our governments do everything they can to end horrific human rights abuses. Even today, forced labour is shamefully common in the production of green technologies, whether it's polysilicon for solar panels produced in Uyghur concentration camps in Xinjiang or electric vehicle batteries made with cobalt mined by children in the Congo.^{14 15} Slavery must be abolished in all its forms. Supply chains for electric vehicles and renewable energy cannot accept these horrific practices. Canada and its allies should prioritize domestic production for renewable energy and electric vehicles with family-supporting union jobs.

Migrant rights

While we must protect vulnerable communities around the world, more and more displaced people will continue to seek sanctuary in countries most equipped to weather the storm.¹⁶ In Europe and America, the unconscionable response to this tragic reality has been to make migrants' journeys as dangerous as possible.¹⁷ Many are exploited, detained or killed. Less vulnerable countries must allow migrants to arrive safely and afford them the same rights and protections as their citizens.

Ending violent conflict

America has fought wars in the Middle East for oil for decades. The U.S. Department of Defense is the single most polluting institution on the planet.^{18 19} Globally, militaries are responsible for 5.5 per cent of climate pollution.²⁰ Closing bases and scaling back operations should be a priority in efforts to cut pollution



Photo: United Nations Stabilization Mission members carry children through flood waters after Hurricane Ike, Port au Prince, Haiti (UN Photo/Marco Dormino).

with workers redirected to disaster response.²¹ Conflicts for control of critical minerals waged with electric tanks and drones would be every bit as devastating for people and the planet as the ones preceding them. Climate change offers hope for global collaboration but it's also a threat to global security.²² Solutions must promote peace and focus on resilience and relief efforts worldwide.

If the world has anything close to a constitution, it would be the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.²³ Climate change itself presents an enormous violation of these rights. Humanity cannot allow its response to compromise them any further. We're all in this together, even if everyone hasn't realized it yet.



Photo: Hazeltine Creek, post-Mount Polley mine tailings dam breach (ClayoquotAction.org).



LIFE CAN GET BETTER EVEN AS WE CONSUME LESS

By 2030, humans will consume twice the resources the planet can provide.²⁴ Lifestyles in wealthy, industrialized nations — that much of the world is rapidly pursuing — are literally unsustainable. They cannot and will not continue forever. The sooner our species finds a way to live on Earth as if we plan to stay, the better. Thankfully this doesn't mean returning to the stone age. It's about finding smart ways to be more intentional about how best to use the resources we need.

Electric vehicles (EVs) are a vital technology for the green transition but the goal shouldn't be to have one or more in every garage. With smart community planning and serious investment in alternatives, most people should be able to live without a car. Research shows we can reduce the amount of lithium required for batteries in electric vehicles by up to 92 per cent simply by prioritizing transit, cycling and walking, limiting the size of batteries, and recycling the materials.²⁵ Communities with less traffic and more travel options are safer, healthier and quieter places. Meanwhile, it will require fewer environmental impacts from mining.

Dense communities enable public transit, limit pollution and save resources.²⁶ It turns out one of the best ways to reduce the amount of materials and energy our homes consume is to share a wall with your neighbours in multifamily housing.



Photo: Rooftop gardens in Vancouver, B.C. (Creative Commons).

And when we can house more people in existing neighbourhoods, wetlands, forests and farms don't need to be demolished for sprawling subdivisions. Building standards for maximum energy efficiency also mean these new apartments and townhomes can house more people with less power than the aging single-family homes they replace. However, to minimize the risk of displacing renters, strong tenant protections and historic investments in non-market housing are necessary.

In this way, we can power modern life with clean energy without doubling or tripling the amount of electricity society requires. Wind, solar, hydro and geothermal power don't create much climate pollution but

none are without environmental impacts. Super-efficient technologies like LED light bulbs and heat pumps help us decrease energy use as do renovations like improving insulation and passive design. But we must also change consumption habits. Things as simple as putting on a sweater instead of reaching for the thermostat — or as radical as a four-day work week to save on commuting costs — can all make a difference.²⁷

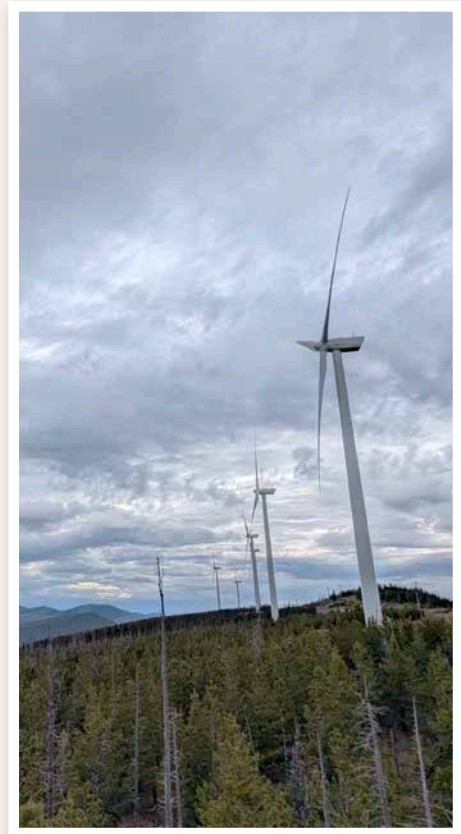


Photo: Dokie Wind Project near Chetwynd, B.C., with Klinse-za / Twin Sisters Park in background. (Peter McCartney).



Photo: Electric car making use of Winnipeg MB's first charging station (Eric Reeder).

MAKING LIFE CHEAPER THROUGH CLIMATE ACTION

For too many Canadians, a world without pollution sounds similar to the current one but everything is more expensive. Many in the environmental community believe the best way to reduce emissions is to make pollution more expensive with carbon pricing. These initiatives are beginning to work and putting money back in people's pockets, but governments must provide affordable alternatives for the public to remain on board.²⁸

Thankfully, smart climate solutions actually make life cheaper. It turns out minimizing our consumption of resources and energy is a great way to stop paying for these things. But it takes public investment and policy solutions to make green living practical and desirable for all.

There's no bigger opportunity to make life more affordable than

enabling people to give up a vehicle. Transportation is most families' largest expense after housing.²⁹ Between gas, insurance, parking, maintenance, depreciation and debt, owning a car costs Canadians an average of \$16,644 every year.³⁰ Society forces this staggering cost onto almost everyone who lives outside the downtown core of the nation's largest urban centres. Meanwhile, taxpayers pay even more for massive road budgets and the healthcare costs of collisions and pollution.

Historic investments in public transit, bike lanes and walkable neighbourhoods in every community could make it possible for most people to live without a vehicle, or at least allow families to share one. The British Columbia Federation of Labour recently estimated the cost of

building such a widespread public transit system across the province at \$22.2 billion over 10 years.³¹ That's far less than it cost taxpayers to build a single pipeline.³² Imagine how much money Canadians could save for housing, groceries, childcare or retirement if they could only ditch their vehicles.

Communities enabling this shift also offer other cost savings. Public transit becomes practical when more people use it. Multifamily housing that enables transit use tends to be cheaper to build per unit and Canada needs 5.8 million new homes by 2030 to restore any hint of housing affordability.³³ We've already noted how apartments, townhomes and condos save resources and energy, but that also means saving people



Photo: Vancouver, B.C. bike lanes (Paul Krueger).

money. With government subsidies for heat pumps — highly efficient electric appliances that replace a gas furnace or boiler — most households can lower their home heating bills even further.³⁴ Canadians are already paying staggering costs of climate disasters. Extreme weather is a major factor driving up grocery prices.³⁵ Insurance premiums rise with every catastrophic storm or wildfire.³⁶ Taxes are rising to cover healthcare costs, infrastructure damage and relief funds. Researchers estimate the cost to society of one tonne of carbon dioxide pollution is \$266. That means every single tank of gas costs all of us about \$30 in climate change impacts.³⁷ Climate change is already making life more expensive and smart policy solutions can help.



Photo: BC Housing's new project behind Burquitlam SkyTrain Station will be the most energy efficient tower in the city (Peter McCartney).



Photo: Bay View Garden and Yard Society and Bay View Neighborhood Association members planting garden at the KK Triangle in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (VitusKonter/Wikipedia).



WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Communities all over the world are bracing for life on a more dangerous planet while simultaneously working to tackle climate pollution. Nobody can predict what the future looks like but no matter where people live, their way of life will change. What I know for certain is that humans are strongest when we act as a community. Our ability to achieve more as a group than the sum of our parts defines us as a species.

Whether it's preparing for the next heat wave with our neighbours, taking care of elders during a flood or rebuilding homes after a wildfire tears through town, people come together in challenging times. As we embark upon the task of eliminating climate pollution from our daily lives, we're going to need collective action and organizing more than ever before.

Thankfully, gathering with like-minded people to make a difference is the best way to overcome the crippling anxiety and profound grief of living at this moment in history.³⁸ Rather than sitting alone scrolling through the latest news of climate chaos, let's get together with our friends, family and neighbours to meet the challenges ahead together.

Mutual aid

networks helped get people through the worst days of the COVID-19 lockdowns.³⁹ For many, it was their first experience organizing, even if it was just posting resources and services they could offer on a local Facebook group. But marginalized communities have long used these survival strategies to take care of each other. It's time the rest of us learned how to practice this kind of solidarity, given what the world has in store for us.

People must come together to reimagine our communities so they no longer pollute. Whether we're pushing for new bus lanes or safe cycling, working to electrify and insulate our homes



Photo: Farmers market (All Canada Photos).

and businesses, or finding new and creative ways to produce food without pollution, the climate solutions with staying power are the ones that improve people's lives.

Our institutions are failing to meet the moment. Corporations and governments are making big promises on climate action but refusing urgent calls to eliminate the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels. We can't wait for them to act. New and old ways of organizing ourselves can empower people to have an impact in their own neighbourhoods that ripples across the globe. It's not enough to dismantle the systems of oppression that are working for fewer and fewer people every day. We must replace them with models of caring for our communities to show the world there's another way.



Photo: Bike to Work Day in Toronto, ON (Jackman ChiuFollow/Climate Visuals).

TAKE ACTION

Get involved in climate justice in your community:

- ▶ Learn how climate disasters are disproportionately affecting the vulnerable people in your community. Don't be afraid to ask!
- ▶ Look for groups in your community fighting climate change and its impacts. Join a meeting and find ways to get involved. There's never a shortage of work to be done.
- ▶ Show up in a good way. Consider a workshop or do some reading on power dynamics and anti-oppression. Be open to feedback and listen more than you speak.
- ▶ Spread the word! Share this paper with your friends, family and social networks at the URL below:



Photo: Migrant Justice Art Build - Wilderness Committee volunteers paint banner for rally with the Migrant Rights Network (WC files).

WildernessCommittee.org/ClimateJustice

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