

Climate justice: What is it and why does it matter?

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This briefing introduces the concept of climate justice, exploring interconnections with indigenous worldviews, rights-based frameworks, and ecofeminism. We invite educators, learners, and communities to explore these ideas and what they mean for your climate actions.



What is climate justice?

Climate and environmental justice is a shorthand to explain that environmental and climate challenges are not just about science or economics—they are inherently social justice issues and human rights issues. Climate change and environmental harm affect everyone, but some people will be more severely affected than others. The people and groups who are most affected are often the least responsible for creating the problems.

A climate and environmental justice approach says that the needs, rights, voices, and aspirations of the most affected people and groups must be centred in how societies respond to, and take action on, climate change and sustainability.

These intersecting groups include (but are not limited to):

- indigenous people
- children and young people
- people on low or unstable incomes
- disabled people
- people with chronic health issues
- women, girls, and gender minorities
- people whose homes, communities, and

livelihoods are at risk because of climate change

- future generations—people who haven't been born yet.

Climate and environmental justice also acknowledges the inherent rights and value of the more-than-human world, including other species and ecosystems, and spiritual and metaphysical dimensions.

Climate and environmental justice approaches yield better solutions

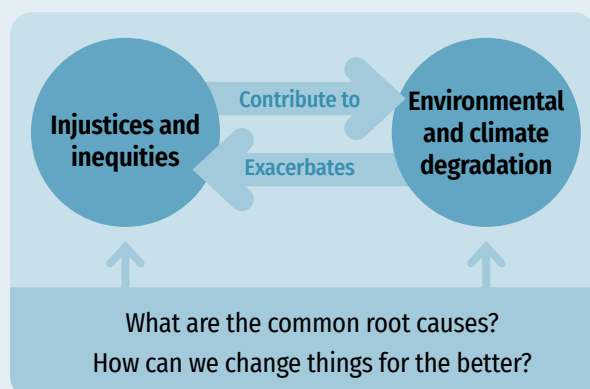
Centring climate and environmental justice in climate action means supporting most-affected people and communities to lead the way on finding solutions. People from dominant groups—who often hold positions of power—can support climate justice by sharing or ceding power to traditionally marginalised groups, recognising that their knowledge, values, and leadership can guide society towards more holistic and long-lasting sustainable solutions.

Although this is critically important, it is not always easy for those who are accustomed to being the decision makers. As Gaillard (2021) notes, sharing power to benefit those who are usually excluded from decisions can be

“complex, sensitive and often conflictual”, and requires “constantly questioning who is making decisions, on whose behalf, based on whose knowledge and ultimately to the benefit of whom”.

The reciprocal relationship between injustices and harm to the environment

Current and past injustices and inequities can contribute to environmental and climate degradation, and climate change and environmental degradation can worsen existing inequities.



Looking at root causes

Education can help people to understand that social injustice and environmental harms often have shared root causes. These include: loss of indigenous lands through colonisation; histories of racism and oppression; industrialisation and empire; and other structures that create and maintain social and economic inequalities. These issues are complex and can take time to unpack. We can start by looking at our own places, and asking:

- Who has had power or custodianship over the natural world in this place?
- Whose power or custodianship has been limited or suppressed?
- What are the consequences of this for people and the environment?

Looking at worldviews

Digging deeper, it is important to consider the worldviews that shape the way people see themselves in relationship to the environment. There are many different worldviews. Four Arrows (2020) argues that there are basically two worldviews: *Indigenous and Dominant*. Indigenous worldviews see humans as part of nature, while dominant worldviews maintain the superiority of humans, and their dominion over all other living beings. The table below shows just some of the many ways these worldviews contrast.¹

Dominant	Indigenous
Individually focused	Holistic and interconnected
Humans control nature	Humans are part of nature, nature teaches us
Knowledge is universal and objective	Knowledge is place-based and contextualised

Dominant worldviews and the actions that flow from them have arguably given rise to many of the world’s current problems, through the exploitation of land and natural resources for profit and industrialisation. The extraction and burning of energy-dense fossil fuels has enabled extraordinary levels of economic, industrial, and technological development in a few centuries. However, this “extractive” economic model has come at great cost to the environment and climate. These costs have largely been “externalised”—meaning they are carried by society as a whole—but their impacts are distributed unequally, due to social inequities.

¹ For a more thorough discussion, see Four Arrows. (2020). *The red road: Linking diversity and inclusion programs to indigenous worldviews*. Information Age Publishing.

Climate justice is indigenous justice

Indigenous peoples have been severely impacted by colonisation, with indigenous groups worldwide being driven from their ancestral lands. Colonisation has led to the continued exploitation of indigenous lands and peoples to further the Eurocentric “progress” of industrialisation. This has contributed greatly to climate change, the degradation of indigenous whenua, and violation of indigenous people’s rights.

Indigenous justice requires the dismantling of systems that have led to the current climate crisis, as well as the recognition and acknowledgement that indigenous voices and ways of knowing are vital to help mitigate climate impacts.

Since indigenous identities, cultures, and languages are born of the land, and intertwined with it, the preservation of the land is integral to indigenous rights and wellbeing. For Māori specifically, a loss of biodiversity could mean a severing of connections between whakataukī, reo, and the natural world.²

Associate Professor Sandy Morrison, Vision Mātauranga Lead for the Deep South Challenge, and Mike Smith, Chair of the Climate Change Iwi Leaders Group, recently outlined ways in which Māori are leading the way in climate response. The ongoing work in this space demonstrates clear ways forward to transition

Aotearoa New Zealand from an extractive worldview to a new framework built on pou that support reliance and flourishing for people and the environment.³



2 <https://thespinoff.co.nz/nga-pae-o-te-maramatanga/21-12-2021/a-threat-to-our-identity-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-maori>

3 See <https://vimeo.com/686116135>, from 1 hour 50 minutes onwards.

Human rights and the environment

All human beings depend on the environment in which we live. A safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights.⁴

The United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) states that indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines, the conservation of their animals, and to see their lands flourish. Yet climate change is in direct violation of these rights.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) guarantees basic and fundamental rights to the world’s children, including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.⁵ Children have the right to life, survival, and development. Importantly, UNCROC demands that children be informed about and participate in achieving their rights, and have the right for their opinions to be heard.

The UN Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights says we must create space for young people to participate in shaping the decisions that will affect their future, including but not limited to climate change. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) argues that “States must protect children’s rights from the negative impacts of climate change”, and that “failure to take adequate steps to prevent children from suffering foreseeable climate-related human rights harms breaches these obligations”. States – and other people with power – should “empower children to participate in climate policymaking including through climate change education and consultative mechanisms”.⁶

4 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-environment/about-human-rights-and-environment>

5 See <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/uncroc/#WhatistheUnitedNationsConventionontheRightsoftheChild1>

6 <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/ClimateChange/RightsChild/ChildrenOnePager.pdf>

Non-human rights and “environmental personhood”

Dominant or Western perspectives tend to see people as separate from nature, and nature as lacking sentience. For Māori and many indigenous peoples, mountains, rivers, trees, and other species are *whanaunga* to people and places have sentience. In 2017, Parliament passed an historic bill making the Whanganui River a person in the eyes of the law. This followed the Te Urewera Act 2014 that recognises a legal identity and protected status for Te Urewera. The notion of “environmental personhood”, now adopted in a number of countries, combines indigenous worldviews with legal frameworks that recognise that the environment has intrinsic value and rights that are independent of their economic value to humans. Giving the environment rights and protections, recognising their special relationship to indigenous peoples, and enabling the environment itself to have a “voice” in decisions, could be one of the best ways of protecting the environment for climate change resilience and future generations.⁷

Ecofeminism and gender-equitable climate response

Ecofeminist thinking explores how concepts and expressions of gender in society, including gender oppression and power relationships, are deeply intertwined with human relationships to the natural world.⁸ Ecofeminism shines a light on alternative ways of living and being in the world. This includes examining gendered notions of what is “feminine” (e.g., care, love, nurturing, gentleness, collaboration, natural systems), in contrast to notions of what is “masculine” (e.g., dominance, control, interventions to manage nature through technology). Ecofeminism also allows for refutation of gender and sex as only binary, recognising that many cultures, including indigenous cultures, have long recognised multiple genders.

7 See <https://www.otago.ac.nz/hekitenga/2021/otago833855.html>

8 Shiva, V., & Mies, M. (2014). *Ecofeminism* (2nd ed.). Zed Books. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2014326/ecofeminism-pdf>



It is critical that ecofeminist or any gender-based environmental movements are *intersectional* and *inclusive*.⁹

Kwauk and Casey (2021) describe **feminist planetary consciousness** as providing “a sense of awareness of the root problems of power and patriarchy underlying planetary challenges, including the linkages between gender inequality and the climate crisis, violence against indigenous peoples and indigenous lands, and the exploitation of vulnerable populations amidst uneven global economic growth” (p. 55).

They put forward a three-pronged agenda for transforming education towards a new “green” future. The three prongs of this agenda are:

- education to develop skills for green jobs
- education to develop green lifeskills and transferable capabilities
- education to develop capabilities to transform society and the world.

They explain why gender equity need to be centred in *each* of these agendas.

Summing up

The ideas presented in this summary are big, complex, interconnected, and contested. Some readers may find these ideas exciting and empowering. Others may find them confronting and unsettling. Many may be asking, “Now what?” Our aim in skimming lightly over deep terrain has been to provide an entry point to high-level climate justice ideas. To take this work further, we invite you to engage in conversations that can help to connect and further unpack these ideas in your own contexts.

9 See <https://www.sei.org/perspectives/climate-justice-gender-sexual-minorities/>

Questions to discuss in your school

- Which ideas in this summary resonate for us? Which ideas challenge us? Why?
- How can we talk about climate and environmental justice with students, school leaders, staff, and boards of trustees?
- Whose views and experiences are centred in decision making in our school and community—for example, when making decisions about how we use and consume resources, and plan for the future?
- How can we use Te Tiriti o Waitangi to guide our understanding of climate and environmental justice, and take actions in our place?
- How might our maunga, awa, or moana exercise environmental personhood in our school? In what other ways can the non-human world have a voice in our decisions? Could a maunga have a seat on our Board of Trustees?

Resources and further reading

In addition to the references footnoted throughout this resource, we recommend:

NZCER's other research briefings on climate change and education. <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/climate-change-what-can-schools-do-research-briefing-1>

Aotearoa Social Studies Educators' Network (ASSEN) classroom resources to support the New Zealand documentary "High Tide, Don't Hide", about student climate activism. <https://www.socialstudiesnz.org/>

Climate justice resources produced by the National Youth Council of Ireland, including "Future generations: How to get young people involved in the climate justice movement". <https://www.youth.ie/climate-justice/>

UN Women's Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/01/intersectionality-resource-guide-and-toolkit>

Science Learning Hub's "Why climate change matters to Māori". <https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/2960-why-climate-change-matters-to-maori>

Damico, J., Baildon, M., & Panos, A. (2020). Climate justice literacy: Stories-we-live-by, ecolinguistics, and classroom practice. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 63(6), 683–691.

Kwauk, C., & Casey, O. (2021). *A new green learning agenda: Approaches to quality education for climate action*. Center for Universal Education at Brookings. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED610523>

Paul, J. (2020). Climate justice is indigenous justice. In T. Doig (Ed.), *Living with the climate crisis: Voices from Aotearoa* (pp. 49–54). BWB Texts.

Poelina, A., Woolerton, S., Blaise, M., Aniere, C., Horwitz, P., White, P., & Muecke, S. (2022). Regeneration time: Ancient wisdom for planetary wellbeing. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2021.34>

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